

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 ragdoll'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.

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.