

Fredward Bound

A new translation of *Twilight*

by Greg Petrovic & Sara Adams

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Revised and Expanded

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Translators' Note

This is a parody.

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In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
The earth was without form and void,
and darkness was upon the face of the deep;
and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.
And God said, "Let there be light";
and there was light.
And God saw that the light was good;
and God separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light Day,
and the darkness he called Night.
And there was evening and there was morning;
one day.

Genesis 1:1—:5

But of the tree of 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 HAD NEVER GIVEN TOO MUCH THOUGHT TO HOW I WOULD die—though I'd had reason enough in the last few months—but even if I had (and I most certainly hadn't), I would not have imagined it like this.

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

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

I knew that if I'd never gone to Forks,¹ I wouldn't be facing total death now. But, terrified as I was, I couldn't bring myself to baguette the decision to confront this fiend. When life offers you a lemon so far beyond any of your wildest citrus dreams, it's not reasonable to grieve when it comes to a sour end.

The Hunter smiled in a friendly way as he sauntered jauntily forward to kill me.

This story is based on a true story:

my story.

1. A town in Washington that gets so few sunny days per year, a vampire could live there.

1.

FIRST SIGHT

MY MOTHER DROVE ME TO THE AIRPORT WITH THE WINDOWS ROLLED down.² It was seventy-five degrees in Phoenix,³ the sky a perfect cloudless blue. I was wearing my favorite shirt—sleeveless, white eyeless lace—as a farewell gesture. I was saying farewell to my mother because I was leaving. My carry-on item was a parka because I was going to Forks—a town in Washington which not only boasts having so many cloudy days a year a vampire could live there, but also boasts being so dark in the daytime that a vampire could also live there.

In the Olympic Peninsula of northwest Washington State, a small town named Forks⁴ exists under a near-constant cover of clouds. It rains in this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America.⁵ 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.⁶

I loved Phoenix. I loved the sun's blistering heat as it played over my pale skin, making it glow whiter than the hottest of lights. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city, so big that I couldn't but lose myself to it.

"Bella,"⁷ my mom said to me—the last of a thousand times—before I got on the plane. "You don't have to do this."

"Listen to you say my name and tell me what I don't have to do?"

She sighed.

My mom looks like me, except with short hair and laugh lines. I felt a spasm of panic as I stared at her wide, mothering hips. How could I leave my loving, erratic, hare-brained, wide-hipped, frumpy, tasteless mother to fend for herself? Of course she had Phil⁸ 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... she was loving, erratic, hare-brained, wide-hipped, frumpy,

2. Also known as the Phoenix International Airport, the first and only international airport in the world to have all of its windows rolled down.

3. The city which boasts the first and only international airport in the world that allows all of its windows to be rolled down, simultaneously.

4. Originally founded in 1806 by Georges and Hilda Fork, Forks quickly gained a reputation as the largest regional exporter of its eponymous product, the fork.

5. Originally founded in 1776 by George Washington, who is known for his legendary hatred for "ill weathers," a driving force behind his bid for independence from Britain.

6. Founded in 1797 by Eustace "Forks" Miller, a notorious serial killer who killed his victims with knives.

7. An Italian word meaning "beautiful."

8. Bella's mother's new husband, an aspiring baseball player and child at heart. By the nature of his dreams, Phil is forced to move around the country to try out for different minor-league teams. Renée follows him because they are married and she wants to be around him and she is also unemployed.

tasteless, and a nag. In other words: Renéé.⁹ What would she do without me?

"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 lied. The last thing he ever needed to hear was that my mother still knew he existed.

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

But I could see the sacrifice happening behind her eyes, behind the promise.¹⁰

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

She hugged me tightly for a minute, twice. Once in the car and once outside the terminal, after we'd exited the car and entered the airport. And then I got on the plane, and then she was gone.

It's a four-hour flight from Phoenix to Seattle,¹¹ another hour in a small plane up to Fort Angles, and then an hour's drive back down to Forks. Flying doesn't bother me; the hour in the car with my pops Charlie, 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.¹² Neither of us was what anyone would call verbose, talkative, *or* chatty, 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 Fort Angles, it was raining. I didn't see it as an omen—just unavoidable. I'd already said my goodbyes to the sun when I kissed one of Phoenix International's descending windows a fair *adios*.

