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TWILIGHT

By

Stephenie Meyer

Contents

[PREFACE](#)

[1. FIRST SIGHT](#)

[2. OPEN BOOK](#)

[3. PHENOMENON](#)

[4. INVITATIONS](#)

[5. BLOOD TYPE](#)

[6. SCARY STORIES](#)

[7. NIGHTMARE](#)

[8. PORT ANGELES](#)

[9. THEORY](#)

[10. INTERROGATIONS](#)

[11. COMPLICATIONS](#)

[12. BALANCING](#)

[13. CONFESSIONS](#)

[14. MIND OVER MATTER](#)

[15. THE CULLENS](#)

[16. CARLISLE](#)

[17. THE GAME](#)

[18. THE HUNT](#)

[19. GOODBYES](#)

[20. IMPATIENCE](#)

[21. PHONE CALL](#)

[22. HIDE-AND-SEEK](#)

[23. THE ANGEL](#)

[24. AN IMPASSE](#)

[EPILOGUE: AN OCCASION](#)

twilight

STEPHENIE MEYER

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For my big sister, Emily,

without whose enthusiasm this story might still be unfinished.

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,

thou shalt not eat of it:

for in the day that thou eatest thereof

thou shalt surely die.

Genesis 2:17

PREFACE

I'd never given much thought to how I would die — though I'd had reason enough in the last few months — but even if I had, I would not have imagined it like this.

I stared without breathing across the long room, into the dark eyes of the hunter, and he looked pleasantly back at me.

Surely 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 facing death 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 he sauntered forward to kill me.

1. FIRST SIGHT

My mother drove me to the airport with the windows rolled down. It was seventy-five degrees in Phoenix, the sky a perfect, cloudless blue. I was wearing my favorite shirt — sleeveless, white eyelet lace; I was wearing it as a farewell gesture. My carry-on item was a parka.

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 inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America. It was from this town and its gloomy, omnipresent shade that my mother escaped with me when I was only a few months old. It was in this town that I'd been compelled to spend a month every summer until I was fourteen. That was the year I finally put my foot down; these past three summers, my dad, Charlie, vacationed with me in California for two weeks instead.

It was to Forks that I now exiled myself— an action that I took with great horror. I detested Forks. I loved Phoenix. I loved the sun and the blistering heat. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city.

"Bella," my mom said to me — the last of a thousand times — before I got on the plane. "You don't have to do this."

My mom looks like me, except with short hair and laugh lines. I felt a spasm of panic as I stared at her wide, childlike eyes. How could I leave my loving, erratic, harebrained mother to fend for herself? Of course she had Phil now, so the bills would probably get paid, there would be food in the refrigerator, gas in her car, and someone to call when she got lost, but still...

"I *want* to go," I lied. I'd always been a bad liar, but I'd been saying this lie so frequently lately that it sounded almost convincing now.

"Tell Charlie I said hi."

"I will."

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

But I could see the sacrifice in her eyes behind the promise.

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

She hugged me tightly for a minute, and then I got on the plane, and she was gone.

It's a four-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 doesn't bother me; the hour in the car with Charlie, though, I was a little worried about.

Charlie had really been fairly nice about the whole thing. He seemed genuinely pleased that I was coming to live with him for the first time with any degree of permanence. He'd already gotten me registered for high school and was going to help me get a car.

But it was sure to be awkward with Charlie. Neither of us was what anyone would call verbose, and I didn't know what there was to say regardless. I knew he was more than a little confused by my decision — like my mother before me, I hadn't made a secret of my distaste for Forks.

When I landed in Port Angeles, it was raining. I didn't see it as an omen — just unavoidable. I'd already 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 the scarcity of my funds, was that I refused to be driven around town in a car with red and blue lights on top. Nothing slows down traffic like a cop.

Charlie gave me an awkward, one-armed hug when I stumbled my way off the plane.

"It's good to see you, Bells," he said, smiling as he automatically caught and steadied me. "You haven't changed much. How's Renée?"

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

I had only a few bags. Most of my Arizona clothes were too permeable for Washington. My mom and I had pooled our resources to supplement my winter wardrobe, but it was still scanty. It all fit easily into the trunk of the cruiser.

"I found a good car for you, really cheap," he announced when we were strapped in.

"What kind of car?" I was 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 Billy Black down at La Push?" La Push is the tiny Indian reservation on the coast. "No."

"He used to go fishing with us during the summer," Charlie prompted.

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

"He's in a wheelchair now," Charlie continued when I didn't respond, "so he can't drive anymore,

and he offered to sell me his truck cheap."

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

"Well, Billy's done a lot of work on the engine — it's only a few years old, really." I hoped he didn't think so little of me as to believe I would give up that easily. "When did he buy it?" "He bought it in 1984, I think."

"Did he 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 it if anything went wrong, and I couldn't afford a mechanic..."

"Really, Bella, 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 was the part I couldn't compromise on.

"Well, honey, I kind of already bought it for you. As a homecoming gift." Charlie peeked 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 wasn't comfortable with expressing his emotions out loud. I inherited that from him. So I was looking straight ahead as I responded.

"That's really nice, Dad. Thanks. I really appreciate it." No need to add that my being happy in Forks is an impossibility. He didn't need to suffer along with me. And I never looked a free truck in the mouth — or 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 in silence.

It was beautiful, of course; I couldn't deny that. Everything was green: the trees, their trunks covered with moss, their branches hanging with a canopy of it, the ground covered with ferns. Even the air filtered down greenly 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, rounded fenders and a bulbous cab. To my intense surprise, I loved it. I didn't know if it would run, but I could see myself in it. Plus, it was one of those solid iron affairs 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 destroyed.

"Wow, Dad, I love it! Thanks!" Now my horrific day tomorrow would be just that much less dreadful. I wouldn't be faced with the choice of either walking two miles in the rain to school or accepting a ride in the Chief's cruiser.

"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 been belonged to me since I was born. The wooden floor, the light blue walls, the peaked ceiling, the yellowed lace 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 a stipulation from my mother, so that we could stay in touch easily. 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. I was trying not to dwell too much on that fact.

One of the best things about Charlie is he doesn't hover. He left me alone to unpack and get settled, a feat that would have been altogether impossible for my mother. It was nice to be alone, not to have to smile and look pleased; a relief to stare dejectedly out the window at the sheeting rain and let just a few tears escape. I wasn't in the mood to go on a real crying jag. I would save that for bedtime, when I would have to think about the coming morning.

Forks High School had a frightening total of only 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 girl from the big city, a curiosity, a freak.

Maybe, if I looked like a girl from Phoenix should, I could work this to my advantage. But physically, I'd never fit in anywhere. I *should* be tan, sporty, blond — a volleyball player, or a cheerleader, perhaps — all the things that go with living in the valley of the sun.

Instead, I was ivory-skinned, without even the excuse of blue eyes or red hair, despite the constant sunshine. I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete; I didn't have the necessary hand-eye coordination to play sports without humiliating myself — and harming both myself and anyone else who stood too close.

When I finished putting my clothes in the old pine dresser, I took my bag of bathroom necessities and went to the communal bathroom to clean myself up after the day of travel. I looked at my face in the mirror as I brushed through my tangled, damp hair. Maybe it was the light, but already I looked sallow, unhealthy. My skin could be pretty — it was very clear, almost

translucent-looking — but it all depended on color. I had no color here.

Facing my pallid reflection in the mirror, I was forced to admit that I was lying to myself. It wasn't just physically that I'd never fit in. And if I couldn't find a niche in a school with three thousand people, what were my chances here?

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 closer to than anyone else on the planet, was never in harmony with me, never on exactly the same page. Sometimes I wondered if I was seeing the same things through my eyes that the rest of the world was seeing through theirs. 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 was done crying. The constant *whooshing* of the rain and wind across the roof wouldn't fade into the background. I pulled the faded 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 quieter 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 a cage.

Breakfast with Charlie was a quiet event. He wished me good luck at school. I thanked him, knowing his hope was wasted. 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 examined his small kitchen, with its dark paneled walls, bright yellow cabinets, and white linoleum floor. Nothing was changed. My mother had painted the cabinets eighteen years ago in an attempt to bring some sunshine into the house. Over the small fireplace in the adjoining handkerchief-sized 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 last year's. Those were embarrassing to look at — 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 donned my jacket — which had the feel of 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 eaves by the door, and locked up. The sloshing of my new waterproof boots was unnerving. I missed the normal crunch of gravel as I walked. I couldn't pause and admire my truck again as I wanted; I was in a hurry to get out of the misty wet that swirled around my head and clung to my hair under my hood.

Inside the truck, it was nice and dry. Either Billy or Charlie had obviously cleaned it up, but the tan upholstered seats still smelled faintly of tobacco, gasoline, and peppermint. The engine started quickly, to my 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 plus that I hadn't expected.

Finding the school wasn't difficult, though I'd never been there before. The school was, like most other things, just off the highway. It was not obvious that it was a school; only the sign, which declared it to be the Forks High School, made me stop. 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 wondered nostalgically. Where were the chain-link fences, the metal detectors?

I parked in front of 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. I stepped unwillingly out of the toasty truck cab and walked down a little stone path lined with dark hedges. I took a deep breath before opening the door.

Inside, it was brightly lit, and warmer than I'd hoped. The office was small; a little waiting area with padded folding chairs, orange-flecked commercial carpet, notices and awards cluttering the walls, a big clock ticking loudly. Plants grew everywhere in large plastic pots, as if there wasn'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 its front. There were three desks behind the counter, one of which was manned by a large, red-haired woman wearing glasses. She was wearing a purple t-shirt, which immediately made me feel overdressed.

The red-haired woman looked up. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Isabella Swan," I informed her, and saw the immediate awareness light her eyes. I was expected, a topic of gossip no doubt. Daughter of the Chief's flighty ex-wife, come home at last.

"Of course," she said. She dug through a precariously stacked pile of documents on her desk till she found the ones she was looking for. "I have your schedule right here, and a map of the school." She brought several sheets to the counter to show me.

She 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. She 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. I was glad to see that 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 shiny Volvo, and it stood out. Still, I cut the engine as soon as I was in a spot, so that the thunderous 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 bag, slung the strap over my shoulder, and sucked in a huge breath. I can do this, I lied to myself feebly. No one was going to bite me. I finally exhaled and stepped out of the truck.

I kept my face pulled back into my hood as I walked to the sidewalk, crowded with teenagers. My plain black jacket didn't stand out, I noticed with relief.

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 felt my breathing gradually creeping toward hyperventilation as I approached the door. I tried holding my breath as 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 tall, balding man whose desk had a nameplate identifying him as Mr. Mason. He gawked at me when he saw my name — not an encouraging response — and of course I flushed tomato red. But at least he sent me to an empty desk at the back without introducing me to the class. 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 fairly basic: Bronte, 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 nasal buzzing sound, a gangly boy with skin problems and hair black as an oil slick leaned across the aisle to talk to me.

"You're Isabella Swan, aren't you?" He looked like the overly helpful, chess club

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

"Where's your next class?" he 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 Eric," he added.

I smiled tentatively. "Thanks."

We got our jackets and headed out into the rain, which had picked up. I could have sworn several people behind us were walking close enough to eavesdrop. I hoped I wasn't getting paranoid.

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

"Very."

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

"Three or four times a year."

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

"Sunny," I told him.

"You don't look very tan."

"My mother is part albino."

He studied my face apprehensively, and I sighed. 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. Eric walked me right to the door, though it was clearly marked.

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

I smiled at him vaguely and went inside.

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

After two classes, I started to recognize several of the faces in each class. 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.

One girl sat next to me in both Trig and Spanish, and she walked with me to the cafeteria for lunch. She was tiny, several inches shorter than my five feet four inches, but her wildly curly dark hair made up a lot of the difference between our heights. I couldn't remember her name, so I smiled and nodded as she prattled about teachers and classes. I didn't try to keep up.

We sat at the end of a full table with several of her friends, who she introduced to me. I forgot all their names as soon as she spoke them. They seemed impressed by her bravery in speaking to me. The boy from English, Eric, waved at me from across the room.

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

They were sitting 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 untouched 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 without fear of meeting an excessively interested pair of eyes. But it was none of these things that caught, and held, my attention.

They didn't look anything alike. Of the three boys, one was big — muscled like a serious weight lifter, with dark, curly hair. Another was taller, leaner, but still muscular, and honey blond. The last was lanky, less bulky, with untidy, bronze-colored hair. He was more boyish than the others, who looked like they could be in college, or even teachers here rather than students.

The girls were opposites. The tall one was statuesque. She had a beautiful figure, the kind you saw on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, the kind that made every girl around her take a hit on her self-esteem just by being in the same room. Her hair was golden, gently waving to the middle of her back. The short girl was pixielike, thin in the extreme, with small features. Her hair was a deep black, cropped short and pointing in every direction.

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 despite the range in hair tones. They also had dark shadows under those eyes — purplish, bruise-like shadows. As if they were all suffering from a sleepless night, or almost done recovering from a broken nose. Though their noses, all their features, were straight, perfect, angular.

But all this is not why I couldn't look away.

I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel. It was hard to decide who was the most beautiful — maybe the perfect blond girl, or the bronze-haired boy.

They were all looking away — away from each other, away from the other students, away from anything in particular as far as I could tell. As I watched, the small girl rose with her tray — unopened soda, unbitten apple — and walked away with a quick, graceful lope that belonged on a runway. I watched, amazed at her lithe dancer's step, till she dumped her tray and glided through the back door, faster than I would have thought possible. My eyes darted back to the others, who sat unchanging.

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

As she looked up to see who I meant — though already knowing, probably, from my tone — suddenly he looked at her, the thinner one, the boyish one, the youngest, perhaps. He looked at my neighbor for just a fraction of a second, and then his dark eyes flickered to mine.

He looked away quickly, more quickly than I could, though in a flush of embarrassment I dropped my eyes at once. In that brief flash of a glance, his face held nothing of interest — it was as if she had called his name, and he'd looked up in involuntary response, already having decided not to answer.

My neighbor giggled in embarrassment, looking at the table like I did.

"That's Edward and Emmett Cullen, and Rosalie and Jasper Hale. The one who left was Alice Cullen; they all live together with Dr. Cullen and his wife." She said this under her breath.

I glanced sideways at the beautiful boy, who was looking at his tray now, picking a bagel to pieces with long, pale fingers. His mouth was moving very quickly, his perfect lips barely opening. The other three still looked away, and yet I felt he was speaking quietly to them.

Strange, unpopular names, I thought. The kinds of names grandparents had. But maybe that was in vogue here — small town names? I finally remembered that my neighbor was called Jessica, a perfectly common name. There were two girls named Jessica in my History class back home.

"They are... very nice-looking." I struggled with the conspicuous understatement.

"Yes!" Jessica agreed with another giggle. "They're all *together* though — Emmett and Rosalie, and Jasper and Alice, I mean. And they *live* together." Her voice held all the shock and condemnation of the small town, I thought critically. But, if I was being honest, I had to admit that even in Phoenix, it would cause gossip.

"Which ones are the Cullens?" I asked. "They don't look related..."

"Oh, they're not. Dr. Cullen is really young, in his twenties or early thirties. They're all adopted. The Hales *are* brother and sister, twins — the blondes — and they're foster children."

"They look a little old for foster children."

"They are now, Jasper and Rosalie are both eighteen, but they've been with Mrs. Cullen since they were eight. She's their aunt or something like that."

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

"I guess so," Jessica admitted reluctantly, and I got the impression that she didn't like the doctor and his wife for some reason. With the glances she was throwing at their adopted children, I would presume the reason was jealousy. "I think that Mrs. Cullen can't have any kids, though," she added, as if that lessened their kindness.

Throughout all this conversation, my eyes flickered again and again to the table where the strange family sat. They continued to look at the walls and not eat.

"Have they always lived in Forks?" I asked. Surely I would have noticed them on one of my summers here.

"No," she said in a voice that implied it should be obvious, even to a new arrival like me.

"They just moved down two years ago from somewhere in Alaska."

I felt a surge of pity, and relief. Pity because, as beautiful as they were, they were outsiders, clearly not accepted. Relief that I wasn't the only newcomer here, and certainly not the most interesting by any standard.

As I examined them, the youngest, one of the Cullens, looked up and met my gaze, this time with evident curiosity in his expression. As I looked swiftly away, it seemed to me that his glance held some kind of unmet expectation.

"Which one is the boy with the reddish brown hair?" I asked. I peeked at him from the corner of my eye, and he was still staring at me, but not gawking like the other students had today — he had a slightly frustrated expression. I looked down again.

"That's Edward. He's gorgeous, of course, but don't waste your time. He doesn't date. Apparently none of the girls here are good-looking enough for him." She sniffed, a clear case of sour grapes. I wondered when he'd turned her down.

I bit my lip to hide my smile. Then I glanced at him again. His face was turned away, but I thought his cheek appeared lifted, as if he were smiling, too.

After a few more minutes, the four of them left the table together. They all were noticeably graceful — even the big, brawny one. It was unsettling to watch. The one named Edward didn't look at me again.

I sat at the table with Jessica and her friends longer than I would have if I'd been sitting alone. I was anxious not to be late for class on my first day. One of my new acquaintances, who considerably reminded me that her name was Angela, had Biology II with me the next hour. We walked to class together in silence. She was shy, too.

When we entered the classroom, Angela went to sit at a black-topped lab table exactly like the ones I was used to. She already had a neighbor. In fact, all the tables were filled but one. Next to the center aisle, I recognized Edward Cullen by his unusual hair, sitting next to that single open seat.

As I walked down the aisle to introduce myself to the teacher and get my slip signed, I was watching him surreptitiously. Just as I passed, he suddenly went rigid in his seat. He stared at me again, meeting my eyes with the strangest expression on his face — it was hostile, furious. I looked away quickly, shocked, 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 noticed that his eyes were black — coal black.

Mr. Banner signed my slip and handed me a book with no nonsense about introductions. I could tell we were going to get along. Of course, he 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 *him*, bewildered by the antagonistic stare he'd given me.

I didn't look up as I set my book on the table and took my seat, but I saw his posture change from the corner of my eye. He was leaning away from me, sitting on the extreme edge of his chair and averting his face like he smelled something bad. Inconspicuously, I sniffed my hair. It smelled like strawberries, the scent of my favorite shampoo. It seemed an innocent enough odor. I let my hair fall over my right shoulder, making a dark curtain between us, and tried to pay attention to the teacher.