Charlie was waiting for me with the cruiser. This I was expecting, too. Charlie is Police Chief Duck 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. I like to move fast and I do not stop. I like the wind in my hair when I roll down the top.

Charlie gave me an awkward, one-armed hug when I stumbled my way off the plane.¹³

"It's good to see you, Ducky," he said, smiling as he automatically caught and steadied me in his one-armed grip. "You haven't changed much. How's Renéé?"

"Mom's fine. It's good to see you, too, Dad."

I only had a few bags. Most of my Arizona clothes were too permeable for Washington. 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 answered when we were strapped in.

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

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

9. Bella's mother's husband's new wife; Bella's mother.

10. In Italian, "promise" and "sacrifice" are the same word: "bella."

11. Founded in 1840 by Kurt Cobain, a city known for the large volume of rain it receives. According to local legend, every drop of rain is a fraction of its founder's tears.

12. Charlie only had one arm.

13. Bella's tragic flaw is that while she is beautiful, she is extraordinarily clumsy. She has problems exiting planes, climbing stairs, etc.

"Where did you find it?"

"It fell off the back of another truck."

"Really?"

"No. 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. Things like ill-conceived summer fishing trips. And Indians.

"He's in a wheelchair now." Charlie continued when I didn't respond because I was so busy thinking about how much worse a crippled Indian was than just a normal one, "so he can't drive anymore, and he offered to sell me his truck cheap."

Score! Maybe crippled Indians weren't so bad after all.

"What year is it?" I could see from his change of expression that this was the question he was hoping I wouldn't ask, would never ask, would never even think of asking.

He rubbed at the spot where his left arm would have been, pensive. "Well, Billy's done a lot of work on the engine—it's only a few years old, really. Young at heart." I hoped he didn't think so little of me as to believe I would give it up that easily. Did he think I was easy? "When did he buy it?"

"He bought it in 1984,¹⁴ 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. "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, sort of. In a way." He paused, and stroked his shoulder as I waited for him to continue.

"So... you bought it for me?"

Charlie looked uncertain. I wasn't sure whether or not he had bought it for me, and maybe he wasn't either.

"Yes," Charlie confirmed, peeking at me sideways with a hopeful expression. "As a homecoming gift."

Wow. He bought it for me. That meant I was getting it for free.

"You didn't need to do that, Dad. I was going to buy myself a car." But now, it seemed, I didn't have to.

"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, let alone his thoughts or desires. 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 Forks¹⁵ was an impossibility: he didn't need to suffer along with me. And I never looked a gift-truck in the mouth—or the gasket.

14. 1984 is largely seen as an auspicious year, for two reasons. First, it was the year that George Orwell prophesied as the apocalypse in his legendary book, *1985*. Second, it was the year the Apple II came onto the market and revolutionized home computing.

15. Notable for its nearby Native American reservation "The Push."

"Well, now, you're welcome," he mumbled, embarrassed by my thanks.

We exchanged a few more comments on the weather, it was wet, and then 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, the trees covered with branches, the branches covered with leaves, their trunks covered with moss, the moss covered with caterpillars, the ground covered with ferns, the ferns covered with really big, green slugs. Even the air filtered down greenly¹⁶ through the leaves.

It was just too green—just a green, 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, and it was in this very same house that he'd cut off his own arm. 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 me¹⁷—truck. It was a big red color with faded, rounded red fenders and a bulbous red cab. To my intense surprise, I loved how red it was.¹⁸ Plus, it was one of those solid iron affairs that never gets damaged—the kind that can be seen at the scene of an accident, paint unscratched,¹⁹ surrounded by the pieces of the foreign car²⁰ it had destroyed.

"Wow, Dad, I love it. Thanks!" Now my horrific day tomorrow would be just that much less dreadful, although not entirely *undreadful*. 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 me only one trip to get all of my stuff upstairs. I only fell twice and Charlie tried his best to help me up, which was emotionally as well as physically awkward. I got the west bedroom that faced out over the front yard. The room was familiar; it had belonged to me since I was born. It had belonged to me then, and it belonged to me now. The wooden floor, the light blue walls, the peaked ceiling, the yellowed lace curtains around the window, the windows framing the barren yard out front, the brown of the barren yard accenting the yellowed lace curtains, the Kewpie dolls stacked in the corner, the mysterious "beet juice" stain on the carpet in the far corner—these were all a part of my childhood. The only changes Charlie had ever made were switching the crib for a desk as I was now too big to do my homework in the crib. The desk now held a second-hand computer, with a 28k modem and wicked dial-up speed. 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. It too was stained with "beet juice."

There was only one small bathroom at the top of the stairs, which I would have to share with that messy pig Charlie. I was trying not to dwell too much on the fact that he was a messy pig, and a dirty one at that, but it was hard.

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 ample time to think about the coming morning.

Forks High School had a frightening student body of only three hundred and fifty-seven—now

16. In a green sort of way.

17. As mentioned earlier, Chief Duck dated the vehicle back to the early sixties or late fifties. Therefore, while not literally new, it is newly in Bella's possession.

18. Bella has a general aversion to things that are red—for example: blood, Native Americans, and blushing.

19. Due to the paint being made out of iron.

20. Toyota, Honda, Datsun, KIA, Subaru, Mazda, and Mitsubishi cars are all designed, as well as assembled, by Asia, which is notoriously small and delicate.

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; even their grandparents had been toddlers together. I would be the new girl from the big city, a curiosity, a freak. A hot topic. A rising phoenix. A freak. Cursed to smolder in embers and rise again, only to smolder once more.

Maybe.

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.²¹

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 that 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 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. Perhaps I needed someone ageless. Perhaps I needed someone who *wasn't* people; someone who was *something* else...

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. When I see red, is it the same as when someone else sees red? 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 had no idea...

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 face, and later added the pillow, too. But I couldn't fall asleep until after midnight, when the rain finally settled into a quiet sizzle.

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 quiet 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 and missing arm. 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.²² Over the small fireplace in the adjoining handkerchief-sized family room was a row of pictures. First a wedding picture of Charlie and

21. This is a direct reference to two other historical valleys of the sun: the first, the Mayan Valley of the Sun, dates back to 312 AD. It was in this valley that young men coming of age were sent to prove themselves as men by doing combat with the elements, chiefly the sun. The second, the San Fernando valley, rose to prominence in 1952 when the American pornography industry relocated from New York City to the sunnier climates of California.

22. Renée mistook the color yellow for actual sunshine.

my mom in Las Vegas,²³ 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 that 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 that I had to share a bathroom, let alone a house, with a one-armed man that I was forced to call my father and not his real name: Charlie.

I didn't want to be too early to school, but I couldn't stay in the house anymore. I donned²⁴ my jacket—which had the feel of a biohazard suit—and headed out into the rain.

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 new truck 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 cleaned it up, but the tan upholstered seats still smelled faintly of tobacco, gasoline, and peppermint. Indian smells. 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, but only got stations from the 1950s.

Finding the school wasn't difficult, though I'd never been there before, since I had just moved here. 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,²⁵ indicated to me that it was the Forks High School. 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?²⁶

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 large counter, cluttered with wire baskets full of papers and brightly colored fliers 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 Duck," I informed her, and saw the immediate awareness light her eyes as though she had suddenly become aware of me. I was expected, a topic of gossip no doubt. Daughter of the Chief's Flighty Ex-Wife, bearer of his lost arm, come home at last to drizzly dark Forks, home of the Forks High School Bears.

"Of course," she said. "We've been expecting you," she added with a small wink. She dug through a precariously stacked pile of documents on her desk 'til she found the ones she was looking

23. Founded in 1949 by the Rat Pack, this city is known for its live entertainments, and as the setting for George Orwell's penultimate dystopian novel *1986*, as well as John Steinbeck's *Chicanery Strip*.

24. Put on. A homonym of 'dawned.'

25. A high school in the town of Forks, Washington. The only high school in the town which serves grade levels 9-12. The low matriculation rate makes it easy for young-looking vampires to pose as students for extended periods of time.

26. Please see thought question #1.

for. "I have your schedule right here and a map of the school." She brought several documents to the counter to show me them.