Unfortunately 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 peeking occasionally through the screen of my hair at the strange boy next to me. During the whole class, he never relaxed his stiff position on the edge of his chair, sitting as far from me as possible. I could see his hand on his left leg was clenched into a fist, tendons standing out under his pale skin. This, too, he never relaxed. He had the long sleeves of his white shirt pushed up to his elbows, and his forearm was surprisingly hard and muscular beneath his light skin. He wasn't nearly as slight as he'd looked next to his burly brother.

The class seemed to drag on longer than the others. Was it because the day was finally coming to a close, or because I was waiting for his tight fist to loosen? It never did; he continued to sit so still it looked like he wasn't breathing. What was wrong with him? Was this his normal behavior? I questioned my judgment on Jessica's bitterness at lunch today. Maybe she was not as resentful as I'd thought.

It couldn't have anything to do with me. He didn't know me from Eve.

I peeked up at him one more time, and regretted it. He was glaring down at me again, his black eyes full of revulsion. As I flinched away from him, shrinking against my chair, the phrase *if looks could kill* suddenly ran through my mind.

At that moment, the bell rang loudly, making me jump, and Edward Cullen was out of his seat. Fluidly he rose — he was much taller than I'd thought — his back to me, and he was out the door before anyone else was out of their seat.

I sat frozen in my seat, staring blankly after him. He was so mean. It wasn't fair. I began gathering up my things slowly, trying to block the anger that filled me, for fear my eyes would tear up. For some reason, my temper was hardwired to my tear ducts. I usually cried when I was angry, a humiliating tendency.

"Aren't you Isabella Swan?" a male voice asked.

I looked up to see a cute, baby-faced boy, his pale blond hair carefully gelled into orderly spikes, smiling at me in a friendly way. He obviously didn't think I smelled bad.

"Bella," I corrected him, with a smile.

"I'm Mike."

"Hi, Mike."

"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." He seemed thrilled, though it wasn't that big of a coincidence in a school this small.

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

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

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

"Was that the boy I sat next to in Biology?" I asked artlessly.

"Yes," he said. "He looked like he was in pain or something."

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

"He's a weird guy." Mike lingered by me instead of heading to the dressing room. "If I were lucky enough to sit by you, I would have talked to you."

I smiled at him before walking through the girls' locker room door. He was friendly and clearly admiring. But it wasn't enough to ease my irritation.

The Gym teacher, Coach Clapp, found me a uniform but didn't make me dress down for today's class. At home, only two years of RE. were required. Here, P.E. was mandatory all four years. Forks was literally my personal hell on Earth.

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

The final bell rang at last. I walked slowly to the office to return my paperwork. The rain had drifted away, but the wind was strong, and colder. I wrapped my arms around myself.

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

Edward Cullen stood at the desk in front of me. I recognized again that tousled bronze hair. He didn't appear to notice the sound of my entrance. I stood pressed against the back wall, waiting for the receptionist to be free.

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

I just couldn't believe that this was about me. It had to be something else, something that happened before I entered the Biology room. The look on his face must have been about another aggravation entirely. It was impossible that this stranger could take such a sudden, intense dislike to me.

The door opened again, and the cold wind suddenly gusted through the room, rustling the papers on the desk, swirling my hair around my face. The girl who came in merely stepped to the desk, placed a note in the wire basket, and walked out again. But Edward Cullen's back stiffened, and he turned slowly to glare at me — his face was absurdly handsome — with piercing, hate-filled eyes. For an instant, I felt a thrill of genuine fear, raising the hair on my arms. The look only lasted a second, but it chilled me more than the freezing wind. He turned back to the receptionist.

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

I went meekly to the desk, my face white for once instead of red, and handed her the signed slip. "How did your first day go, dear?" the receptionist asked maternally.

"Fine," I lied, my voice weak. She didn't look convinced.

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 damp green hole. I sat inside for a while, just staring out the windshield blankly. But soon I was cold enough to need the heater, so I turned the key and the engine roared to life. I headed back to Charlie's house, fighting tears the whole way there.

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 opaque. It was easier because I knew what to expect of my day. Mike came to sit by me in English, and walked me to my next class, with Chess Club Eric glaring at him all the while; that was nattering. People didn't look at me quite as much as they had yesterday. I sat with a big group at lunch that included Mike, Eric, Jessica, and several other people whose names and faces I now remembered. I began to feel like I was treading water, instead of drowning in it.

It was worse because I was tired; I still couldn't sleep with the wind echoing around the house. It was worse because Mr. 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 cringe out of the way of the ball, I hit my teammate in the head with it. And it was worse because Edward Cullen wasn't in school at all.

All morning I was dreading lunch, fearing his bizarre glares. Part of me wanted to confront him and demand to know what his problem was. While I was lying sleepless in my bed, I even imagined what I would say. But I knew myself too well to think I would really have the guts to do it. I made the Cowardly Lion look like the terminator.

But when I walked into the cafeteria with Jessica — trying to keep my eyes from sweeping the place for him, and failing entirely — I saw that his four siblings of sorts were sitting together at the same table, and he was not with them.

Mike intercepted us and steered us to his table. Jessica seemed elated by the attention, and her friends quickly joined us. But as I tried to listen to their easy chatter, I was terribly uncomfortable, waiting nervously for the moment he would arrive. I hoped that he would simply ignore me when he came, and prove my suspicions false.

He didn't come, and as time passed I grew more and more tense.

I walked to Biology with more confidence when, by the end of lunch, he still hadn't showed. Mike, who was taking on the qualities of a golden retriever, walked faithfully by my side to class. I held my breath at the door, but Edward Cullen wasn't there, either. I exhaled and went to my seat. Mike followed, talking about an upcoming trip to the beach. He lingered by my desk till the bell rang. Then he smiled at me wistfully and went to sit by a girl with braces and a bad perm. It looked like I was going to have to do something about Mike, and it wouldn't be easy. In a town like this, where everyone lived on top of everyone else, diplomacy was essential. I had never been enormously tactful; I had no practice dealing with overly friendly boys.

I was relieved that I had the desk to myself, that Edward was absent. I told myself that repeatedly. But I couldn't get rid of the nagging suspicion that I was the reason he wasn't there. It was ridiculous, and egotistical, to think that I could affect anyone that strongly. It was impossible. And yet I couldn't stop worrying that it was true.

When the school day was finally done, and the blush was fading out of my cheeks from the volleyball incident, I changed quickly back into my jeans and navy blue sweater. I hurried from the girls' locker room, pleased to find that I had successfully evaded my retriever friend for the moment. I walked swiftly out to the parking lot. It was crowded now with fleeing students. I got in my truck and dug through my bag to make sure I had what I needed.

Last night I'd discovered that Charlie couldn't cook much besides fried eggs and bacon. So I requested that I be assigned kitchen detail for the duration of my stay. He was willing enough to hand over the keys to the banquet hall. I also found out that he had no food in the house. So I had my shopping list and the cash from the jar in the cupboard labeled FOOD MONEY, and I was on my way to the Thriftway.

I gunned my deafening engine to life, ignoring the heads that turned in my direction, and backed carefully 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 getting into 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 dressed exceptionally well; simply, but in clothes that subtly hinted at designer origins. With their remarkable good looks, the style with which they carried themselves,

they could have worn dishrags and pulled it off. It seemed excessive for them to have both looks and money. But as far as I could tell, life worked that way most of the time. It didn't look as if it bought them any acceptance here.

No, I didn't fully believe that. The isolation must be their desire; I couldn't imagine any door that wouldn't be opened by that degree of beauty.

They looked at my noisy truck as I passed them, just like everyone else. I kept my eyes straight forward and was relieved when I finally was free of the school grounds.

The Thriftway was not far from the school, just a few streets south, off the highway. It was nice to be inside the supermarket; it felt normal. I did the shopping at home, and I fell into the pattern of the familiar task gladly. 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, stuffing them in wherever I could find an open space. I hoped Charlie wouldn't mind. I wrapped potatoes in foil and stuck them in the oven to bake, covered a steak in marinade and balanced it on top of a carton of eggs in the fridge.

When I was finished with that, I took my book bag upstairs. Before starting my homework, I changed into a pair of dry sweats, pulled my damp hair up into a pony-tail, and checked my e-mail for the first time. I had three messages.

"Bella," 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 eight hours after the first.

"Bella," she wrote...

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

The last was from this morning.
Isabella,

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 my mom was well known for jumping the gun.

Mom,

Calm down. I'm writing right now. Don't do anything rash.

Bella.

I sent that, and began again.

Mom,

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 nice kids who sit by me at lunch.

Your blouse is at the dry cleaners - you were supposed to pick it up Friday.

Charlie bought me a truck, can you believe it? I love it. 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.

Bella.

I had decided to read *Wuthering Heights* — the novel we were currently studying in English — yet again for the fun of it, and that's what I was doing when Charlie came home. I'd lost track of the time, and I hurried downstairs to take the potatoes out and put the steak in to broil.

"Bella?" 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 bustled about the kitchen. As far as I was aware, he'd never shot the gun on the job. But he kept it ready. When I came 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. My mother was an imaginative cook, 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, and he looked relieved.

He seemed to feel awkward standing in the kitchen doing nothing; he lumbered into the living room to watch TV while I worked. We were both more comfortable that way. I made a salad while the steaks 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, Bell."

"Thanks."

We ate in silence for a few minutes. It wasn't uncomfortable. Neither of us was bothered by the quiet. In some ways, we were well suited for living together.

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

"Well, I have a few classes with a girl named Jessica. I sit with her friends at lunch. And there's this boy, Mike, who's very friendly. Everybody seems pretty nice." With one outstanding exception.

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

"Do you know the Cullen family?" I asked hesitantly.

"Dr. Cullen's family? Sure. Dr. Cullen's a great man."

"They... the kids... are a little different. They don't seem to fit in very well at school." Charlie surprised me by looking 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 he gets here," he continued, getting louder. "We're lucky to have him — lucky that his wife wanted to live in a small town. He'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 he's happily married. A lot of the nurses at the hospital have a hard time concentrating on their work with him 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 unwillingly to work on my math homework. I could feel a tradition in the making.

That night it was finally quiet. I fell asleep quickly, 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 students at school. In Gym, the kids on my team learned not to pass me the ball and to step quickly in front of me if the other team tried to take advantage of my weakness. I happily stayed out of their way.

Edward Cullen didn't come back to school.

Every day, I watched anxiously until the rest of the Cullens entered the cafeteria without him. Then I could relax and join in the lunchtime conversation. Mostly it centered around a trip to the La Push Ocean Park in two weeks that Mike was putting together. I was invited, and I had agreed to go, more out of politeness than desire. Beaches should be hot and dry.

By Friday I was perfectly comfortable entering my Biology class, no longer worried that Edward would be there. For all I knew, he had dropped out of school. I tried not to think about him, but I couldn't totally suppress the worry that I was responsible for his continued absence, ridiculous as it seemed.

My first weekend in Forks passed without incident. Charlie, unused to spending time in the usually empty house, worked most of the weekend. I cleaned the house, got ahead on my homework, and wrote my mom more bogusly cheerful e-mail. I did drive to the library Saturday, but it was so poorly stocked that I didn't bother to get a card; I would have to make a date to visit Olympia or Seattle soon and find a good bookstore. I wondered idly what kind of gas mileage the truck got... and shuddered at the thought.

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

People greeted me in the parking lot Monday morning. I didn't know all their names, but I waved back and smiled at everyone. It was colder this morning, but happily not raining. In English, Mike took his accustomed 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 bit at my cheeks, my nose.

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

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

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

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

"No. That 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?" he asked incredulously.

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

Mike laughed. And then a big, squishy ball of dripping snow smacked into the back of his head.

We both

turned to see where it came from. I had my suspicions about Eric, who was walking away, his back toward us — in the wrong direction for his next class. Mike apparently had the same notion. He bent over and began scraping together a pile of the white mush.

"I'll see you at lunch, okay?" I kept walking as I spoke. "Once people start throwing wet stuff, I go inside."

He just nodded, his eyes on Eric's retreating figure.

Throughout the morning, everyone chattered excitedly about the snow; apparently it was the first snowfall of the new year. I kept my mouth shut. Sure, it was drier than rain — until it melted in your socks.

I walked alertly to the cafeteria with Jessica after Spanish. Mush balls were flying everywhere. I kept a binder in my hands, ready to use it as a shield if necessary. Jessica thought I was hilarious, but something in my expression kept her from lobbing a snowball at me herself.

Mike caught up to us as we walked in the doors, laughing, with ice melting the spikes in his hair. He and Jessica 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.

Jessica pulled on my arm.

"Hello? Bella? 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 Bella?" Mike asked Jessica.

"Nothing," I answered. "I'll just get a soda today." I caught up to the end of the line. "Aren't you hungry?" Jessica asked.

"Actually, I feel a little sick," I said, my eyes still on the floor.

I waited for them to *get* their food, and then followed them to a table, my eyes on my feet.

I sipped my soda slowly, my stomach churning. Twice Mike asked, with unnecessary concern, how I was feeling.

I told him 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.

I decided to permit myself one glance at the Cullen family's table. If he was glaring at me, I would skip Biology, like the coward I was.

I kept my head down and glanced up under my lashes. None of them were looking this way. I

lifted my head a little.

They were laughing. Edward, Jasper, and Emmett all had their hair entirely saturated with melting snow. Alice and Rosalie were leaning away as Emmett shook his dripping hair toward them. 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 pinpoint what that difference was. I examined Edward the most carefully. His skin was less pale, I decided — flushed from the snow fight maybe — the circles under his eyes much less noticeable. But there was something more. I pondered, staring, trying to isolate the change.

"Bella, what are you staring at?" Jessica intruded, her eyes following my stare.

At that precise moment, his eyes flashed over to meet mine.

I dropped my head, letting my hair fall to conceal my face. I was sure, though, in the instant our eyes met, that he didn't look harsh or unfriendly as he had the last time I'd seen him. He looked merely curious again, unsatisfied in some way.

"Edward Cullen is staring at you," Jessica giggled in my ear.

"He doesn't look angry, does he?" I couldn't help asking.

"No," she said, sounding confused by my question. "Should he be?"

"I don't think he likes me," I confided. I still felt queasy. I put my head down on my arm.

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

"Stop looking at him," I hissed.

She snickered, but she looked away. I raised my head enough to make sure that she did, contemplating violence if she resisted.

Mike interrupted us then — he was planning an epic battle of the blizzard in the parking lot after school and wanted us to join. Jessica agreed enthusiastically. The way she looked at Mike left little doubt that she would be up for anything he suggested. I kept silent. I would have to hide in the gym until the parking lot cleared.

For the rest of the lunch hour I very carefully kept my eyes at my own table. I decided to honor the bargain I'd made with myself. Since he didn't look angry, I would go to Biology. My stomach did frightened little flips at the thought of sitting next to him again.

I didn't really want to walk to class with Mike as usual — he seemed to be a popular target for the snowball snipers — but when we went 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, secretly pleased. I would be free to go straight home after Gym.

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

Once inside the classroom, I saw with relief that my table was still empty. Mr. Banner was walking around the room, distributing one microscope and box of slides to each table. Class

didn't start for a few minutes, 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 my eyes stayed carefully focused on the pattern I was drawing.

"Hello," said a quiet, musical voice.

I looked up, stunned that he was speaking to me. He was sitting as far away from me as the desk allowed, but his chair was angled toward me. His hair was dripping wet, disheveled — even so, he looked like he'd just finished shooting a commercial for hair gel. His dazzling face was friendly, open, a slight smile on his flawless lips. But his eyes were careful.

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

My mind was spinning with confusion. Had I made up the whole thing? He was perfectly polite now. I had to speak; he was waiting. But I couldn't think of anything conventional to say.

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

He laughed a soft, enchanting laugh.

"Oh, I think everyone knows your name. The whole town's been waiting for you to arrive." I grimaced. I knew it was something like that.

"No," I persisted stupidly. "I meant, why did you call me Bella?"

He seemed confused. "Do you prefer Isabella?"

"No, I like Bella," I said. "But I think Charlie — I mean my dad — must call me Isabella behind my back — that's what everyone here seems to know me as," I tried to explain, feeling like an utter moron.

"Oh." He let it drop. I looked away awkwardly.

Thankfully, Mr. Banner started class at that moment. I tried to concentrate as he 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, he would be coming around to see who had it right.

"Get started," he commanded.

"Ladies first, partner?" Edward asked. I looked up to see him smiling a crooked smile so beautiful that I could only stare at him like an idiot.

"Or I could start, if you wish." The smile faded; he was obviously wondering if I was mentally competent. "No," I said, flushing. "I'll go ahead."

I was showing off, just a little. I'd already done this lab, and I knew what I was looking for. It should be easy. I snapped the first slide into place under the microscope and adjusted it quickly to the 40X objective. I studied the slide briefly.

My assessment was confident. "Prophase."

"Do you mind if I look?" he asked as I began to remove the slide. His hand caught mine, to stop me, as he asked. His fingers were ice-cold, like he'd been holding them in a snowdrift before class. But that wasn't why I jerked my hand away so quickly. When he touched me, it stung my hand as if an electric current had passed through us.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, pulling his hand back immediately. However, he continued to reach for the microscope. I watched him, still staggered, as he examined the slide for an even shorter time than I had.

"Prophase," he agreed, writing it neatly in the first space on our worksheet. He swiftly switched out the first slide for the second, and then glanced at it cursorily.

"Anaphase," he murmured, writing it down as he spoke.

I kept my voice indifferent. "May I?"

He smirked and pushed the microscope to me.

I looked through the eyepiece eagerly, only to be disappointed. Dang it, he was right. "Slide three?" I held out my hand without looking at him.

He handed it to me; it seemed like he was being careful not to touch my skin again. I took the most fleeting look I could manage.

"Interphase." I passed him the microscope before he could ask for it. He took a swift peek, and then wrote it down. I would have written it while he looked, but his clear, elegant script intimidated me. I didn't want to spoil the page with my clumsy scrawl.

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

Which left me with nothing to do but try to not look at him... unsuccessfully. I glanced up, and he was staring at me, that same inexplicable look of frustration in his eyes. Suddenly I identified that subtle difference in his face.

"Did you get contacts?" I blurted out unthinkingly.

He seemed puzzled by my unexpected question. "No."

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

He shrugged, and looked away.

In fact, I was sure there was something different. I vividly remembered the flat black color of his eyes the last time he'd glared at me — the color was striking against the background of his pale skin and his auburn hair. Today, his eyes were a completely different color: a strange ocher, darker than butterscotch, but with the same golden tone. I didn't understand how that could be, unless he 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. His hands were clenched into hard fists again.

Mr. Banner came to our table then, to see why we weren't working. He looked over our shoulders to glance at the completed lab, and then stared more intently to check the answers.

"So, Edward, didn't you think Isabella should get a chance with the microscope?" Mr. Banner asked. "Bella," Edward corrected automatically. "Actually, she identified three of the five."

Mr. Banner looked at me now; his expression was skeptical.

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

I smiled sheepishly. "Not with onion root."

"Whitefish blastula?"

"Yeah."

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

"Well," he said after a moment, "I guess it's good you two are lab partners." He mumbled something else as he walked away. After he left, I began doodling on my notebook again.

"It's too bad about the snow, isn't it?" Edward asked. I had the feeling that he was forcing himself to make small talk with me. Paranoia swept over me again. It was like he had heard my conversation with Jessica at lunch and was trying to prove me wrong.

"Not really," I answered honestly, instead of pretending to be normal like everyone else. I was still trying to dislodge the stupid feeling of suspicion, and I couldn't concentrate.

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

"Or the wet."

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

"You have no idea," I muttered darkly.

He looked fascinated by what I said, for some reason I couldn't imagine. His 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 he did, demanding.

"It's... complicated."

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

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

"My mother got remarried," I said.

"That doesn't sound so complex," he disagreed, but he was suddenly sympathetic. "When did that happen?"

"Last September." My voice sounded sad, even to me.

"And you don't like him," Edward surmised, his tone still kind.

"No, Phil is fine. Too young, maybe, but nice enough."

"Why didn't you stay with them?"

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

"Phil travels a lot. He plays ball for a living." I half-smiled.

"Have I heard of him?" he asked, smiling in response.

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

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

My chin raised a fraction. "No, she did not send me here. I sent myself."

His eyebrows knit together. "I don't understand," he admitted, and he seemed unnecessarily frustrated by that fact.

I sighed. Why was I explaining this to him? He continued to stare at me with obvious curiosity.

"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," he pointed out.

"And?" I challenged.

"That doesn't seem fair." He shrugged, but his eyes were still intense.

I laughed without humor. "Hasn't anyone ever told you? Life isn't fair."

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

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

His gaze became appraising. "You put on a good show," he said slowly. "But I'd be willing to bet that you're suffering more than you let anyone see."

I grimaced at him, resisting the impulse to stick out my tongue like a five-year-old, and

looked away. "Am I wrong?"

I tried to ignore him.

"I didn't think so," he murmured smugly.

"Why does it matter to *you*?" I asked, irritated. I kept my eyes away, watching the teacher make his rounds.

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

I sighed, scowling at the blackboard.

"Am I annoying you?" he asked. He sounded amused.

I glanced at him without thinking... and told the truth again. "Not exactly. I'm more annoyed at myself. My face is so easy to read — my mother always calls me her open book." I frowned. "On the contrary, I find you very difficult to read." Despite everything that I'd said and he'd guessed, he sounded like he meant it.

"You must be a good reader then," I replied.

"Usually." He smiled widely, flashing a set of perfect, ultrawhite teeth.

Mr. Banner called the class to order then, and I turned with relief to listen. I was in disbelief that I'd just explained my dreary life to this bizarre, beautiful boy who may or may not despise me. He'd seemed engrossed in our conversation, but now I could see, from the corner of my eye, that he was leaning away from me again, his hands gripping the edge of the table with unmistakable tension.

I tried to appear attentive as Mr. Banner illustrated, with transparencies on the overhead projector, what I had seen without difficulty through the microscope. But my thoughts were unmanageable.

When the bell finally rang, Edward rushed as swiftly and as gracefully from the room as he had last Monday. And, like last Monday, I stared after him in amazement.

Mike skipped quickly to my side and picked up my books for me. I imagined him with a wagging tail.

"That was awful," he groaned. "They all looked exactly the same. You're lucky you had Cullen for a partner."

"I didn't have any trouble with it," I said, stung by his assumption. I regretted the snub instantly. "I've done the lab before, though," I added before he could get his feelings hurt.

"Cullen seemed friendly enough today," he commented as we shrugged into our raincoats. He didn't seem pleased about it.

I tried to sound indifferent. "I wonder what was with him last Monday."

I couldn't concentrate on Mike's chatter as we walked to Gym, and RE. didn't do much to hold

my attention, either. Mike was on my team today. He chivalrously covered my position as well as his own, so my woolgathering was only interrupted when it was my turn to serve; my team ducked warily out of the way every time I was up.

The rain was just a mist as I walked to the parking lot, but I was happier when I was in the dry cab. I got the heater running, for once not caring about the mind-numbing roar of the engine. I unzipped my jacket, put the hood down, and fluffed my damp hair out so the heater could dry it on the way home.

I looked around me to make sure it was clear. That's when I noticed the still, white figure. Edward Cullen was leaning against the front door of the Volvo, three cars down from me, and staring intently in my direction. I swiftly looked away and threw the truck into reverse, almost hitting a rusty Toyota Corolla in my haste. 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, with greater success. I stared straight ahead as I passed the Volvo, but from a peripheral peek, I would swear I saw him laughing.

3. PHENOMENON

When I opened my eyes in the morning, something was different. It was the light. It was still the gray-green light of a cloudy day in the forest, but it was clearer somehow. I realized there was no fog veiling my window.

I jumped up to look outside, and then groaned in horror.

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 fantastic, gorgeous 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 reveling in the aloneness instead of being 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 scared 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 Edward Cullen. And that was very, very stupid.

I should be avoiding him entirely after my brainless and embarrassing babbling yesterday. And I was suspicious of him; why should he lie about his eyes? I was still frightened of the hostility I sometimes felt emanating from him, and I was still tongue-tied whenever I pictured his perfect face. I was well aware that my league and his league were spheres that did not touch. So I shouldn't be at all anxious to see him today.

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 to the side mirror and save myself. Clearly, today was going to be nightmarish.

Driving to school, I distracted myself from my fear of falling and my unwanted speculations about Edward Cullen by thinking about Mike and Eric, and the obvious difference in how teenage boys responded to me here. I was sure I looked exactly the same as I had in Phoenix. Maybe it was just that the boys back home had watched me pass slowly through all the awkward phases of adolescence and still thought of me that way. Perhaps it was because I was a novelty here, where novelties were few and far between. Possibly my crippling clumsiness was seen as endearing rather than pathetic, casting me as a damsel in distress. Whatever the reason, Mike's puppy dog behavior and Eric's apparent rivalry with him were disconcerting. I wasn't sure if I didn't prefer being ignored.

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 saw 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. My throat suddenly felt tight. I wasn't used to being taken care of, and Charlie's unspoken concern caught me by surprise.

I was standing by the back corner of the truck, struggling to fight back the sudden wave of emotion the snow chains had brought on, when I heard an odd sound.

It was a high-pitched screech, and it was fast becoming 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 much faster, and I was able to absorb in clear detail several things at once.

Edward Cullen was standing four cars down from me, staring at me in horror. His face stood out from a sea of faces, all frozen in the same mask of shock. But of more immediate importance was the dark blue van that 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 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*.

A low oath made me aware that someone was with me, and the voice was impossible not to recognize. Two long, white hands shot out protectively in front of me, and the van shuddered to a stop a foot from my face, the large hands fitting providentially into a deep dent in the side of the van's body.

Then his 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. A groaning metallic thud 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 before the screaming began. In the abrupt bedlam, I could hear more than one person shouting my name. But more clearly than all the yelling, I could hear Edward Cullen's low, frantic voice in my ear.

"Bella? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." My voice sounded strange. I tried to sit up, and realized he was holding me against the side of his body in an iron grasp.

"Be careful," he 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." His voice, amazingly, sounded like he was suppressing laughter.

"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, Bella," he said, his tone serious again.

I turned to sit up, and this time he let me, releasing his hold around my waist and sliding as far from me as he could in the limited space. I looked at his concerned, innocent expression and was disoriented again by the force of his gold-colored eyes. What was I asking him?

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 Tyler out of the van!" someone else shouted.

There was a flurry of activity around us. I tried to get up, but Edward's cold hand pushed my shoulder down.

"Just stay put for now."

"But it's cold," I complained. It surprised me when he chuckled under his breath. There was an edge to the sound.

"You were over there," I suddenly remembered, and his chuckle stopped short. "You were by your car." His expression turned hard. "No, I wasn't."

"I saw you." All around us was chaos. I could hear the gruffer voices of adults arriving on the scene. But I obstinately held on to our argument; I was right, and he was going to admit it.

"Bella, I was standing with you, and I pulled you out of the way." He unleashed the full, devastating power of his eyes on me, as if trying to communicate something crucial.

"No." I set my jaw.

The gold in his eyes blazed. "Please, Bella."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Trust me," he pleaded, his soft voice overwhelming.

I could hear the sirens now. "Will you promise to explain everything to me later?" "Fine," he snapped, abruptly exasperated.

"Fine," I repeated angrily.

It took six EMTs and two teachers — Mr. Varner and Coach Clapp — to shift the van far enough away from us to bring the stretchers in. Edward vehemently refused his, and I tried to do the same, but the traitor told them I'd hit my head and probably had a concussion. I almost died of humiliation 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. Edward got to ride in the front. It was maddening.

To make matters worse, Chief Swan arrived before they could get me safely away. "Bella!" 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 turned to the closest EMT for a second opinion. I tuned him out to consider the jumble of inexplicable images churning chaotically in my head. 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 contours of Edward's shoulders... as if he had braced himself against the car with enough force to damage the metal frame...

And then there was his family, looking on from the distance, with expressions that ranged from disapproval to fury but held no hint of concern for their brother's safety.

I tried to think of a logical solution that could explain what I had just seen — a solution that excluded the assumption that I was insane.

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 Edward simply glided through the hospital doors under his own power. I ground my teeth together.

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 stupid-looking neck brace anymore. When 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 Tyler Crowley from my Government class beneath the bloodstained bandages wrapped tightly around his head. Tyler looked a hundred times worse than I felt. But he was staring anxiously at me.

"Bella, I'm so sorry!"

"I'm fine, Tyler — you look awful, are you all right?" As we spoke, nurses began unwinding his soiled bandages, exposing a myriad of shallow slices all over his forehead and left cheek.

He ignored me. "I thought I was going to kill you! I was going too fast, and I hit the ice wrong..." He winced as one nurse started dabbing at his 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... Edward pulled me out of the way."

He looked confused. "Who?"

"Edward Cullen — he was standing next to me." I'd always been a terrible liar; I didn't sound convincing at all.

"Cullen? I didn't see him... wow, it was all so fast, I guess. Is he okay?"

"I think so. He's here somewhere, but they didn't make him 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, waiting, harassed by Tyler's constant apologies and promises to make it up to me. No matter how many times I tried to convince him I was fine, he continued to torment himself. Finally, I closed my eyes and ignored him. He kept up a remorseful mumbling.

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

Edward was standing at the foot of my bed, smirking. I glared at him. It wasn't easy — it would have been more natural to ogle.

"Hey, Edward, I'm really sorry —" Tyler began.
Edward lifted a hand to stop him.

"No blood, no foul," he said, flashing his brilliant teeth. He moved to sit on the edge of Tyler's bed, facing me. He smirked again.

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

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

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

Then a doctor walked around the corner, and my mouth fell open. He was young, he was blond... and he was handsomer than any movie star I'd ever seen. He was pale, though, and tired-looking, with circles under his eyes. From Charlie's description, this had to be Edward's father.

"So, Miss Swan," Dr. Cullen said in a remarkably appealing voice, "how are you feeling?" "I'm fine," I said, for the last time, I hoped.

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

"Your X-rays look good," he said. "Does your head hurt? Edward said you hit it pretty hard." "It's fine," I repeated with a sigh, throwing a quick scowl toward Edward.

The doctor's cool fingers probed lightly along my skull. He noticed when I winced. "Tender?" he asked.

"Not really." I'd had worse.

I heard a chuckle, and looked over to see Edward's patronizing smile. My eyes narrowed.

"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 be attentive.

"Maybe you should take it easy today."

I glanced at Edward. "Does *he* get to go to school?"

"Someone has to spread the good news that we survived," Edward said smugly.

"Actually," Dr. Cullen corrected, "most of the school seems to be in the waiting room." "Oh no," I moaned, covering my face with my hands.

Dr. Cullen raised his 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. He looked concerned.

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

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

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

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

"Lucky Edward happened to be standing next to me," I amended with a hard glance at the subject of my statement.

"Oh, well, yes," Dr. Cullen agreed, suddenly occupied with the papers in front of him. Then he looked away, at Tyler, and walked to the next bed. My intuition flickered; the doctor was in on it.

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

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

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I hissed under my breath. He took a step back from me, his jaw suddenly clenched.

"Your father is waiting for you," he said through his teeth.

I glanced at Dr. Cullen and Tyler.

"I'd like to speak with you alone, if you don't mind," I pressed.

He glared, and then turned his back and strode down the long room. I nearly had to run to keep up. As soon as we turned the corner into a short hallway, he spun around to face me.

"What do you want?" he asked, sounding annoyed. His eyes were cold.

His unfriendliness intimidated me. My words came out with less severity than I'd intended. "You owe me an explanation," I reminded him.

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

I flinched back from the resentment in his voice. "You promised."

"Bella, you hit your head, you don't know what you're talking about." His tone was cutting. My temper flared now, and I glared defiantly at him. "There's nothing wrong with my head." He glared back. "What do you want from me, Bella?"

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

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

It came out in a rush.

"All I know is that you weren't anywhere near me — Tyler didn't see you, either, so don't tell me I hit my head too hard. That van was going to crush us both — and it didn't, and your hands left dents in the side of it — and you left a dent in the other car, and you're not hurt at all — and the van should have smashed my legs, but you were holding it up..." I could hear how crazy it sounded, and I couldn't continue. I was so mad I could feel the tears coming; I tried to force them back by grinding my teeth together.

He was staring at me incredulously. But his face was tense, defensive.

"You think I lifted a van off you?" His tone questioned my sanity, but it only made me more suspicious. It was like a perfectly delivered line by a skilled actor.

I merely nodded once, jaw tight.

"Nobody will believe that, you know." His voice held an edge of derision now.

"I'm not going to tell anybody." I said each word slowly, carefully controlling my anger. Surprise flitted across his face. "Then why does it matter?"

"It matters to me," I insisted. "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 waited, fuming and expectant.

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

"No."

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

We scowled at each other in silence. I was the first to speak, trying to keep myself focused. I was in danger of being distracted by his livid, glorious face. It was like trying to stare down a destroying angel.

"Why did you even bother?" I asked frigidly.

He paused, and for a brief moment his stunning face was unexpectedly vulnerable. "I don't know," he whispered.

And then he turned his back on me and walked away.

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

The waiting room was more unpleasant than I'd feared. 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 sullenly. I was still aggravated, not in the mood for chitchat.

"What did the doctor say?"

"Dr. Cullen saw me, and he said I was fine and I could go home." I sighed. Mike and Jessica and Eric were all there, beginning to converge on us. "Let's go," I urged.

Charlie put one arm behind my back, not quite touching me, and led me to the glass doors of the exit. I waved sheepishly at my friends, hoping to convey that they didn't need to worry anymore. 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 Edward's defensive behavior in the hall was a confirmation of the bizarre things I still could hardly believe I'd witnessed.

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 Edward presented. And more than a little obsessed by Edward himself. 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 of Edward Cullen.

4. INVITATIONS

In my dream it was very dark, and what dim light there was seemed to be radiating from Edward's skin. I couldn't see his face, just his back as he walked away from me, leaving me in the blackness. No matter how fast I ran, I couldn't catch up to him; no matter how loud I called, he never turned. Troubled, I woke in the middle of the night and couldn't sleep again for what seemed like a very long time. After that, he was in my dreams nearly every night, but always on the periphery, never within reach.

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

To my dismay, I found myself the center of attention for the rest of that week. Tyler Crowley was impossible, following me around, obsessed with making amends to me somehow. I tried to convince him what I wanted more than anything else was for him to forget all about it — especially since nothing had actually happened to me — but he remained insistent. He followed me between classes and sat at our now-crowded lunch table. Mike and Eric were even less friendly toward him than they were to each other, which made me worry that I'd gained another unwelcome fan.

No one seemed concerned about Edward, though I explained over and over that he was the hero — how he had pulled me out of the way and had nearly been crushed, too. I tried to be convincing. Jessica, Mike, Eric, and everyone else always commented that they hadn't even seen him there till the van was pulled away.

I wondered to myself why no one else had seen him standing so far away, before he was suddenly, impossibly saving my life. With chagrin, I realized the probable cause — no one else was as aware of Edward as I always was. No one else watched him the way I did. How pitiful.

Edward was never surrounded by crowds of curious bystanders eager for his firsthand account. People

avoided him as usual. The Cullens and the Hales sat at the same table as always, not eating, talking only among themselves. None of them, especially Edward, glanced my way anymore.

When he sat next to me in class, as far from me as the table would allow, he seemed totally unaware of my presence. Only now and then, when his fists would suddenly ball up — skin stretched even whiter over the bones — did I wonder if he wasn't quite as oblivious as he appeared.

He wished he hadn't pulled me from the path of Tyler's van — there was no other conclusion I could come to.

I wanted very much to talk to him, and the day after the accident I tried. The last time I'd seen him, outside the ER, we'd both been so furious. I still was angry that he wouldn't trust me with the truth, even though I was keeping my part of the bargain flawlessly. But he had in fact saved my life, no matter how he'd done it. And, overnight, the heat of my anger faded into awed gratitude.

He was already seated when I got to Biology, looking straight ahead. I sat down, expecting him to turn toward me. He showed no sign that he realized I was there.

"Hello, Edward," I said pleasantly, to show him I was going to behave myself.

He turned his head a fraction toward me without meeting my gaze, nodded once, and then looked the other way.

And that was the last contact I'd had with him, though he was there, a foot away from me, every day. I watched him sometimes, unable to stop myself— from a distance, though, in the cafeteria or parking lot. I watched as his golden eyes grew perceptibly darker day by day. But in class I gave no more notice that he existed than he showed toward me. I was miserable. And the dreams continued.