She went through my classes for me, highlighting the best route to each of them on the map-document, and gave me a slip-document 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.²⁷ 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-document 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 into my bag, slung the strap over my shoulder, and sucked in a huge breath. I can do this. I finally exhaled and stepped out of the truck and into my first day of school.

I kept my face pulled back as I walked to the sidewalk, crowded with teenagers. My plain black jacket didn't stand out, I noticed with relief. In fact, everyone was wearing plain black jackets.

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 towards hyperventilation as I approached the door, breathing. I tried holding my breathe 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 coat hooks. I copied them. They were two girls, which became obvious as they took off their coats. One was a porcelain-colored blond, the other also a pale ceramic with light brown hair. At least my skin, also light-colored, wouldn't be a standout here.

I took the slip-document up to the teacher, a tall, balding man whose desk had a nameplate identifying him as Mr. Mason.²⁸ He gawked at me when my slip-document identified me as Bella Duck. It was not an encouraging response, and of course I blushed 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.²⁹ I kept my eyes down on the reading list the teacher had given me. It was fairly basic: Bronte, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Faulkner.³⁰ I'd already read everything, because I went to school.

Knowing 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 wondered if next time I should save them digitally. 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 smooth yellowish skin and smooth, jet-black hair leaned across the aisle to talk to me.

"You're Isabella Duck, right?" He looked like the overly helpful, chess-club type.

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

27. Known locally as "The PVD." Garnered national attention in 1989 with the Kinsey murders, in which Alfred Kinsey subjected the members of his family to a series of sexual "stress tests," in order to, "Sound the outer limits of their individual sexologies; in order to determine where such systems being to deteriorate."

28. A mason, by trade, is a person who works with stone. A sub-group of these are known as the Freemasons, a group of individuals who wish to spread the joy of their trade throughout the world, free of charge.

29. The author leaves two possibilities open, both ripe with implication. The first is that the students turned around in their seats to look at her. The second is that they all have eyes on the backside of their bodies, probably their heads.

30. Famous authors whose works deal with similar themes as this text.

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

I sighed, having to check my bag because I couldn't remember what it was, and the schedule-document was in my bag. "Um, Government with Jefferson, in Building Six."

There was nowhere to look without meeting his curious eyes.

"I'm heading toward Building Four, I could show you the way." Definitely overly helpful. "I'm Eric," he added.

I smiled perfunctorily. "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 eavesdropped.

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

"Yes."

"How much does it rain there?"

"Never."

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

"Dry," I told him.

"You don't look very tan."

"My mother is part albino."

He laughed and I sighed. It looked like a yellow complexion and my humor mixed, perhaps too well. My sarcastic wit may get me into more trouble than I was accustomed to.

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 said with a chuckle. Small town humor.

I smiled at him vaguely³¹ and went inside.

The rest of the morning passed in about the same fashion. My Trigganomics 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 of the classes. 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-document.

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 and big nose made up a lot of 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 the 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 and I sighed.

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. It seemed strange to me that they weren't eating, but

31. An allusion to Da Vinci's famously cryptic Mona Lisa and the painting's film adaptation, *Mona Lisa Smile* (1972).

even stranger that 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 seriously muscled weight lifter, a bear with dark, curly hair. Another was taller, leaner, but still muscular, a blond honey of a buck. 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 tall. 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 me from the middle of her back. The short girl was pixielike, short, thin in the extreme, with small features that I have no idea how to describe. 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, each paler than the last, the palest of all the students living in this pale, sunless town. Paler than me, the pretend-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 that were kind of purple and were sort of like bruises, although not really either of those things. As if they were all suffering from a sleepless night, or almost done recovering from a broken nose. Though their noses, all their features in fact, 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, inhumanely, unconditionally and irrevocably beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see in real life, as if they had just leapt from the pages of a fashion magazine, their airbrushed faces pushing through the paper into reality and proceeding to walk around, beautiful and devastating as a sinking sun. Or faces so perfect that it was as if they had been painted by an old master on a fresco of heaven, their faces the many faces of angels. It was hard to decide who was the most beautifully angelic—maybe the perfect blond girl, or the bronze-haired buck.

They were all looking away—away from each other, away from the other students, away from the world. As I watched, the small girl rose with her tray—unopened soda, unbitten Red Delicious apple—and walked away with a quick, graceful lode that belonged to a gazelle on the runway. I watched, amazed at her lithe dancing gazelle's step, 'til she dumped her tray into the trash and glided through the back door, faster than I would have thought possible. My eyes darted back to the others, who sat unchanging.

I was literally blown away. I squealed, "Who are *they*?" to the girl from my Spanish class, an overly saucy Chica whose name I'd already forgotten.

As she looked up from her burrito to see who I was talking about, he suddenly looked at her; the thinner one, the boyish one, the youngest, perhaps. He looked at her for just a fraction of a second, and then his dark eyes flickered to mine.

He looked away fast, faster than I could convince my own eyes to fast from the glorious buffet that was his face, and hair. It was almost as if she had called his name, as if somehow he'd heard her thoughts or seen her intentions, 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 Fredward 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."³² She said this under her breath.

32. Esme Cullen: the vampire wife of Dr. Carlisle Cullen.

I glanced sideways at the beautiful buck, whose eyes were on his tray now, picking a bagel to pieces. 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, perhaps in another language I didn't understand.

Strange, unpopular names, I thought. The kinds of names grandparents had. But maybe that was in vogue here—small town names? Hundred-year-old names? Names that had been popular a hundred or *more* years ago? 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.

"Oh, yes!" Jessica agreed with another giggle. "They're all, like, *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. 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."

I did the math in my head. "They look a little old for foster children."

Jessica had done a little math of her own. "They are now, Jasper and Rosalie are both eighteen, but they've been with Mrs. Cullen since they were eight."

"*With* her?" I said with a raised eyebrow.

Jessica chuckled nervously. "Ha ha, no I don't think so. She's their aunt, or something like that."

I settled down. "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 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?"³³ I asked. Surely I would have noticed them on one of my summers here, unless they avoided summers, or sunlight, or something, for some reason.

"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."³⁴ I felt a surge of pity, and relief. Pity because, as beautiful as they were, they were outsiders, clearly not accepted for their continental beauty. Relief, that I wasn't the only newcomer here, and certainly not the most interesting by any standard.

As I examined them, the youngest buck, 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 peeking at me, but not gawking like the other students had today—he had a slightly frustrated expression. I looked down again.

"That's Fredward. He's gorgeous, of course, but don't waste your time. He's *too* gorgeous; too gorgeous for me, too gorgeous for you... maybe too gorgeous for anyone. He doesn't date. Apparently none of the girls here are gorgeous-looking enough for him." She sniffed, a clear case of sour grapes. I

33. A town where even non-traditional vampire families could comfortably reside without persecution.

34. A barren state where even undesirable people are paid to live.

wondered when he'd turned her down. I bit my lip to hide a smile. Then I glanced at him again, still biting and smiling. His face was turned away, but I thought his cheek appeared lifted, as if he were smiling, too. As if somehow, from all the way across the room, he knew what we were talking about, and it was *him*, and he knew what I was smiling about was him and the sour grapes he'd given Jessica.

After a few more minutes, the four of them left the table together. They were all noticeably graceful—even the big, brawny bison one. It was unsettling to watch. It was like their movements were inhuman, their choreography from another plane. The one named Fredward didn't look at me again, although he continued to be graceful. I sat at the table with Jessica and her friends, who took 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 considerately reminded me that her name was Angela, had Biology IV with me for the next hour. I sighed. We walked to class together in silence.

When we entered the classroom, Angela went to sit at a black-topped lab table exactly like the ones that I was used to; exactly like all the others in the room, and in most Biology IV classrooms. She already had a neighbor. In fact, all the tables already had a neighbor, except for one. Next to the center aisle, I recognized Fredward Cullen by his unusual hair.

As I walked down the aisle to introduce myself to the teacher and get my slip-document teacher-signed, I was watching him surreptitiously. Just as I passed, he suddenly went rigid, hard in his seat. He stared at me again, meeting my eyes with the strangest expression on his face—it was unconditionally hostile and irrevocably furious, and probably some other things I wished I could describe. 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 didn't blame her.