Despite my outright lies, the tenor of my e-mails alerted Renée to my depression, and she called a few times, worried. I tried to convince her it was just the weather that had me down.

Mike, at least, was pleased by the obvious coolness between me and my lab partner. I could see he'd been worried that Edward's daring rescue might have impressed me, and he was relieved that it seemed to have the opposite effect. He grew more confident, sitting on the edge of my table to talk before Biology class started, ignoring Edward as completely as he ignored us.

The snow washed away for good after that one dangerously icy day. Mike was disappointed he'd never gotten to stage his snowball fight, but pleased that the beach trip would soon be possible. The rain continued heavily, though, and the weeks passed.

Jessica made me aware of another event looming on the horizon — she called the first Tuesday of March to ask my permission to invite Mike to the girls' choice spring dance in two weeks.

"Are you sure you don't mind... you weren't planning to ask him?" she persisted when I told her I didn't mind in the least.

"No, Jess, I'm not going," I assured her. Dancing was glaringly outside my range of abilities.

"It will be really fun." Her attempt to convince me was halfhearted. I suspected that Jessica enjoyed my inexplicable popularity more than my actual company.

"You have fun with Mike," I encouraged.

The next day, I was surprised that Jessica wasn't her usual gushing self in Trig and Spanish. She was silent as she walked by my side between classes, and I was afraid to ask her why. If Mike had turned her down, I was the last person she would want to tell.

My fears were strengthened during lunch when Jessica sat as far from Mike as possible, chatting animatedly with Eric. Mike was unusually quiet.

Mike was still quiet as he walked me to class, the uncomfortable look on his face a bad sign. But he didn't broach the subject until I was in my seat and he was perched on my desk. As always, I was electrically aware of Edward sitting close enough to touch, as distant as if he were merely an invention of my imagination.

"So," Mike said, looking at the floor, "Jessica asked me to the spring dance."

"That's great." I made my voice bright and enthusiastic. "You'll have a lot of fun with Jessica."

"Well..." He floundered as he examined my smile, clearly not happy with my response. "I told her I had to think about it."

"Why would you do that?" I let disapproval color my tone, though I was relieved he hadn't given her an absolute no.

His face was bright red as he looked down again. Pity shook my resolve.

"I was wondering if... well, if you might be planning to ask me."

I paused for a moment, hating the wave of guilt that swept through me. But I saw, from the corner of my eye, Edward's head tilt reflexively in my direction.

"Mike, I think you should tell her yes," I said.

"Did you already ask someone?" Did Edward notice how Mike's eyes flickered in his direction? "No," I assured him. "I'm not going to the dance at all."

"Why not?" Mike demanded.

I didn't want to get into the safety hazards that dancing presented, so I quickly made new plans.

"I'm going to Seattle that Saturday," I explained. I needed to get out of town anyway — it was suddenly the perfect time to go.

"Can't you go some other weekend?"

"Sorry, no," I said. "So you shouldn't make Jess wait any longer — it's rude."

"Yeah, you're right," he mumbled, and turned, dejected, to walk back to his seat. I closed my

eyes and pressed my fingers to my temples, trying to push the guilt and sympathy out of my head. Mr. Banner began talking. I sighed and opened my eyes.

And Edward was staring at me curiously, that same, familiar edge of frustration even more distinct now in his black eyes.

I stared back, surprised, expecting him to look quickly away. But instead he continued to gaze with probing intensity into my eyes. There was no question of me looking away. My hands started to shake.

"Mr. Cullen?" the teacher called, seeking the answer to a question that I hadn't heard.

"The Krebs Cycle," Edward answered, seeming reluctant as he turned to look at Mr.

Banner.

I looked down at my book as soon as his eyes released me, trying to find my place. Cowardly as ever, I shifted my hair over my right shoulder to hide my face. I couldn't believe the rush of emotion pulsing through me — just because he'd happened to look at me for the first time in a half-dozen weeks. I couldn't allow him to have this level of influence over me. It was pathetic. More than pathetic, it was unhealthy.

I tried very hard not to be aware of him for the rest of the hour, and, since that was impossible, at least not to let him know that I was aware of him. When the bell rang at last, I turned my back to him to gather my things, expecting him to leave immediately as usual.

"Bella?" His voice shouldn't have been so familiar to me, as if I'd known the sound of it all my life rather than for just a few short weeks.

I turned slowly, unwillingly. I didn't want to feel what I knew I *would* feel when I looked at his too-perfect face. My expression was wary when I finally turned to him; his expression was unreadable. He didn't say anything.

"What? Are you speaking to me again?" I finally asked, an unintentional note of petulance in my voice. His lips twitched, fighting a smile. "No, not really," he admitted.

I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly through my nose, aware that I was gritting my teeth. He waited.

"Then what do you want, Edward?" I asked, keeping my eyes closed; it was easier to talk to him coherently that way.

"I'm sorry." He sounded sincere. "I'm being very rude, I know. But it's better this way, really." I opened my eyes. His face was very serious.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, my voice guarded.

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

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

"It's too bad you didn't figure that out earlier," I hissed through my teeth. "You could have saved yourself all this regret."

"Regret?" The word, and my tone, obviously caught him off guard. "Regret for what?" "For not just letting that stupid van squish me."

He was astonished. He stared at me in disbelief.

When he finally spoke, he almost sounded mad. "You think I regret saving your life?" "I *know* you do," I snapped.

"You don't know anything." He was definitely mad.

I turned my head sharply away from him, clenching my jaw against all the wild accusations I wanted to hurl at him. I gathered my books together, then stood and walked to the door. I meant to sweep dramatically out of the room, but of course I caught the toe of my boot on the door jamb and dropped my books. I stood there for a moment, thinking about leaving them. Then I sighed and bent to pick them up. He was there; he'd already stacked them into a pile. He handed them to me, his face hard.

"Thank you," I said icily.

His eyes narrowed.

"You're welcome," he retorted.

I straightened up swiftly, turned away from him again, and stalked off to Gym without looking back.

Gym was brutal. We'd moved on to basketball. My team never passed me the ball, so that was good, but I fell down a lot. Sometimes I took people with me. Today I was worse than usual because my head was so filled with Edward. I tried to concentrate on my feet, but he kept creeping back into my thoughts just when I really needed my balance.

It was a relief, as always, to leave. I almost ran to the truck; there were just so many people I wanted to avoid. The truck had suffered only minimal damage in the accident. I'd had to replace the taillights, and if I'd had a real paint job, I would have touched that up. Tyler's parents had to sell their van for parts.

I almost had a stroke when I rounded the corner and saw a tall, dark figure leaning against the side of my truck. Then I realized it was just Eric. I started walking again.

"Hey, Eric," I called.

"Hi, Bella."

"What's up?" I said as I was unlocking the door. I wasn't paying attention to the uncomfortable edge in his voice, so his next words took me by surprise.

"Uh, I was just wondering... if you would go to the spring dance with me?" His voice broke on the last word.

"I thought it was girls' choice," I said, too startled to be diplomatic.

"Well, yeah," he admitted, shamefaced.

I recovered my composure and tried to make my smile warm. "Thank you for asking me, but I'm going to be in Seattle that day."

"Oh," he said. "Well, maybe next time."

"Sure," I agreed, and then bit my lip. I wouldn't want him to take that too literally. He slouched off, back toward the school. I heard a low chuckle.

Edward was walking past the front of my truck, looking straight forward, his lips pressed together. I yanked the door open and jumped inside, slamming it loudly behind me. I revved the engine deafeningly and reversed out into the aisle. Edward was in his car already, two spaces down, sliding out smoothly in front of me, cutting me off. He stopped there — to wait for his family; I could see the four of them walking this way, but still by the cafeteria. I considered taking out the rear of his shiny Volvo, but there were too many witnesses. I looked in my rearview mirror. A line was beginning to form. Directly behind me, Tyler Crowley was in his recently acquired used Sentra, waving. I was too aggravated to acknowledge him.

While I was sitting there, looking everywhere but at the car in front of me, I heard a knock on my passenger side window. I looked over; it was Tyler. I glanced back in my rearview mirror, confused. His car was still running, the door left open. I leaned across the cab to crank the window down. It was stiff. I got it halfway down, then gave up.

"I'm sorry, Tyler, I'm stuck behind Cullen." I was annoyed — obviously the holdup wasn't my fault. "Oh, I know — I just wanted to ask you something while we're trapped here." He grinned. This could not be happening.

"Will you ask me to the spring dance?" he continued.

"I'm not going to be in town, Tyler." My voice sounded a little sharp. I had to remember it wasn't his fault that Mike and Eric had already used up my quota of patience for the day.

"Yeah, Mike said that," he admitted.

"Then why —"

He shrugged. "I was hoping you were just letting him down easy."

Okay, it was completely his fault.

"Sorry, Tyler," I said, working to hide my irritation. "I really am going out of town." "That's cool. We still have prom."

And before I could respond, he was walking back to his car. I could feel the shock on my face. I looked forward to see Alice, Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper all sliding into the Volvo. In his rearview mirror, Edward's eyes were on me. He was unquestionably shaking with laughter, as if he'd heard every word Tyler had said. My foot itched toward the gas pedal... one little bump

wouldn't hurt any of them, just that glossy silver paint job. I revved the engine.

But they were all in, and Edward was speeding away. I drove home slowly, carefully, muttering to myself the whole way.

When I got home, I decided to make chicken enchiladas for dinner. It was a long process, and it would keep me busy. While I was simmering the onions and chilies, the phone rang. I was almost afraid to answer it, but it might be Charlie or my mom.

It was Jessica, and she was jubilant; Mike had caught her after school to accept her invitation. I celebrated with her briefly while I stirred. She had to go, she wanted to call Angela and Lauren to tell them. I suggested — with casual innocence — that maybe Angela, the shy girl who had Biology with me, could ask Eric. And Lauren, a standoffish girl who had always ignored me at the lunch table, could ask Tyler; I'd heard he was still available. Jess thought that was a great idea. Now that she was sure of Mike, she actually sounded sincere when she said she wished I would go to the dance. I gave her my Seattle excuse.

After I hung up, I tried to concentrate on dinner — dicing the chicken especially; I didn't want to take another trip to the emergency room. But my head was spinning, trying to analyze every word Edward had spoken today. What did he mean, it was better if we weren't friends? My stomach twisted as I realized what he must have meant. He must see how absorbed I was by him; he must not want to lead me on... so we couldn't even be friends... because he wasn't interested in me at all.

Of course he wasn't interested in me, I thought angrily, my eyes stinging — a delayed reaction to the onions. I wasn't *interesting*. And he was. Interesting... and brilliant... and mysterious... and perfect... and beautiful... and possibly able to lift full-sized vans with one hand.

Well, that was fine. I could leave him alone. I *would* leave him 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 focused my thoughts on sunny beaches and palm trees as I finished the enchiladas and put them in the oven.

Charlie seemed suspicious when he came home and smelled the green peppers. I couldn't blame him — the closest edible Mexican food was probably in southern California. But he was a cop, even if just a small-town cop, so he was brave enough to take the first bite. He seemed to like it. It was fun to watch as he slowly began trusting me in the kitchen.

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

"Yeah, Bella?"

"Um, I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to Seattle for the day a week from Saturday... if that's okay?" I didn't want to ask permission — it set a bad precedent — but I felt rude, so I tacked it on at the end.

"Why?" He sounded surprised, as if he were unable to imagine something that Forks couldn't offer.

"Well, I wanted to get few books — the library here is pretty limited — and maybe look at some clothes." I had more money than I was used to having, since, thanks to Charlie, I hadn't had to pay for a car. Not that the truck didn't cost me quite a bit in the gas department.

"That truck probably doesn't get very good gas mileage," he said, echoing my thoughts. "I know, I'll stop in Montesano and Olympia — and Tacoma if I have to."

"Are you going all by yourself?" he asked, and I couldn't tell if he was suspicious I had a secret boyfriend or just worried about car trouble.

"Yes."

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

"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 tried to be crafty as I hid my horror.

"That's all right, Dad, I'll probably just be in dressing rooms all day — very boring."

"Oh, okay." The thought of sitting in women's clothing stores for any period of time immediately put him off.

"Thanks." I smiled at him.

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

Grrr. Only in a town this small would a *father* know when the high school dances were.

"No — I don't dance, Dad." He, of all people, should understand that — I didn't get my balance problems from my mother.

He did understand. "Oh, that's right," he realized.

The next morning, when I pulled into the parking lot, I deliberately parked as far as possible from the silver Volvo. I didn't want to put myself in the path of too much temptation and end up owing him a new car. Getting out of the cab, I fumbled with my key and it fell into a puddle at my feet. As I bent to get it, a white hand flashed out and grabbed it before I could. I jerked upright. Edward Cullen was right next to me, leaning casually against my truck.

"How do you *do* that?" I asked in amazed irritation.

"Do what?" He held my key out as he spoke. As I reached for it, he dropped it into my palm. "Appear out of thin air."

"Bella, it's not my fault if you are exceptionally unobservant." His voice was quiet as usual — velvet, muted.

I scowled at his perfect face. His eyes were light again today, a deep, golden honey color. Then I had to look down, to reassemble my now-tangled thoughts.

"Why the traffic jam last night?" I demanded, still looking away. "I thought you were supposed to be pretending I don't exist, not irritating me to death."

"That was for Tyler's sake, not mine. I had to give him his chance." He snickered.

"You..." I gasped. I couldn't think of a bad enough word. It felt like the heat of my anger should physically burn him, but he only seemed more amused.

"And I'm not pretending you don't exist," he continued.

"So you *are* trying to irritate me to death? Since Tyler's van didn't do the job?"

Anger flashed in his tawny eyes. His lips pressed into a hard line, all signs of humor gone. "Bella, you are utterly absurd," he said, his low voice cold.

My palms tingled — I wanted so badly to hit something. I was surprised at myself. I was usually a nonviolent person. I turned my back and started to walk away.

"Wait," he called. I kept walking, sloshing angrily through the rain. But he was next to me, easily keeping pace.

"I'm sorry, that was rude," he said as we walked. I ignored him. "I'm not saying it isn't true," he continued, "but it was rude to say it, anyway."

"Why won't you leave me alone?" I grumbled.

"I wanted to ask you something, but you sidetracked me," he chuckled. He seemed to have recovered his good humor.

"Do you have a multiple personality disorder?" I asked severely.

"You're doing it again."

I sighed. "Fine then. What do you want to ask?"

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

"Are you trying to *be funny*?" I interrupted him, wheeling toward him. My face got drenched as I looked up at his expression.

His eyes were wickedly amused. "Will you please allow me to finish?"

I bit my lip and clasped my hands together, interlocking my fingers, so I couldn't do anything rash. "I heard you say you were going to Seattle that day, and I was wondering if you wanted a ride." That was unexpected.

"What?" I wasn't sure what he was getting at.

"Do you want a ride to Seattle?"

"With who?" I asked, mystified.

"Myself, obviously." He enunciated every syllable, as if he were talking to someone

mentally handicapped.

I was still stunned. "*Why?*"

"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."

"My truck works just fine, thank you very much for your concern." I started to walk again, but I was too surprised to maintain the same level of anger.

"But can your truck make it there on one tank of gas?" He matched my pace again. "I don't see how that is any of your business." Stupid, shiny Volvo owner.

"The wasting of finite resources is everyone's business."

"Honestly, Edward." I felt a thrill go through me as I said his name, and I hated 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, thanks, now that's *all* cleared up." Heavy sarcasm. I realized I had stopped walking again. We were under the shelter of the cafeteria roof now, so I could more easily look at his face. Which certainly didn't help my clarity of thought.

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

His eyes were gloriously intense as he uttered that last sentence, his voice smoldering. I couldn't remember how to breathe.

"Will you go with me to Seattle?" he asked, still intense.

I couldn't speak yet, so I just nodded.

He smiled briefly, and then his face became serious.

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

He turned abruptly and walked back the way we'd come.

5. BLOOD TYPE

I made my way to English in a daze. I didn't even realize when I first walked in that class had already started.

"Thank you for joining us, Miss Swan," Mr. Mason said in a disparaging tone.

I flushed and hurried to my seat.

It wasn't till class ended that I realized Mike wasn't sitting in his usual seat next to me. I felt a twinge of guilt. But he and Eric both met me at the door as usual, so I figured I wasn't totally unforgiven. Mike seemed to become more himself as we walked, gaining enthusiasm as he talked about the weather report for this weekend. The rain was supposed to take a minor break, and so maybe his beach trip would be possible. I tried to sound eager, to make up for disappointing him yesterday. It was hard; rain or no rain, it would still only be in the high forties, if we were lucky.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. It was difficult to believe that I hadn't just imagined what Edward had said, and the way his eyes had looked. Maybe it was just a very convincing dream that I'd confused with reality. That seemed more probable than that I really appealed to him on any level.

So I was impatient and frightened as Jessica and I entered the cafeteria. I wanted to see his face, to see if he'd gone back to the cold, indifferent person I'd known for the last several weeks. Or if, by some miracle, I'd really heard what I thought I'd heard this morning. Jessica babbled on and on about her dance plans — Lauren and Angela had asked the other boys and they were all going together — completely unaware of my inattention.

Disappointment flooded through me as my eyes unerringly focused on his table. The other four were there, but he was absent. Had he gone home? I followed the still-babbling Jessica through the line, crushed. I'd lost my appetite — I bought nothing but a bottle of lemonade. I just wanted to go sit down and sulk.

"Edward Cullen is staring at you again," Jessica said, finally breaking through my abstraction with his name. "I wonder why he's sitting alone today."

My head snapped up. I followed her gaze to see Edward, smiling crookedly, staring at me from an empty table across the cafeteria from where he usually sat. Once he'd caught my eye, he raised one hand and motioned with his index finger for me to join him. As I stared in disbelief, he winked.

"Does he mean *you*?" Jessica asked with insulting astonishment in her voice.

"Maybe he needs help with his Biology homework," I muttered for her benefit. "Um, I'd better go see what he wants."

I could feel her staring after me as I walked away.

When I reached his table, I stood behind the chair across from him, unsure.

"Why don't you sit with me today?" he asked, smiling.

I sat down automatically, watching him with caution. He was still smiling. It was hard to believe that someone so beautiful could be real. I was afraid that he might disappear in a sudden puff of smoke, and I would wake up.

He seemed to be waiting for me to say something.

"This is different," I finally managed.

"Well..." He paused, and then the rest of the words followed in a rush. "I decided as long as I was going to hell, I might as well do it thoroughly."

I waited for him to say something that made sense. The seconds ticked by.

"You know I don't have any idea what you mean," I eventually pointed out.

"I know." He smiled again, and then he changed the subject. "I think your friends are angry with me for stealing you."

"They'll survive." I could feel their stares boring into my back.

"I may not give you back, though," he said with a wicked glint in his eyes.

I gulped.

He laughed. "You look worried."

"No," I said, but, ridiculously, my voice broke. "Surprised, actually... what brought all this on?"

"I told you — I got tired of trying to stay away from you. So I'm giving up." He was still smiling, but his other eyes were serious.

"Giving up?" I repeated in confusion.

"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." His smile faded as he explained, and a hard edge crept into his voice.

"You lost me again."

The breathtaking crooked smile reappeared.

"I always say too much when I'm talking to you — that's one of the problems."

"Don't worry — I don't understand any of it," I said wryly.

"I'm counting on that."

"So, in plain English, are we friends now?"

"Friends..." he mused, dubious.

"Or not," I muttered.

He grinned. "Well, we can try, I suppose. But I'm warning you now that I'm not a good friend for you." Behind his smile, the warning was real.

"You say that a lot," I noted, trying to ignore the sudden trembling in my stomach and keep my voice even.

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

"I think you've made your opinion on the subject of my intellect clear, too." My eyes narrowed. He smiled apologetically.

"So, as long as I'm being... not smart, we'll try to be friends?" I struggled to sum up the

confusing exchange.

"That sounds about right."

I looked down at my hands wrapped around the lemonade bottle, not sure what to do now. "What are you thinking?" he asked curiously.

I looked up into his deep gold eyes, became befuddled, and, as usual, blurted out the truth. "I'm trying to figure out what you are."

His jaw tightened, but he kept his smile in place with some effort.

"Are you having any luck with that?" he asked in an offhand tone.

"Not too much," I admitted.

He chuckled. "What are your theories?"

I blushed. I had been vacillating during the last month between Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker. There was no way I was going to own up to that.

"Won't you tell me?" he asked, tilting his head to one side with a shockingly tempting smile. I shook my head. "Too embarrassing."

"That's *really* frustrating, you know," he complained.

"No," I disagreed quickly, my eyes narrowing, "I can't *imagine* why that would be frustrating at all — just because someone refuses to tell you what they're thinking, even if all the while they're making cryptic little remarks specifically designed to keep you up at night wondering what they could possibly mean... now, why would that be frustrating?"

He grimaced.

"Or better," I continued, the pent-up annoyance flowing freely now, "say that person also did a wide range of bizarre things — from saving your life under impossible circumstances one day to treating you like a pariah the next, and he never explained any of that, either, even after he promised. That, also, would be *very* non-frustrating."

"You've got a bit of a temper, don't you?"

"I don't like double standards."

We stared at each other, unsmiling.

He glanced over my shoulder, and then, unexpectedly, he snickered.

"What?"

"Your boyfriend seems to think I'm being unpleasant to you — he's debating whether or not to come break up our fight." He snickered again.

"I don't know who you're talking about," I said frostily. "But I'm sure you're wrong,

anyway." "I'm not. I told you, most people are easy to read."

"Except me, of course."

"Yes. Except for you." His mood shifted suddenly; his eyes turned brooding. "I wonder why that is."

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

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked, distracted.

"No." I didn't feel like mentioning that my stomach was already full — of butterflies. "You?" I looked at the empty table in front of him.

"No, I'm not hungry." I didn't understand his expression — it looked like he was enjoying some private joke.

"Can you do me a favor?" I asked after a second of hesitation.

He was suddenly wary. "That depends on what you want."

"It's not much," I assured him.

He waited, guarded but curious.

"I just wondered... if you could warn me beforehand the next time you decide to ignore me for my own good. Just so I'm prepared." I looked at the lemonade bottle as I spoke, tracing the circle of the opening with my pinkie finger.

"That sounds fair." He was pressing his lips together to keep from laughing when I looked up. "Thanks."

"Then can I have one answer in return?" he demanded.

"One."

"Tell me *one* theory."

Whoops. "Not that one."

"You didn't qualify, you just promised one answer," he reminded me.

"And you've broken promises yourself," I reminded him back.

"Just one theory — I won't laugh."

"Yes, you will." I was positive about that.

He looked down, and then glanced up at me through his long black lashes, his other eyes scorching. "Please?" he breathed, leaning toward me.

I blinked, my mind going blank. Holy crow, how did he *do* that?

"Er, what?" I asked, dazed.

"Please tell me just one little theory." His eyes still smoldered at me.

"Um, well, bitten by a radioactive spider?" Was he a hypnotist, too? Or was I just a hopeless pushover? "That's not very creative," he scoffed.

"I'm sorry, that's all I've got," I said, miffed.

"You're not even close," he teased.

"No spiders?"

"Nope."

"And no radioactivity?"

"None."

"Dang," I sighed.

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

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

He struggled to compose his face.

"I'll figure it out eventually," I warned him.

"I wish you wouldn't try." He was serious again.

"Because...?"

"What if I'm not a superhero? What if I'm the bad guy?" He smiled playfully, but his eyes were impenetrable.

"Oh," I said, as several things he'd hinted fell suddenly into place. "I see."

"Do you?" His face was abruptly severe, as if he were afraid that he'd accidentally said too much.

"You're dangerous?" I guessed, my pulse quickening as I intuitively realized the truth of my own words. He *was* dangerous. He'd been trying to tell me that all along.

He just looked at me, eyes full of some emotion I couldn't comprehend.

"But not bad," I whispered, shaking my head. "No, I don't believe that you're bad."

"You're wrong." His voice was almost inaudible. He looked down, stealing my bottle lid and then spinning it on its side between his fingers. I stared at him, wondering why I didn't feel afraid. He meant what he was saying — that was obvious. But I just felt anxious, on edge... and, more than anything else, fascinated. The same way I always felt when I was near him.

The silence lasted until I noticed that the cafeteria was almost empty.

I jumped to my feet. "We're going to be late."

"I'm not going to class today," he said, twirling the lid so fast it was just a blur.

"Why not?"

"It's healthy to ditch class now and then." He smiled up at me, but his eyes were still troubled. "Well, I'm going," I told him. I was far too big a coward to risk getting caught.

He turned his attention back to his makeshift top. "I'll see you later, then."

I hesitated, torn, but then the first bell sent me hurrying out the door — with a last glance confirming that he hadn't moved a centimeter.

As I half-ran to class, my head was spinning faster than the bottle cap. So few questions had been answered in comparison to how many new questions had been raised. At least the rain had stopped.

I was lucky; Mr. Banner wasn't in the room yet when I arrived. I settled quickly into my seat, aware that both Mike and Angela were staring at me. Mike looked resentful; Angela looked surprised, and slightly awed.

Mr. Banner came in the room then, calling the class to order. He was juggling a few small cardboard boxes in his arms. He put them down on Mike's table, telling him to start passing them around the class.

"Okay, guys, I want you all to take one piece from each box," he said as he produced a pair of rubber gloves from the pocket of his lab jacket and pulled them on. The sharp sound as the gloves snapped into place against his wrists seemed ominous to me. "The first should be an indicator card," he went on, grabbing a white card with four squares marked on it and displaying it. "The second is a four-pronged applicator —" he held up something that looked like a nearly toothless hair pick — and the third is a sterile micro-lancet." He held up a small piece of blue plastic and split it open. The barb was invisible from this distance, but my stomach flipped.

"I'll be coming around with a dropper of water to prepare your cards, so please don't start until I get to you." He began at Mike's table again, carefully putting one drop of water in each of the four squares. "Then I want you to carefully prick your finger with the lancet..." He grabbed Mike's hand and jabbed the spike into the tip of Mike's middle finger. Oh no. Clammy moisture broke out across my forehead.

"Put a small drop of blood on each of the prongs." He demonstrated, squeezing Mike's finger till the blood flowed. I swallowed convulsively, my stomach heaving.

"And then apply it to the card," he finished, holding up the dripping red card for us to see. I closed my eyes, trying to hear through the ringing 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." He sounded proud of himself. "Those of you who aren't eighteen yet

will need a parent's permission — I have slips at my desk."

He continued through the room with his water drops. I put my cheek against the cool black tabletop and tried to hold on to my consciousness. All around me I could hear squeals, complaints, and giggles as my classmates skewered their fingers. I breathed slowly in and out through my mouth.

"Bella, are you all right?" Mr. Banner asked. His voice was close to my head, and it sounded alarmed. "I already know my blood type, Mr. Banner," I said in a weak voice. I was afraid to raise my head. "Are you feeling faint?"

"Yes, sir," I muttered, internally kicking myself for not ditching when I had the chance. "Can someone take Bella to the nurse, please?" he called.

I didn't have to look up to know that it would be Mike who volunteered.

"Can you walk?" Mr. Banner asked.

"Yes," I whispered. Just let me get out of here, I thought. I'll crawl.

Mike seemed eager as he put his arm around my waist and pulled my arm over his shoulder. I leaned against him heavily on the way out of the classroom.

Mike towed me slowly across campus. When we were around the edge of the cafeteria, out of sight of building four in case Mr. Banner was watching, I stopped.

"Just let me sit for a minute, please?" I begged.

He helped me sit on the edge of the walk.

"And whatever you do, keep your hand in your pocket," I warned. I was still so dizzy. I slumped over on my side, putting my cheek against the freezing, damp cement of the sidewalk, closing my eyes. That seemed to help a little.

"Wow, you're green, Bella," Mike said nervously.

"Bella?" a different voice called from the distance.

No! Please let me be imagining that horribly familiar voice.

"What's wrong — is she hurt?" His voice was closer now, and he sounded upset. I wasn't imagining it. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping to die. Or, at the very least, not to throw up.

Mike seemed stressed. "I think she's fainted. I don't know what happened, she didn't even stick her finger."

"Bella." Edward's voice was right beside me, relieved now. "Can you hear me?"

"No," I groaned. "Go away."

He chuckled.

"I was taking her to the nurse," Mike explained in a defensive tone, "but she wouldn't go any farther." "I'll take her," Edward said. I could hear the smile still in his voice. "You can go back to class." "No," Mike protested. "I'm supposed to do it."

Suddenly the sidewalk disappeared from beneath me. My eyes flew open in shock. Edward had scooped me up in his arms, as easily as if I weighed ten pounds instead of a hundred and ten.

"Put me down!" Please, please let me not vomit on him. He was walking before I was finished talking. "Hey!" Mike called, already ten paces behind us.

Edward ignored him. "You look awful," he told me, grinning.

"Put me back on the sidewalk," I moaned. The rocking movement of his walk was not helping. He held me away from his body, gingerly, supporting all my weight with just his arms — it didn't seem to bother him.

"So you faint at the sight of blood?" he asked. This seemed to entertain him.

I didn't answer. I closed my eyes again and fought the nausea with all my strength, clamping my lips together.

"And not even your own blood," he continued, enjoying himself.

I don't know how he opened the door while carrying me, but it was suddenly warm, so I knew we were inside.

"Oh my," I heard a female voice gasp.

"She fainted in Biology," Edward explained.

I opened my eyes. I was in the office, and Edward was striding past the front counter toward the nurse's door. Ms. Cope, the redheaded front office receptionist, ran ahead of him to hold it open. The grandmotherly nurse looked up from a novel, astonished, as Edward swung me into the room and placed me gently on the crackly paper that covered the brown vinyl mattress on the one cot. Then he moved to stand against the wall as far across the narrow room as possible. His eyes were bright, excited.

"She's just a little faint," he reassured the startled nurse. "They're blood typing in Biology." The nurse nodded sagely. "There's always one."

He muffled a snicker.

"Just lie down for a minute, honey; it'll pass."

"I know," I sighed. The nausea was already fading.

"Does this happen a lot?" she asked.

"Sometimes," I admitted. Edward coughed to hide another laugh.

"You can go back to class now," she told him.

"I'm supposed to stay with her." He said this with such assured authority that — even though she pursed her lips — the nurse didn't argue it further.

"I'll go *get* you some ice for your forehead, dear," she said to me, and then bustled out of the room. "You were right," I moaned, letting my eyes close.

"I usually am — but about what in particular this time?"

"Ditching *is* healthy." I practiced breathing evenly.

"You scared me for a minute there," he admitted after a pause. His tone made it sound like he was confessing a humiliating weakness. "I thought Newton was dragging your dead body off to bury it in the woods."

"Ha ha." I still had my eyes closed, but I was feeling more normal every minute.

"Honestly — I've seen corpses with better color. I was concerned that I might have to avenge your murder."

"Poor Mike. I'll bet he's mad."

"He absolutely loathes me," Edward said cheerfully.

"You can't know that," I argued, but then I wondered suddenly if he could.

"I saw his face — I could tell."

"How did you see me? I thought you were ditching." I was almost fine now, though the queasiness would probably pass 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 her hand. "Here you go, dear." She laid it across my forehead. "You're looking better," she added.

"I think I'm fine," I said, sitting up. Just a little ringing in my ears, no spinning. The mint green walls stayed where they should.

I could see she was about to make me lie back down, but the door opened just then, and Ms. Cope stuck her head in.

"We've got another one," she warned.

I hopped down to free up the cot for the next invalid.

I handed the compress back to the nurse. "Here, I don't need this."

And then Mike staggered through the door, now supporting a sallow-looking Lee Stephens,

another boy in our Biology class. Edward and I drew back against the wall to give them room.

"Oh no," Edward muttered. "Go out to the office, Bella."

I looked up at him, bewildered.

"Trust me — go."

I spun and caught the door before it closed, darting out of the infirmary. I could feel Edward right behind me.

"You actually listened to me." He was stunned.

"I smelled the blood," I said, wrinkling my nose. Lee wasn't sick from watching other people, like me. "People can't smell blood," he contradicted.

"Well, I can — that's what makes me sick. It smells like rust... and salt."

He was staring at me with an unfathomable expression.

"What?" I asked.

"It's nothing."

Mike came through the door then, glancing from me to Edward. The look he gave Edward confirmed what Edward had said about loathing. He looked back at me, his eyes glum.

"*You* look better," he accused.

"Just keep your hand in your pocket," I warned him again.

"It's not bleeding anymore," he muttered. "Are you going back to class?"

"Are you kidding? I'd just have to turn around and come back."

"Yeah, I guess... So are you going this weekend? To the beach?" While he spoke, he flashed another glare toward Edward, who was standing against the cluttered counter, motionless as a sculpture, staring off into space.

I tried to sound as friendly as possible. "Sure, I said I was in."

"We're meeting at my dad's store, at ten." His eyes flickered to Edward again, wondering if he was giving out too much information. His body language made it clear that it wasn't an open invitation.

"I'll be there," I promised.

"I'll see you in Gym, then," he said, moving uncertainly toward the door.

"See you," I replied. He looked at me once more, his round face slightly pouting, and then as he walked slowly through the door, his shoulders slumped. A swell of sympathy washed over me. I pondered seeing his disappointed face again... in Gym.

"Gym," I groaned.

"I can take care of that." I hadn't noticed Edward moving to my side, but he spoke now in my ear. "Go sit down and look pale," he muttered.

That wasn't a challenge; I was always pale, and my recent swoon 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 spells always exhausted me.

I heard Edward speaking softly at the counter.

"Ms. Cope?"

"Yes?" I hadn't heard her return to her desk.

"Bella has Gym next hour, and I don't think she feels well enough. Actually, I was thinking I should take her home now. Do you think you could excuse her from class?" His voice was like melting honey. I could imagine how much more overwhelming his eyes would be.

"Do you need to be excused, too, Edward?" Ms. Cope fluttered. Why couldn't I do that? "No, I have Mrs. Goff, she won't mind."

"Okay, it's all taken care of. You feel better, Bella," she called to me. I nodded weakly, hamming it up just a bit.

"Can you walk, or do you want me to carry you again?" With his back to the receptionist, his expression became sarcastic.

"I'll walk."

I stood carefully, and I was still fine. He held the door for me, his smile polite but his eyes mocking. I walked out into the cold, fine mist that had just begun to fall. It felt nice — the first time I'd enjoyed the constant moisture falling out of the sky — as it washed my face clean of the sticky perspiration.

"Thanks," I said as he followed me out. "It's almost worth getting sick to miss Gym." "Anytime." He was staring straight forward, squinting into the rain.

"So are you going? This Saturday, I mean?" I was hoping he would, though it seemed unlikely. I couldn't picture him loading up to carpool with the rest of the kids from school; he didn't belong in the same world. But just hoping that he might gave me the first twinge of enthusiasm I'd felt for the outing.

"Where are you all going, exactly?" He was still looking ahead, expressionless.

"Down to La Push, to First Beach." I studied his face, trying to read it. His eyes seemed to narrow infinitesimally.

He glanced down at me from the corner of his eye, smiling wryly. "I really don't think I was invited." I sighed. "I just invited you."

"Let's you and I not push poor Mike any further this week. We don't want him to snap." His eyes danced; he was enjoying the idea more than he should.

"Mike-schmike." I muttered, preoccupied by the way he'd said "you and I." I liked it more than I should.

We were near the parking lot now. I veered left, toward my truck. Something caught my jacket, yanking me back.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked, outraged. He was gripping a fistful of my jacket in one hand.

I was confused. "I'm going home."

"Didn't you hear me promise to take you safely home? Do you think I'm going to let you drive in your condition?" His voice was still indignant.

"What condition? And what about my truck?" I complained.

"I'll have Alice drop it off after school." He was towing me toward his car now, pulling me by my jacket. It was all I could do to keep from falling backward. He'd probably just drag me along anyway if I did.

"Let go!" I insisted. He ignored me. I staggered along sideways across the wet sidewalk until we reached the Volvo. Then he finally freed me — I stumbled against the passenger door.

"You are so *pushy*!" I grumbled.

"It's open," was all he responded. He got in the driver's side.

"I am perfectly capable of driving myself home!" I stood by the car, fuming. It was raining harder now, and I'd never put my hood up, so my hair was dripping down my back.

He lowered the automatic window and leaned toward me across the seat. "Get in, Bella."