I'd noticed that his eyes were black—coal black.³⁵

Mr. Banner³⁶ signed my slip-document and handed me a book and made sure there was 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*, Fredward, the love of my life, the undying love of my young life who'd just now bewildered me with an antagonistic glare from the depths of Hell, no doubt conjured to disguise his confused but reciprocal feelings.

I didn't look up as I set my book on the table and took my seat, but I saw him stiffen even harder 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, which my one-armed Charlie-father had bought me at the Forks Wal-Mart the day prior. It seemed an innocent enough odor, although perhaps a bit red-based. 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 in Biology III at Pleasure Valley High School. 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 buck next to me. During the whole class, he never relaxed his stiff position on the edge of his chair, which he'd scooted 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. I timidly wondered what else under those buckskin clothes of his was hard and muscular. He wasn't nearly as slight as he'd looked next to his burly bison of a brother.

35. Among some European cultures, it is a burial practice to insert lumps of coal in place of the eyes. With this, the author is suggesting that Fredward is a dead European.

36. Hulk out... !

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. But how in the world could he continue to sit there, with his eyes open and his fist clenched, if he wasn't breathing? I had learned about oxygen in Biology II. 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. Or Adam. Or did he?

I peeked up at him one more time, and regretted it. He was peeking 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*³⁷ suddenly ran through my mind.

At that moment, the bell rang loudly, making me jump, and Fredward 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 themselves up. I usually cried when I was angry, a humiliating tendency.

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

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

"Bella," I corrected him with my best smile.

"I'm Mike."

"Hi, Mike," I kept smiling.

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

"Ooh, gosh, let me see..." I rummaged around in my knapsack, taking particularly long to find the schedule-document while surreptitiously³⁸ checking him out.

Pale blond hair: check.

Spiky hair: check.

Friendly: check.

He had all the makings of a thoroughbred. I smiled inwardly.

"Um, gym, I think? Where's that?"

"That's my next class, too. C'mon, I'll walk you there."

I smiled appreciatively and grabbed onto his arm, pressing it against my chest. This was going to be too easy.

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

But as we were entering the gym, he asked, "So did you stab Fredward Cullen in the heart 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* Fredward Cullen's usual behavior. It must have been me. I decided to play dumb.

"Was that the boy I sat next to in Biology IV?" I asked artlessly.³⁹

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

37. A reference to the 1986 smash-hit "If Looks Could Kill" by Heart. "If looks could kill/I would be lying on the floor/begging you/please don't look at me no more."

38. With syrup.

39. Without aesthetic training.

"I don't know," I responded. And it was true, I didn't. "I never spoke to him." Had I hurt 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 all day."

Hook, line and sinker. I smiled at him before walking into and through the girls' locker room door. He was friendly and clearly admiring. But even if he did have pale blond hair and sky blue eyes, a marvelous cocktail for the senses, it wasn't easy to ease my agitation.

The Gym teacher, Coach Capp,⁴⁰ found me a uniform but didn't make me dress down for today's class. At home, only two years of P.E. were required. Here, P.E. was mandatory all four years. 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-documents. The rain had drifted away but the wind was stronger, colder. I wrapped my arms around myself, thankful that I didn't have an umbrella, lest it be blown away in the blustery wind.

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

Fredward Cullen stood at the desk in front of me. I recognized again that tousled bronze hair and buckskin outfit, stretched over infinitely stiff features. 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 IV to another time—*any* other time.

"I'll even retake II or III if I have to," he crooned.

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 towards me.

The door opened again, and the cold wind suddenly gusted through the room, rustling the paper-documents on the desk, swirling my hair around my face. The girl who came in merely stepped to the desk, placed a note-document in the wire basket, glared at me, and walked out again. Fredward Cullen's back stiffened, as if it could get any stiffer, and he turned slowly to look 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 for more than a second. He turned back to the receptionist.

"Never mind, then," he said hastily in a voice like Velveeta. "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-document.

"How did your first day go, dear?" the receptionist asked maternally.

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

When I got back to the truck, it was the last car in the lot. It seemed like a tavern, a broken person's home away from home, and already the closest thing to home I had in this damp green dump. 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 heater on. Then I turned the engine on; it roared to life. I headed back to Charlie's house, fighting hot tears the whole way home.