I didn't answer. I was mentally calculating my chances of reaching the truck before he could catch me. I had to admit, they weren't good.

"I'll just drag you back," he threatened, guessing my plan.

I tried to maintain what dignity I could as I got into his car. I wasn't very successful — I looked like a half-drowned cat and my boots squeaked.

"This is completely unnecessary," I said stiffly.

He didn't answer. He fiddled with the controls, turning the heater up and the music down. As he pulled out of the parking lot, I was preparing to give him the silent treatment — my face in full pout mode — but then I recognized the music playing, and my curiosity got the better of my intentions.

"Clair de Lune?" I asked, surprised.

"You know Debussy?" He sounded surprised, too.

"Not well," I admitted. "My mother plays a lot of classical music around the house — I only

know my favorites."

"It's one of my favorites, too." He stared out through the rain, lost in thought.

I listened to the music, relaxing against the light gray leather seat. It was impossible not to respond to the familiar, soothing melody. The rain blurred everything outside the window into gray and green smudges. I began to realize we were driving very fast; the car moved so steadily, so evenly, though, I didn't feel the speed. Only the town flashing by gave it away.

"What is your mother like?" he asked me suddenly.

I glanced over to see him studying me with curious eyes.

"She looks a lot like me, but she's prettier," I said. He raised his eyebrows. "I have too much Charlie in me. She's more outgoing than I am, and braver. She's irresponsible and slightly eccentric, and she's a very unpredictable cook. She's my best friend." I stopped. Talking about her was making me depressed.

"How old are you, Bella?" His voice sounded frustrated for some reason I couldn't imagine. He'd stopped the car, and I realized we were at Charlie's house already. The rain was so heavy that I could barely see the house at all. It was like the car was submerged under a river.

"I'm seventeen," I responded, a little confused.

"You don't seem seventeen."

His tone was reproachful; it made me laugh.

"What?" he asked, curious again.

"My mom always says I was born thirty-five years old and that I get more middle-aged every year." I laughed, 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 yourself," I noted.

He made a face and changed the subject.

"So why did your mother marry Phil?"

I was surprised he would remember the name; I'd mentioned it just once, almost two months ago. It took me a moment to answer.

"My mother... she's very young for her age. I think Phil makes her feel even younger. At any rate, she's crazy about him." I shook my head. The attraction was a mystery to me.

"Do you approve?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" I countered. "I want her to be happy... and he is who she wants." "That's very generous... I wonder," he mused.

"What?"

"Would she extend the same courtesy to you, do you think? No matter who your choice was?"

He was suddenly intent, his eyes searching mine.

"I-I think so," I stuttered. "But she's the parent, after all. It's a little bit different." "No one too scary then," he teased.

I grinned in response. "What do you mean by scary? Multiple facial piercings and extensive tattoos?" "That's one definition, I suppose."

"What's your definition?"

But he ignored my question and asked me another. "Do you think that *I* could be scary?" He raised one eyebrow, and the faint trace of a smile lightened his face.

I thought for a moment, wondering whether the truth or a lie would go over better. I decided to go with the truth. "Hmmm... I think you *could be*, if you wanted to."

"Are you frightened of me now?" The smile vanished, and his heavenly face was suddenly serious. "No." But I answered too quickly. The smile returned.

"So, now are you going to tell me about your family?" I asked to distract him. "It's got to be a much more interesting story than mine."

He was instantly cautious. "What do you want to know?"

"The Cullens adopted you?" I verified.

"Yes."

I hesitated for a moment. "What happened to your parents?"

"They died many years ago." His tone was matter-of-fact.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"I don't really remember them that clearly. Carlisle and Esme have been my parents for a long time now." "And you love them." It wasn't a question. It was obvious in the way he spoke of them. "Yes." He smiled. "I couldn't imagine two better people."

"You're very lucky."

"I know I am."

"And your brother and sister?"

He glanced at the clock on the dashboard.

"My brother and sister, and Jasper and Rosalie 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." I didn't want to get out of the car.

"And you probably want your truck back before Chief Swan gets home, so you don't have to tell him about the Biology incident." He grinned at me.

"I'm sure he's already heard. There are no secrets in Forks." I sighed.

He laughed, and there was an edge to his laughter.

"Have fun at the beach... good weather for sunbathing." He glanced out at the sheeting rain. "Won't I see you tomorrow?"

"No. Emmett and I are starting the weekend early."

"What are you going to do?" A friend could ask that, right? I hoped the disappointment wasn't too apparent in my voice.

"We're going to be hiking in the Goat Rocks Wilderness, just south of Rainier."

I remembered Charlie had said the Cullens went camping frequently.

"Oh, well, have fun." I tried to sound enthusiastic. I don't think I fooled him, though. A smile was playing around the edges of his lips.

"Will you do something for me this weekend?" He turned to look me straight in the face, utilizing the full power of his burning gold eyes.

I nodded helplessly.

"Don't be offended, but you seem to be one of those people who just attract accidents like a magnet. So... try not to fall into the ocean or get run over or anything, all right?" He smiled crookedly.

The helplessness had faded as he spoke. I glared at him.

"I'll see what I can do," I snapped as I jumped out into the rain. I slammed the door behind me with excessive force.

He was still smiling as he drove away.

6. SCARY STORIES

As I sat in my room, trying to concentrate on the third act of *Macbeth*, I was really listening for my truck. I would have thought, even over the pounding rain, I could have heard the engine's roar. But when I went to peek out the curtain — again — it was suddenly there.

I wasn't looking forward to Friday, and it more than lived up to my non-expectations. Of course there were the fainting comments. Jessica especially seemed to get a kick out of that story. Luckily Mike had kept his mouth shut, and no one seemed to know about Edward's involvement. She did have a lot of questions about lunch, though.

"So what did Edward Cullen want yesterday?" Jessica asked in Trig.

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. "He never really got to the point."

"You looked kind of mad," she fished.

"Did I?" I kept my expression blank.

"You know, I've never seen him sit with anyone but his family before. That was weird."

"Weird," I agreed. She seemed annoyed; she flipped her dark curls impatiently — I guessed she'd been hoping to hear something that would make a good story for her to pass on.

The worst part about Friday was that, even though I knew he wasn't going to be there, I still hoped. When I walked into the cafeteria with Jessica and Mike, I couldn't keep from looking at his table, where Rosalie, Alice, and Jasper sat talking, heads close together. And I couldn't stop the gloom that engulfed me as I realized I didn't know how long I would have to wait before I saw him again.

At my usual table, everyone was full of our plans for the next day. Mike was animated again, putting a great deal of trust in the local weatherman who promised sun tomorrow. I'd have to see that before I believed it. But it was warmer today — almost sixty. Maybe the outing wouldn't be completely miserable.

I intercepted a few unfriendly glances from Lauren during lunch, which I didn't understand until we were all walking out of the room together. I was right behind her, just a foot from her slick, silver blond hair, and she was evidently unaware of that.

"...don't know why *Bella*" — she sneered my name — "doesn't just sit with the Cullens from now on."

I heard her muttering to Mike. I'd never noticed what an unpleasant, nasal voice she had, and I was surprised by the malice in it. I really didn't know her well at all, certainly not well enough for her to dislike me — or so I'd thought. "She's my friend; she sits with us," Mike whispered back loyally, but also a bit territorially. I paused to let Jess and Angela pass me. I didn't want to hear any more.

That night at dinner, Charlie seemed enthusiastic about my trip to La Push in the morning. I think 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. Of course he knew the names of all the kids going, and their parents, and their great-grandparents, too, probably. He seemed to approve. I wondered if he would approve of my plan to ride to Seattle with Edward Cullen. Not that I was going to tell him.

"Dad, do you know a place called Goat Rocks or something like that? I think it's south of Mount Rainier," I asked casually.

"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 the hunting season."

"Oh," I murmured. "Maybe I got the name wrong."

I meant to sleep in, but an unusual brightness woke me. I opened my eyes to see a clear yellow light streaming through my window. I couldn't believe it. I hurried to the window to check, and sure enough, there was the sun. It was in the wrong place in the sky, too low, and it didn't seem to be as close as it should be, but it was definitely the sun. Clouds ringed the horizon, but a large patch of blue was visible in the middle. I lingered by the window as long as I could, afraid that if I left the blue would disappear again.

The Newtons' Olympic Outfitters store was just north of town. I'd seen the store, but I'd never stopped there — not having much need for any supplies required for being outdoors over an extended period of time. In the parking lot I recognized Mike's Suburban and Tyler's Sentra. As I pulled up next to their vehicles, I could see the group standing around in front of the Suburban. Eric was there, along with two other boys I had class with; I was fairly sure their names were Ben and Conner. Jess was there, flanked by Angela and Lauren. Three other girls stood with them, including one I remembered falling over in Gym on Friday. That one gave me a dirty look as I got out of the truck, and whispered something to Lauren. Lauren shook out her cornsilk hair and eyed me scornfully.

So it was going to be one of *those* days.

At least Mike was happy to see me.

"You came!" he called, delighted. "And I said it would be sunny today,

didn't I?" "I told you I was coming," I reminded him.

"We're just waiting for Lee and Samantha... unless you invited someone," Mike added.

"Nope," I lied lightly, hoping I wouldn't get caught in the lie. But also wishing that a miracle would occur, and Edward would appear.

Mike looked satisfied.

"Will you ride in my car? It's that or Lee's mom's minivan."

"Sure."

He smiled blissfully. It was so easy to make Mike happy.

"You can have shotgun," he promised. I hid my chagrin. It wasn't as simple to make Mike and Jessica happy at the same time. I could see Jessica glowering at us now.

The numbers worked out in my favor, though. Lee brought two extra people, and suddenly every seat was necessary. I managed to wedge Jess in between Mike and me in the front seat of the Suburban. Mike could have been more graceful about it, but at least Jess seemed appeased.

It was only fifteen miles to La Push from Forks, with gorgeous, dense 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 a bit 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 many times during my Forks summers with Charlie, so

the mile-long crescent of First Beach was familiar to me. It was still breathtaking. The water was dark gray, even in the sunlight, white-capped and heaving to the gray, rocky shore. Islands rose out of the steel harbor waters with sheer cliff sides, reaching to uneven summits, and crowned with austere, soaring firs. The beach had only a thin border of actual sand at the water's edge, after which it grew into millions of large, smooth stones that looked uniformly gray from a distance, but close up were every shade a stone could be: terra-cotta, sea green, lavender, blue gray, dull gold. The tide line was strewn with huge driftwood trees, bleached bone white in the salt waves, some piled together against the edge of the forest fringe, some lying solitary, just out of reach of the waves.

There was a brisk wind coming off the waves, cool and briny. Pelicans floated on the swells while seagulls and a lone eagle wheeled above them. The clouds still circled the sky, threatening to invade at any moment, but for now the sun shone bravely in its halo of blue sky.

We picked our way down to the beach, Mike leading the way to a ring of driftwood logs that had obviously been used for parties like ours before. There was a fire circle already in place, filled with black ashes. Eric and the boy I thought was named Ben gathered broken branches of driftwood from the drier piles against the forest edge, and soon had a teepee-shaped construction built atop the old cinders.

"Have you ever seen a driftwood fire?" Mike asked me. I was sitting on one of the bone-colored benches; the other girls clustered, gossiping excitedly, on either side of me. Mike knelt by the fire, lighting one of the smaller sticks with a cigarette lighter.

"No," I said as he placed the blazing twig carefully against the teepee.

"You'll like this then — watch the colors." He 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. Pretty, isn't it?" He lit one more piece, placed it where the fire hadn't yet caught, and then came to sit by me. Thankfully, Jess was on his other side. She turned to him and claimed his attention. I watched the strange blue and green flames crackle toward the sky.

After a half hour of chatter, some of the boys wanted to hike to the nearby tidal pools. It was a dilemma. On the one hand, I loved the tide pools. They had fascinated me since I was a child; 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 of Edward's request — that I not fall into the ocean.

Lauren was the one who made my decision for me. She didn't want to hike, and she was definitely wearing the wrong shoes for it. Most of the other girls besides Angela and Jessica decided to stay on the beach as well. I waited until Tyler and Eric had committed to remaining with them before I got up quietly to join the pro-hiking group. Mike gave me a huge smile when he saw that I was coming.

The hike wasn't too long, though I hated to lose the sky in the woods. The green light of the forest was strangely at odds with the adolescent laughter, too murky and ominous to be in harmony with the light banter around me. I had to watch each step I took very carefully, avoiding roots below and branches above, and I soon fell behind. Eventually I broke through the emerald confines of the forest and found the rocky shore again. It was low tide, and a tidal river flowed past us on its way to the sea. Along its pebbled banks, shallow pools that never completely drained were

teeming with life.

I was very cautious not to lean too far over the little ocean ponds. The others were fearless, leaping over the rocks, perching precariously on the edges. I found a very stable-looking rock on the fringe of one of the largest pools and sat there cautiously, spellbound by the natural aquarium below me. The bouquets of brilliant anemones undulated ceaselessly in the invisible current, twisted shells scurried about the edges, obscuring the crabs within them, starfish stuck motionless to the rocks and each other, while one small black eel with white racing stripes wove through the bright green weeds, waiting for the sea to return. I was completely absorbed, except for one small part of my mind that wondered what Edward was doing now, and trying to imagine what he would be saying if he were here with me.

Finally the boys were hungry, and I got up stiffly to follow them back. I tried to keep up better this time through the woods, so naturally I fell a few times. I got some shallow scrapes on my palms, and the knees of my jeans were stained green, but it could have been worse.

When we got back to First Beach, the group we'd left behind had multiplied. As we got closer we could see the shining, straight black hair and copper skin of the newcomers, teenagers from the reservation come to socialize.

The food was already being passed around, and the boys hurried to claim a share while Eric introduced us as we each entered the driftwood circle. Angela and I were the last to arrive, and, as Eric said our names, I noticed a younger boy sitting on the stones near the fire glance up at me in interest. I sat down next to Angela, and Mike brought us sandwiches and an array of sodas to choose from, while a boy who looked to be the oldest of the visitors rattled off the names of the seven others with him. All I caught was that one of the girls was also named Jessica, and the boy who noticed me was named Jacob.

It was relaxing to sit with Angela; she was a restful kind of person to be around — she didn't feel the need to fill every silence with chatter. She left me free to think undisturbed while we ate. And I was thinking about how disjointedly 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 in my mind. I knew exactly what caused the difference, and it disturbed me.

During lunch the clouds started to advance, slinking across the blue sky, 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. Mike — with Jessica shadowing him — headed up to the one shop in the village. 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 Lauren and Tyler occupying themselves by the CD player someone had thought to bring, and three teenagers from the reservation perched around the circle, including the boy named Jacob and the oldest boy who had acted as spokesperson.

A few minutes after Angela left with the hikers, Jacob sauntered over to take her place by my side. He looked fourteen, maybe fifteen, and had long, glossy black hair pulled back with a rubber band at the nape of his neck. His skin was beautiful, silky and russet-colored; his eyes were dark, set deep above the high planes of his cheekbones. He still had just a hint of childish roundness left around his chin. Altogether, a very pretty face. However, my positive opinion of his looks was

damaged by the first words out of his mouth.

"You're Isabella Swan, aren't you?"

It was like the first day of school all over again.

"Bella," I sighed.

"I'm Jacob Black." He held his hand out in a friendly gesture. "You bought my dad's truck."

"Oh," I said, relieved, shaking his sleek hand. "You're Billy's son. I probably should remember you." "No, I'm the youngest of the family — you would remember my older sisters."

"Rachel and Rebecca," I suddenly recalled. Charlie and Billy had thrown us together a lot during my visits, to keep us busy while they fished. We were all too shy to make much progress as friends. Of course, I'd kicked up enough tantrums to end the fishing trips by the time I was eleven.

"Are they here?" I examined the girls at the ocean's edge, wondering if I would recognize them now.

"No." Jacob shook his head. "Rachel got a scholarship to Washington State, and Rebecca married a Samoan surfer — she 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?" he asked.

"I love it. It runs great."

"Yeah, but it's really slow," he laughed. "I was so relived when Charlie bought it. My dad 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." He 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," he 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?" he added jokingly. He had a pleasant, husky voice.

"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. He was very easy to talk with.

He flashed a brilliant smile, looking at me appreciatively in a way I was learning to recognize. I wasn't the only one who noticed.

"You know Bella, Jacob?" Lauren asked — in what I imagined was an insolent tone — from across the fire.

"We've sort of known each other since I was born," he laughed, smiling at me again. "How nice." She didn't sound like she thought it was nice at all, and her pale, fishy eyes narrowed.

"Bella," she called again, watching my face carefully, "I was just saying to Tyler that it was too bad none of the Cullens could come out today. Didn't anyone think to invite them?" Her expression of concern was unconvincing.

"You mean Dr. Carlisle Cullen's family?" the tall, older boy asked before I could respond, much to Lauren's irritation. He was really closer to a man than a boy, and his voice was very deep.

"Yes, do you know them?" she asked condescendingly, turning halfway toward him. "The Cullens don't come here," he said in a tone that closed the subject, ignoring her question.

Tyler, trying to win back her attention, asked Lauren's opinion on a CD he held. She was distracted.

I stared at the deep-voiced boy, taken aback, but he was looking away toward the dark forest behind us. He'd said that the Cullens didn't come here, but his tone had implied something more — that they weren't allowed; they were prohibited. His manner left a strange impression on me, and I tried to ignore it without success.

Jacob interrupted my meditation. "So is Forks driving you insane yet?"

"Oh, I'd say that's an understatement." I grimaced. He grinned understandingly.

I was still turning over the brief comment on the Cullens, and I had a sudden inspiration. It was a stupid plan, but I didn't have any better ideas. I hoped that young Jacob was as yet inexperienced around girls, so that he wouldn't see through my sure-to-be-pitiful attempts at flirting.

"Do you want to walk down the beach with me?" I asked, trying to imitate that way Edward had of looking up from underneath his eyelashes. It couldn't have nearly the same effect, I was sure, but Jacob jumped up willingly enough.

As we walked north across the multihued stones toward the driftwood seawall, the clouds finally closed ranks across the sky, causing the sea to darken and the temperature to drop. I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my jacket.

"So you're, what, sixteen?" I asked, trying not to look like an idiot as I fluttered my eyelids the way I'd seen girls do on TV.

"I just turned fifteen," he confessed, flattered.

"Really?" My face was full of false surprise. "I would have thought you were older." "I'm tall for my age," he explained.

"Do you come up to Forks much?" I asked archly, as if I was hoping for a yes. I sounded idiotic to myself. I was afraid he would turn on me with disgust and accuse me of my fraud, but he still seemed flattered.

"Not too much," he admitted with a frown. "But when I get my car finished I can go up as much as I want — after I get my license," he amended.

"Who was that other boy Lauren was talking to? He seemed a little old to be hanging out with us." I purposefully lumped myself in with the youngsters, trying to make it clear that I preferred Jacob.

"That's Sam — he's nineteen," he informed me.

"What was that he was saying about the doctor's family?" I asked innocently.

"The Cullens? Oh, they're not supposed to come onto the reservation." He looked away, out toward James Island, as he confirmed what I'd thought I'd heard in Sam's voice.

"Why not?"

He glanced back at me, biting his lip. "Oops. I'm not supposed to say anything about that."

"Oh, I won't tell anyone, I'm just curious." I tried to make my smile alluring, wondering if I was laying it on too thick.

He smiled back, though, looking allured. Then he lifted one eyebrow and his voice was even huskier than before.

"Do you like scary stories?" he asked ominously.

"I *love* them," I enthused, making an effort to smolder at him.

Jacob strolled to a nearby driftwood tree that had its roots sticking out like the attenuated legs of a huge, pale spider. He perched lightly on one of the twisted roots while I sat beneath him on the body of the tree. He stared down at the rocks, a smile hovering around the edges of his broad lips. I could see he was going to try to make this good. I focused on keeping the vital interest I felt out of my eyes.

"Do you know any of our old stories, about where we came from — the Quileutes, I mean?" he began. "Not really," I admitted.

"Well, there are lots of legends, some of them claiming to date back to the 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." He smiled, to show me how little stock he put in the histories. "Another legend claims that we descended from wolves — and that the wolves are our brothers still. It's against tribal law to kill them.

"Then there are the stories about the *cold ones*." His voice dropped a little lower.

"The cold ones?" I asked, not faking my intrigue now.

"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-grandfather knew some of them. He was the one who made the treaty that kept them off our land." He rolled his eyes.

"Your great-grandfather?" I encouraged.

"He was a tribal elder, like my father. You see, the cold ones are the natural enemies of the wolf—well, not the wolf, really, but the wolves that turn into men, like our ancestors. You would call them werewolves."

"Werewolves have enemies?"

"Only one."

I stared at him earnestly, hoping to disguise my impatience as admiration.

"So you see," Jacob continued, "the cold ones are traditionally our enemies. But this pack that came to our territory during my great-grandfather'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-grandfather made a truce with them. If they would promise to stay off our lands, we wouldn't expose them to the pale-faces." He winked at me.

"If they weren't dangerous, then why...?" I tried to understand, struggling not to let him see how seriously I was considering his ghost story.

"There's always a risk for humans to be around the cold ones, even if they're civilized like this clan was. You never know when they might get too hungry to resist." He deliberately worked a thick edge of menace into his 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. "So how does it fit in with the Cullens? Are they like the cold ones your greatgrandfather met?"

"No." He paused dramatically. "They are the *same* ones."

He must have thought the expression on my face was fear inspired by his story. He 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-grandfather's time they already knew of the leader, Carlisle. He'd been here and gone before *your* people had even arrived." He was fighting a smile.

"And what are they?" I finally asked. "What *are* the cold ones?"

He smiled darkly.

"Blood drinkers," he replied in a chilling voice. "Your people call them

vampires." I stared out at the rough surf after he answered, not sure what my face was exposing.

"You have goose bumps," he laughed delightedly.

"You're a good storyteller," I complimented him, still staring into the waves.

"Pretty crazy stuff, though, isn't it? No wonder my dad doesn't want us to talk about it to anyone." I couldn't control my expression enough to look at him yet. "Don't worry, I won't give you away." "I guess I just violated the treaty," he laughed.

"I'll take it to the grave," I promised, and then I shivered.

"Seriously, though, don't say anything to Charlie. He was pretty mad at my dad when he heard that some of us weren't going to the hospital since Dr. Cullen started working there."

"I won't, of course not."

"So do you think we're a bunch of superstitious natives or what?" he asked in a playful tone, but with a hint of worry. I still hadn't looked away from the ocean.

I turned and smiled at him as normally as I could.

"No. I think you're very good at telling scary stories, though. I still have goose bumps, see?" I held up my arm.

"Cool." He smiled.

And then the sound of the beach rocks clattering against each other warned us that someone was approaching. Our heads snapped up at the same time to see Mike and Jessica about fifty yards away, walking toward us.

"There you are, Bella," Mike called in relief, waving his arm over his head.

"Is that your boyfriend?" Jacob asked, alerted by the jealous edge in Mike's voice. I was surprised it was so obvious.

"No, definitely not," I whispered. I was tremendously grateful to Jacob, and eager to make him as happy as possible. I winked at him, carefully turning away from Mike to do so. He smiled, elated by my inept flirting.

"So when I get my license..." he began.

"You should come see me in Forks. We could hang out sometime." I felt guilty as I said this, knowing that I'd used him. But I really did like Jacob. He was someone I could easily be friends with.

Mike had reached us now, with Jessica still a few paces back. I could see his eyes appraising Jacob, and looking satisfied at his obvious youth.

"Where have you been?" he asked, though the answer was right in front of him.

"Jacob was just telling me some local stories," I volunteered. "It was really interesting." I smiled at Jacob warmly, and he grinned back.

"Well," Mike paused, carefully reassessing the situation as he watched our camaraderie. "We're packing up — it looks like it's going to rain soon."
We all looked up at the glowering sky. It certainly did look like rain.

"Okay." I jumped up. "I'm coming."

"It was nice to see you *again*," Jacob said, and I could tell he was taunting Mike just a bit. "It really was. Next time Charlie comes down to see Billy, I'll come, too," I promised. His grin stretched across his face. "That would be cool."

"And thanks," I added earnestly.

I pulled up my hood as we tramped 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 Angela and Tyler, announcing that I'd already had my turn in the shotgun position. Angela just stared out the window at the escalating storm, and Lauren twisted around in the middle seat to occupy Tyler's attention, so I could simply lay my head back on the seat and 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 didn't want anything to eat. There was a basketball game on that he was excited about, though of course *I* had no idea what was special about it, so he wasn't aware of anything unusual in my face or tone.

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 used a little too much bass and shrieking for my tastes. I popped 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, but the light still intruded, so I added a pillow over the top half of my face.

I concentrated very carefully on the music, trying to understand 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 shattering beats made it impossible for me to think — which was the whole purpose of the exercise. 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. Aware in some corner of my consciousness that I was dreaming, I recognized 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. I was trying to follow the sound, but then Jacob Black was there, tugging on my hand, pulling me back toward the blackest part of the forest.

"Jacob? What's wrong?" I asked. His face was frightened as he yanked with all his strength against my resistance; I didn't want to go into the dark.

"Run, Bella, you have to run!" he whispered, terrified.

"This way, Bella!" I recognized Mike's voice calling out of the gloomy heart of the trees, but I couldn't see him.

"Why?" I asked, still pulling against Jacob's grasp, desperate now to find the sun.

But Jacob let go of my hand and yelped, suddenly shaking, falling to the dim forest floor. He twitched on the ground as I watched in horror.

"Jacob!" I screamed. But he was gone. In his place was a large red-brown wolf with black eyes. The wolf faced away from me, pointing toward the shore, the hair on the back of his shoulders bristling, low growls issuing from between his exposed fangs.

"Bella, run!" Mike cried out again from behind me. But I didn't turn. I was watching a light coming toward me from the beach.

And then Edward stepped out from the trees, his skin faintly glowing, his eyes black and dangerous. He held up one hand and beckoned me to come to him. The wolf growled at my feet.

I took a step forward, toward Edward. He smiled then, and his teeth were sharp, pointed. "Trust me," he purred.

I took another step.

The wolf launched himself across the space between me and the vampire, fangs aiming for the jugular. "No!" I screamed, 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 could feel the braid in my hair, an uncomfortable ridge along the back of my skull. I turned onto my side and ripped the rubber band out, quickly combing through the plaits with my fingers. I pulled the pillow back over my eyes.

It was all no use, of course. My subconscious had dredged up exactly the images I'd been trying so desperately to avoid. I was going to have to face them now.

I sat up, and my head spun for a minute as the blood flowed downward. First things first, I thought to myself, happy to put it off as long as possible. I grabbed my bathroom bag.

The shower didn't last nearly as long as I hoped it would, though. Even taking the time to blow-dry my hair, I was soon out of things to do in the bathroom. Wrapped in a towel, I crossed back to my room. I couldn't tell if Charlie was still asleep, or if he had already left. I went to look out my window, and the cruiser was gone. Fishing again.

I dressed slowly in my most comfy sweats and then made my bed — something I never did. 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 was sadly outdated, my free service substandard; just dialing up took so long that I decided to go get myself a bowl of cereal while I waited.

I ate slowly, chewing each bite with care. When I was done, I washed the bowl and spoon, dried them, and put them away. My feet dragged as I climbed the stairs. I went to my CD player first, picking it up off the floor and placing it precisely in the center of the table. I pulled out the headphones, and put them away in the desk drawer. Then I turned the same CD on, turning it down to the point where it was background noise.

With another sigh, I turned to my computer. Naturally, the screen was covered in pop-up ads. I sat in my hard folding chair and began closing all the little windows. Eventually I made it to my favorite search engine. I shot down a few more pop-ups and then typed in one word.

Vampire.

It took an infuriatingly long time, of course. When the results came up, there was a lot to sift through — everything from movies and TV shows to role-playing games, underground metal, and gothic cosmetic companies.

Then I found a promising site — Vampires A—Z. I waited impatiently for it to load, quickly clicking closed each ad that flashed across the screen. Finally the screen was finished — simple white background with black text, academic-looking. 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 held 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 centered around beautiful women as demons and children as victims; they also seemed like constructs created to explain away the high mortality rates for young children, and to give men an excuse for infidelity. Many of the stories involved bodiless spirits and warnings against improper burials. There wasn't much that sounded like the movies I'd seen, and only a very few, like the Hebrew *Estrie* and the Polish *Upier*, who were even preoccupied with 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 relief, that one small entry, the one myth among hundreds that claimed the existence of good vampires.

Overall, though, there was little that coincided with Jacob's stories or my own observations. I'd made a little catalogue in my mind as I'd read and carefully compared it with each myth. Speed, strength, beauty, pale skin, eyes that shift color; and then Jacob'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 small number of scary movies that I'd seen and 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.

Aggravated, I snapped off the computer's main power switch, not waiting to shut things down properly. 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 decided that most of the blame belonged on the doorstep of the town of Forks — and the entire sodden Olympic Peninsula, for that matter.

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.

It was overcast, but not raining yet. I ignored my truck and started east on foot, angling across Charlie's yard toward the ever-encroaching forest. It didn't take long till I was deep enough for the house and the road to be invisible, for the only sound to be the squish of the damp earth under my feet and the sudden cries of the jays.

There was a thin ribbon of a trail that led through the forest here, or I wouldn't risk wandering on

my own like this. My sense of direction was hopeless; I could get lost in much less helpful surroundings. The trail wound deeper and deeper into the forest, mostly east as far as I could tell. It snaked around the Sitka 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 due to Charlie pointing them out to me from the cruiser window in earlier days. There were many 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 at myself pushed me forward. As that started to ebb, I slowed. A few drops of moisture trickled down from the canopy above me, but I couldn't be certain if it was beginning to rain or if it was simply pools left over from yesterday, held high in the leaves above me, slowly dripping their way back to the earth. A recently fallen tree — I knew it was recent because it wasn't entirely carpeted in moss — rested against the trunk of one of her sisters, creating a sheltered little bench just a few safe feet off the trail. I stepped over the ferns and sat carefully, making sure my jacket was between the damp seat and my clothes wherever they touched, and leaned my hooded head back against the living tree.

This was the wrong place to have come. I should have known, but where else was there to go? The forest was deep green and far too much like the scene in last night's dream to allow for peace of mind. 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 higher than my head, now that I was seated, and I knew someone could walk by on the path, three feet away, and not see me.

Here in the trees it was much easier to believe the absurdities that embarrassed me indoors. Nothing had changed in this forest for thousands of years, and all the myths and legends of a hundred different lands seemed much more likely in this green haze than they had in my clear-cut bedroom.

I forced myself to focus on the two most vital questions I had to answer, but I did so unwillingly. First, I had to decide if it was possible that what Jacob had said about the Cullens could be true.

Immediately my mind responded with a resounding negative. It was silly and morbid to entertain such ridiculous notions. But what, then? I asked myself. There was no rational explanation for how I was alive at this moment. I listed again in my head the things I'd observed myself: the impossible speed and strength, the eye color shifting from black to gold and back again, the inhuman beauty, the pale, frigid skin. And more — small things that registered slowly — how they never seemed to eat, the disturbing grace with which they moved. And the way *be*

sometimes spoke, with unfamiliar cadences and phrases that better fit the style of a turn-of-the-century novel than that of a twenty-first-century classroom. He had skipped class the day we'd done blood typing. He hadn't said no to the beach trip till he heard where we were going. He seemed to know what everyone around him was thinking... except me. He had told me he was the villain, dangerous...

Could the Cullens be vampires?

Well, they were *something*. Something outside the possibility of rational justification was taking place in front of my incredulous eyes. Whether it be Jacob's *cold ones* or my own superhero

theory, Edward Cullen was not... human. He 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 if it was true?

If Edward was a vampire — I could hardly make myself think the words — then what should I do? Involving someone else was definitely out. I couldn't even believe myself; anyone I told would have me committed.

Only two options seemed practical. The first was to take his advice: to be smart, to avoid him as much as possible. To cancel our plans, to go back to ignoring him as far as I was able. To pretend there was an impenetrably thick glass wall between us in the one class where we were forced together. To tell him to leave me alone — and mean it this time.

I was gripped in a sudden agony of despair as I considered that alternative. My mind rejected the pain, quickly skipping on to the next option.

I could do nothing different. After all, if he was something... sinister, he'd done nothing to hurt me so far. In fact, I would be a dent in Tyler's fender if he hadn't acted so quickly. So quickly, I argued with myself, that it might have been sheer reflexes. But if it was a reflex to save lives, how bad could he be? I retorted. My head spun around in answerless circles.

There was one thing I was sure of, if I was sure of anything. The dark Edward in my dream last night was a reflection only of my fear of the word Jacob had spoken, and not Edward himself. Even so, when I'd screamed out in terror at the werewolf's lunge, it wasn't fear for the wolf that brought the cry of "no" to my lips. It was fear that *he* would be harmed — even as he called to me with sharp-edged fangs, I feared for *him*.

And I knew 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 — I could do nothing about my frightening secret. Because when I thought of him, of his voice, his hypnotic eyes, the magnetic force of his personality, I wanted nothing more than to be with him right now. Even if... but I couldn't think it. Not here, alone in the darkening forest. Not while the rain made it dim as twilight under the canopy and pattered like footsteps across the matted earthen floor. I shivered and rose quickly from my place of concealment, worried that somehow the path would have disappeared with the rain.

But it was there, safe and clear, winding its way out of the dripping green maze. I followed it hastily, my hood pulled close around my face, becoming 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 confines of the forest. Before I could get too panicky, though, I began to glimpse some open spaces through the webbed branches. And then I could hear a car passing on the street, and I was free, Charlie's lawn stretched out in front of me, the house beckoning me, promising warmth and dry socks.

It was just noon when I got back inside. I went upstairs and got dressed for the day, 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 contentedly, more serene 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 simply followed through — usually with relief that the choice was made. Sometimes the relief was tainted by despair, like my decision to come to Forks. But it was still better than wrestling with the alternatives.

This decision was ridiculously easy to live with. Dangerously easy.

And so 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 chills that flashed up my spine whenever I thought of that trip were no different than the ones I'd felt before I'd taken my walk with Jacob Black. They should be different, I thought. I should be afraid — I knew I should be, but I couldn't feel the right kind of fear.

I slept dreamlessly that night, exhausted from beginning my day so early, and sleeping so poorly the night before. I woke, for the second time since arriving in Forks, to the bright yellow light of a sunny day. I skipped to the window, stunned to see that there was hardly a cloud in the sky, and those there were just fleecy little white puffs that couldn't possibly be carrying any rain. I opened the window — surprised when it opened silently, without sticking, not having 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 was electric in my veins.

Charlie was finishing breakfast when I came downstairs, and he picked up on my mood immediately. "Nice day out," he commented.

"Yes," I agreed with a grin.

He smiled back, his brown eyes crinkling around the edges. When Charlie smiled, it was easier to see why he and my mother had jumped too quickly into an early marriage. Most of the young romantic he'd been in those days had faded before I'd known him, as the curly brown hair — the same color, if not the same texture, as mine — had dwindled, slowly revealing more and more of the shiny skin of his forehead. But when he smiled I could see a little of the man who had run away with Renée when she was just two years older than I was now.

I ate breakfast cheerily, watching the dust moats 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. With a sigh, I folded it over my arm and stepped out into the brightest light I'd seen in months.

By dint of much elbow grease, 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 seldom-used picnic benches on the south side of the cafeteria. The benches were still a little damp, so I sat on my jacket, glad to have a use for it. My homework was done — the product of a slow social life — but there were a few Trig problems I wasn't sure I had right. I took out my book industriously, but halfway through rechecking the first problem I was daydreaming, watching the sunlight play on the red-barked trees. I sketched inattentively along the margins of my homework. After a few minutes, I suddenly realized I'd drawn five pairs of dark eyes staring out of the page at me. I scrubbed them out with the eraser.

"Bella!" I heard someone call, and it sounded like Mike.

I looked around to realize that the school had become populated while I'd been sitting there, absentminded. Everyone was in t-shirts, some even in shorts though the temperature couldn't be over sixty. Mike was coming toward me in khaki shorts and a striped Rugby shirt, waving.

"Hey, Mike," I called, waving back, unable to be halfhearted on a morning like this.

He came to sit by me, the tidy spikes of his hair shining golden in the light, his grin stretching across his face. He was so delighted to see me, I couldn't help but feel gratified.

"I never noticed before — your hair has red in it," he commented, catching between his fingers a strand that was fluttering in the light breeze.

"Only in the sun."

I became just a little uncomfortable as he tucked the lock behind my ear.

"Great day, isn't it?"

"My kind of day," I agreed.

"What did you do yesterday?" His tone was just a bit too proprietary.

"I mostly worked on my essay." I didn't add that I was finished with it — no need to sound smug. He hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Oh yeah — that's due Thursday, right?" "Um, Wednesday, I think."

"Wednesday?" He frowned. "That's not good... What are you writing yours on?" "Whether Shakespeare's treatment of the female characters is misogynistic."

He stared at me like I'd just spoken in pig Latin.

"I guess I'll have to get to work on that tonight," he said, deflated. "I was going to ask if you wanted to go out."

"Oh." I was taken off guard. Why couldn't I ever have a pleasant conversation with Mike anymore without it getting awkward?

"Well, we could go to dinner or something... and I could work on it later." He smiled at me hopefully. "Mike..." I hated being put on the spot. "I don't think that would be the best idea."

His face fell. "Why?" he asked, his eyes guarded. My thoughts flickered to Edward, wondering if that's where his thoughts were as well.

"I think... and if you ever repeat what I'm saying right now I will cheerfully beat you to death," I threatened, "but I think that would hurt Jessica's feelings."

He was bewildered, obviously not thinking in *that* direction at all. "Jessica?"

"Really, Mike, are you *blind*?"

"Oh," he exhaled — clearly dazed. I took advantage of that to make my escape. "It's time for class, and I can't be late again." I gathered my books up and stuffed them in my bag.

We walked in silence to building three, and his expression was distracted. I hoped whatever thoughts he was immersed in were leading him in the right direction.

When I saw Jessica in Trig, she was bubbling with enthusiasm. She, Angela, and Lauren were going to Port Angeles tonight to go dress shopping for the dance, and she wanted me to come, too, even though I didn't need one. I was indecisive. It would be nice to get out of town with some girlfriends, but Lauren would be there. And who knew what I could be doing tonight... But that was definitely the wrong path to let my mind wander down. Of course I was happy about the sunlight. But that wasn't completely responsible for the euphoric mood I was in, not even close.

So I gave her a maybe, telling her I'd have to talk with Charlie first.

She talked of nothing but the dance on the way to Spanish, continuing as if without an interruption when class finally ended, five minutes late, and we were on our way to lunch. I was far too lost in my own frenzy of anticipation to notice much of what she said. I was painfully eager to see not just him but all the Cullens — to compare them with the new suspicions that plagued my mind. As I crossed the threshold of the cafeteria, I felt the first true tingle of fear slither down my spine and settle in my stomach. Would they be able to know what I was thinking? And then a different feeling jolted through me — would Edward be waiting to sit with me again?

As was my routine, I glanced first toward the Cullens' table. A shiver of panic trembled in my stomach as I realized it was empty. With dwindling hope, my eyes scoured the rest of the cafeteria, hoping to find him alone, waiting for me. The place was nearly filled — Spanish had made us late — but there was no sign of Edward or any of his family. Desolation hit me with crippling strength.

I shambled along behind Jessica, not bothering to pretend to listen anymore.

We were late enough that everyone was already at our table. I avoided the empty chair next to Mike in favor of one by Angela. I vaguely noticed that Mike held the chair out politely for Jessica, and that her face lit up in response.

Angela asked a few quiet questions about the *Macbeth* paper, which I answered as naturally as I could while spiraling downward in misery. She, too, invited me to go with them tonight, and I agreed now, grasping at anything to distract myself.

I realized I'd been holding on to a last shred of hope when I entered Biology, saw his empty seat, and felt a new wave of disappointment.

The rest of the day passed slowly, dismally. In Gym, we had a lecture on the rules of badminton, the next torture they had lined up for me. But at least it meant I got to sit and listen instead of stumbling around on the court. The best part was the coach didn't finish, so I got another day off tomorrow. Never mind that the day after they would arm me with a racket before unleashing me on the rest of the class.

I was glad to leave campus, so I would be free to pout and mope before I went out tonight with Jessica and company. But right after I walked in the door of Charlie's house, Jessica called to

cancel our plans. I tried to be happy that Mike had asked her out to dinner — I really was relieved that he finally seemed to be catching on — but my enthusiasm sounded false in my own ears. She rescheduled our shopping trip for tomorrow night.

Which left me with little in the way of distractions. I had fish marinating for dinner, with a salad and bread left over from the night before, so there was nothing to do there. I spent a focused half hour on homework, but then I was through with that, too. I checked my e-mail, reading the backlog of letters from my mother, getting snippier as they progressed to the present. I sighed and typed a quick response.

Mom,

Sorry. I've been out. I went to the beach with some friends. And I had to write a

paper. My excuses were fairly 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. I love you,

Bella.

I decided to kill an hour with non-school-related reading. I had a small collection of books that came with me to Forks, the shabbiest volume being a compilation of the works of Jane Austen. I selected that one and headed to the backyard, grabbing a ragged old quilt from the linen cupboard at the top of the stairs on my way down.

Outside in Charlie's small, square yard, I folded the quilt in half and laid it out of the reach of the trees' shadows on the thick lawn that would always be slightly wet, no matter how long the sun shone. I lay on my stomach, crossing my ankles in the air, flipping through the different novels in the book, trying to decide which would occupy my mind the most thoroughly. My favorites were *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. I'd read the first most recently, so I started into *Sense and Sensibility*, only to remember after I began three that the hero of the story happened to be named *Edward*. Angrily, I turned to *Mansfield Park*, but the hero of that piece was named *Edmund*, and that was just too close. Weren't there any other names available in the late eighteenth century? I snapped the book shut, annoyed, and rolled over onto my back. I pushed my sleeves up as high as they would go, and closed my eyes. I would think of nothing but the warmth on my skin, I told myself severely. The breeze was still light, but it blew tendrils of my hair around my face, and that tickled a bit. I pulled all my hair over my head, letting it fan out on the quilt above me, and focused again on the heat that touched my eyelids, my cheekbones, my nose, my lips, my forearms, my neck, soaked through my light shirt...

The next thing I was conscious of was the sound of Charlie's cruiser turning onto the bricks of the driveway. I sat up in surprise, realizing the light was gone, behind the trees, and I had fallen asleep. I looked around, muddled, 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, foolishly edgy, gathering the now-damp quilt and my book. I ran inside to get some oil heating on the stove, realizing that dinner would be late. Charlie was hanging up his gun belt and stepping out of his boots when I came in.

"Sorry, Dad, dinner's not ready yet — I fell asleep outside." I stifled a yawn.

"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 like 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 depression, to make him happy.

"Dad," I said during a commercial, "Jessica and Angela are going to look at dresses for the dance tomorrow night in Port Angeles, and they wanted me to help them choose... do you mind if I go with them?"

"Jessica Stanley?" he asked.

"And Angela Weber." I sighed as I gave him the details.

He was confused. "But you're not going to the dance, right?"

"No, Dad, but I'm helping *them* find dresses — you know, giving them constructive criticism." I wouldn't have to explain this to a woman.

"Well, okay." He seemed to realize that he was out of his depth with the girlie stuff. "It's a school night, though."

"We'll leave right after school, so we can get back early. You'll be okay for dinner, right?" "Bells, I fed myself for seventeen years before you got here," he reminded me.

"I don't know how you survived," I muttered, then added more clearly, "I'll leave some things for cold-cut sandwiches in the fridge, okay? Right on top."

It was sunny again in the morning. I awakened with renewed hope that I grimly tried to suppress. I dressed for the warmer weather in a deep blue V-neck blouse — 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. With a sinking heart, I circled the full lot looking for a space, while also searching for the silver Volvo that was clearly not there. I parked in the last row and hurried to English, arriving breathless, but subdued, before the final bell.

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.

The Port Angeles scheme was back on again for tonight and made all the more attractive by the fact that Lauren had other obligations. I was anxious to get out of town so I could stop glancing over my shoulder, hoping to see him appearing out of the blue the way he always did. I vowed to myself that I would be in a good mood tonight and not ruin Angela's or Jessica's enjoyment in the dress hunting. Maybe I could do a little clothes shopping as well. I refused to think that I might be shopping alone in Seattle this weekend, no longer interested in the earlier arrangement. Surely he wouldn't cancel without at least telling me.

After school, Jessica followed me home in her old white Mercury so that I could ditch my books and truck. I brushed through my hair quickly when I was inside, feeling a slight lift of excitement as I contemplated getting out of Forks. I left a note for Charlie on the table, explaining again where to find dinner, switched my scruffy wallet from my school bag to a purse I rarely used, and ran out to join Jessica. We went to Angela's house next, and she was waiting for us. My excitement increased exponentially as we actually drove out of the town limits.

8. PORT ANGELES

Jess drove faster than the Chief, so we made it to Port Angeles by four. It had been a while since I'd had a girls' night out, and the estrogen rush was invigorating. We listened to whiny rock songs while Jessica jabbered on about the boys we hung out with. Jessica's dinner with Mike had gone very well, and she was hoping that by Saturday night they would have progressed to the first-kiss stage. I smiled to myself, pleased. Angela was passively happy to be going to the dance, but not really interested in Eric. Jess tried to get her to confess who her type was, but I interrupted with a question about dresses after a bit, to spare her. Angela threw a grateful glance my way.

Port Angeles was a beautiful little tourist trap, much more polished and quaint than Forks. But Jessica and Angela knew it well, so they didn't plan to waste time on the picturesque boardwalk by the bay. Jess drove straight to the one big department store in town, which was a few streets in from the bay area's visitor-friendly face.

The dance was billed as semiformal, and we weren't exactly sure what that meant. Both Jessica and Angela seemed surprised and almost disbelieving when I told them I'd never been to a dance in Phoenix.

"Didn't you ever go with a boyfriend or something?" Jess asked dubiously as we walked through the front doors of the store.

"Really," I tried to convince her, not wanting to confess my dancing problems. "I've never had a boyfriend or anything close. I didn't go out much."

"Why not?" Jessica demanded.

"No one asked me," I answered honestly.

She looked skeptical. "People ask you out here," she reminded me, "and you tell them no." We were in the juniors' section now, scanning the racks for dress-up clothes.

"Well, except for Tyler," Angela amended quietly.

"Excuse me?" I gasped. "What did you say?"

"Tyler told everyone he's taking you to prom," Jessica informed me with suspicious eyes. "He said *what*?" I sounded like I was choking.

"I told you it wasn't true," Angela murmured to Jessica.

I was silent, still lost in shock that was quickly turning to irritation. But we had found the dress racks, and now we had work to do.

"That's why Lauren doesn't like you," Jessica giggled while we pawed through the clothes.

I ground my teeth. "Do you think that if I ran him over with my truck he would stop feeling guilty about the accident? That he might give up on making amends and call it even?"

"Maybe," Jess snickered. "'If that's why he's doing this.'"

The dress selection wasn't large, but both of them found a few things to try on. I sat on a low chair just inside the dressing room, by the three-way mirror, trying to control my fuming.

Jess was torn between two — one a long, strapless, basic black number, the other a knee-length electric blue with spaghetti straps. I encouraged her to go with the blue; why not play up the eyes? Angela chose a pale pink dress that draped around her tall frame nicely and brought out honey tints in her light brown hair. I complimented them both generously and helped by returning the rejects to their racks. The whole process was much shorter and easier than similar trips I'd taken with Renée at home. I guess there was something to be said for limited choices.

We headed over to shoes and accessories. While they tried things on I merely watched and critiqued, not in the mood to shop for myself, though I did need new shoes. The girls'-night high was wearing off in the wake of my annoyance at Tyler, leaving room for the gloom to move back in.

"Angela?" I began, hesitant, while she was trying on a pair of pink strappy heels — she was overjoyed to have a date tall enough that she could wear high heels at all.

Jessica had drifted to the jewelry counter and we were alone.

"Yes?" She held her leg out, twisting her ankle to get a better view of the shoe.

I chickened out. "I like those."

"I think I'll get them — though they'll never match anything but the one dress," she mused.

"Oh, go ahead — they're on sale," I encouraged. She smiled, putting the lid back on a box that contained more practical-looking off-white shoes.

I tried again. "Um, Angela..." She looked up curiously.

"Is it normal for the... Cullens" — I kept my eyes on the shoes — "to be out of school a lot?" I failed miserably in my attempt to sound nonchalant.

"Yes, when the weather is good they go backpacking all the time — even the doctor. They're all real outdoorsy," she told me quietly, examining her shoes, too. She didn't ask one question, let alone the hundreds that Jessica would have unleashed. I was beginning to really like Angela.

"Oh." I let the subject drop as Jessica returned to show us the rhinestone jewelry she'd found to match her silver shoes.

We planned to go to dinner at a little Italian restaurant on the boardwalk, but the dress shopping hadn't taken as long as we'd expected. Jess and Angela were going to take their clothes back to the car and then walk down to the bay. I told them I would meet them at the restaurant in an hour — I wanted to look for a bookstore. They were both willing to come with me, but I encouraged them to go have fun — they didn't know how preoccupied I could get when surrounded by books; it was something I preferred to do alone. They walked off to the car chattering happily, and I headed in the direction Jess pointed out.

I had no trouble finding the bookstore, but it wasn't what I was looking for. The windows were full of crystals, dream-catchers, and books about spiritual healing. I didn't even go inside. Through the glass I could see a fifty-year-old woman with long, gray hair worn straight down her back, clad in a dress right out of the sixties, smiling welcomingly from behind the counter. I decided that was one conversation I could skip. There had to be a normal bookstore in town.

I meandered through the streets, which were filling up with end-of-the-workday traffic, and hoped I was headed toward downtown. I wasn't paying as much attention as I should to where I was going; I was wrestling with despair. I was trying so hard not to think about him, and what Angela had said... and more than anything trying to beat down my hopes for Saturday, fearing a disappointment more painful than the rest, when I looked up to see someone's silver Volvo parked along the street and it all came crashing down on me. Stupid, unreliable vampire, I thought to myself.

I stomped along in a southerly direction, toward some glass-fronted shops that looked promising. But when I got to them, they were just a repair shop and a vacant space. I still had too much time to go looking for Jess and Angela yet, and I definitely needed to get my mood in hand before I met back up with them. I ran my fingers through my hair a couple of times and took some deep breaths before I continued around the corner.

I started to realize, as I crossed another road, that I was going the wrong direction. The little foot traffic I had seen was going north, and it looked like the buildings here were mostly warehouses. I decided to turn east at the next corner, and then loop around after a few blocks and try my luck on a different street on my way back to the boardwalk.

A group of four men turned around the corner I was heading for, dressed too casually to be heading home from the office, but they were too grimy to be tourists. As they approached me, I realized they weren't too many years older than I was. They were joking loudly among themselves, laughing raucously and punching each other's arms. I scooted as far to the inside of the sidewalk as I could to give them room, walking swiftly, looking past them to the corner.

"Hey, there!" one of them called as they passed, and he had to be talking to me since no one else was around. I glanced up automatically. Two of them had paused, the other two were slowing. The closest, a heavyset, dark-haired man in his early twenties, seemed to be the one who had spoken. He was wearing a flannel shirt open over a dirty t-shirt, cut-off jeans, and sandals. He

took half a step toward me.

"Hello," I mumbled, a knee-jerk reaction. Then I quickly looked away and walked faster toward the corner. I could hear them laughing at full volume behind me.

"Hey, wait!" one of them called after me again, but I kept my head down and rounded the corner with a sigh of relief. I could still hear them chortling behind me.

I found myself on a sidewalk leading past the backs of several somber-colored 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 I, as a guest, was intended to see. It was getting dark, I realized, the clouds finally returning, piling up on the western horizon, creating an early sunset. The eastern sky was still clear, but graying, shot through with streaks of pink and orange. I'd left my jacket in the car, and a sudden shiver made me cross my arms tightly across my chest. A single van passed me, and then the road was empty.

The sky suddenly darkened further, and, as I looked over my shoulder to glare at the offending cloud, I realized with a shock that two men were walking quietly twenty feet behind me.

They were from the same group I'd passed at the corner, though neither was the dark one who'd spoken to me. I turned my head forward at once, quickening my pace. A chill that had nothing to do with the weather made me shiver again. My purse was on a shoulder strap and I had it slung across my body, the way you were supposed to wear it so it wouldn't get snatched. I knew exactly where my pepper spray was — still in my duffle bag under the bed, never unpacked. I didn't have much money with me, just a twenty and some ones, and I thought about "accidentally" dropping my bag and walking away. But a small, frightened voice in the back of my mind warned me that they might be something worse than thieves.

I listened intently to their quiet footsteps, which were much too quiet when compared to the boisterous noise they'd been making earlier, and it didn't sound like they were speeding up, or getting any closer to me. Breathe, I had to remind myself. You don't know they're following you. I continued to walk as quickly as I could without actually running, focusing on the right-hand turn that was only a few yards away from me now. I could hear them, staying as far back as they'd been before. A blue car turned onto the street from the south and drove quickly past me. I thought of jumping out in front of it, but I hesitated, inhibited, unsure that I was really being pursued, and then it was too late.

I reached the corner, but a swift glance revealed that it was only a blind drive to the back of another building. I was half-turned in anticipation; I had to hurriedly correct and dash across the narrow drive, back to the sidewalk. The street ended at the next corner, where there was a stop sign. I concentrated on the faint footsteps behind me, deciding whether or not to run. They sounded farther back, though, and I knew they could outrun me in any case. I was sure to trip and go sprawling if I tried to go any faster. The footfalls were definitely farther back. I risked a quick glance over my shoulder, and they were maybe forty feet back now, I saw with relief. But they were both staring at me.

It seemed to take forever for me to get to the corner. I kept my pace steady, the men behind me falling ever so slightly farther behind with every step. Maybe they realized they had scared me and were sorry. I saw two cars going north pass the intersection I was heading for, and I exhaled in relief. There would be more people around once I got off this deserted street. I skipped around the corner with a grateful sigh.

And skidded to a stop.

The street was lined on both sides by blank, doorless, windowless walls. I could see in the distance, two intersections down, streetlamps, cars, and more pedestrians, but they were all too far away. Because lounging against the western building, midway down the street, were the other two men from the group, both watching with excited smiles as I froze dead on the sidewalk. I realized then that I wasn't being followed.

I was being herded.