40. A reference to the titular character of the British comic strip, *Andy Capp*. Capp is notable for his cross-media promotional efforts, including his very own line of potato chips shaped like french fries.

2.

OPEN BUTT⁴¹

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 and sat by me in English, and subsequently walked me to my next class, with Chess Club Eric glaring at him all the while. People didn't look at me quite as much as they had yesterday, except quite a few of the boys. I sat with a big group at lunch that included, but was not limited to: Mike, Eric, Jessica, and several other people with names and faces. I began to feel like I was treading water—*instead* of drowning in it.

But it was also much worse than I'd ever imagined.

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, it hit me in the head, bounced off, and hit my teammate in the head.

And it was worst of all because Fredward Cullen wasn't in school *at* all.

All morning I was dreading lunch, fearing his bizarre glares and the sexual tension between us, which I felt even in his bizarre, hateful glances, and even that one time from all the way across the lunchroom. 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 played it out in my head, what I would say. But I knew myself too well to think I would ever take this late-night roleplaying into the lunchroom. I made the Cowardly Lion look like Arnold Schwarzenegger as The Terminator.⁴²

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 were sitting together at the same table they had been at yesterday, and *he* was not with them.

Mike intercepted us and steered us towards his table, where, I presumed, he would take joy from eating while looking at me. Jessica seemed elated by the attention, not knowing it was directed at me, and her friends quickly joined us; possibly because they, too, thought Mike's attention was directed at Jessica, although it wasn't. But as I tried to listen to their easy, ignorant chatter, I was terribly uncomfortable, and waited nervously for the moment he would arrive. I hoped that he would simply ignore me when he came, not even glare at me, so that I could prove to myself that I did not smell bad or have any other problem that would make a buck of his stature so skittish.

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

I walked to Biology IV with more confidence when, by the end of lunch, he still hadn't shown his beautiful face at the Forks High School cafeteria. 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 Fredward Cullen wasn't there, either! I exhaled and went to my seat. Mike followed, *a la* golden retriever, talking about an upcoming trip to the beach he had planned, which I knew he was organizing for the sole purpose of

41. An image that is meant to conjure the gaping chasm of reality that Bella is about to enter.

42. Arnold Schwarzenegger's star turn in 1997's *The Terminator* was the role that made his career. In it he plays the titular character, The Terminator, a robot that has been sent back in time to shoot a pregnant woman before she can give birth to a baby that, in the future, will try to shoot The Terminator before it goes back in time to shoot his mother.

getting close to me. He lingered by my desk 'til the bell rang. Then he smiled at me wistfully and went to sit by a girl with braces and a bad perm, who kind of looked like my Aunt Barb⁴³ did in the 90's. It looked like I was going to have to do something about Mike. After all, I couldn't have the only blond-haired, blue-eyed guy in the school going all ga-ga over me, even if he was cute, charming, and nice. It wouldn't be easy to ease him off my quickly emptying teat of reciprocal attention, though. In a town like this, 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 Fredward was absent, but I couldn't get rid of the nagging suspicion that I was the reason he wasn't there. It's like I had a sixth sense that was incredibly sensitive to the reality that existed between us, one that, though young and born only yesterday, was maturing quickly. 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 in which I was very clumsy and caused harm to myself and others, 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 more than willing to hand over the keys to the banquet hall,⁴⁴ where I found nothing but empty cabinets and a fridge stocked with a three month supply of eggs and bacon. So now 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.⁴⁵

I gunned my deafening engine to life, ignoring the heads that turned in my direction, and backed carefully into a gap in the line of cars that were waiting to exit the parking lot. As I waited, trying to pretend that that 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 European clothes before—I'd been too mesmerized by their statuesque faces. But now that I looked, it was obvious that they were all dressed exceptionally well; simply, but in cuts that subtly hinted at continental origins. With their remarkable good looks and the confidence with which they carried themselves, they could have worn dishrags and pulled it off, although they didn't. It seemed excessive for them to have both looks and money, unfair even, but as far as I could tell, life worked that way most of the time. Unfairly. At least it didn't look as if it brought 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 their beauty, no door that wouldn't immediately surrender to their designer threads.

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

The Thriftway⁴⁶ was not far from the Forks High School, just a few streets south off the highway, like everything was in town. It was nice to be inside the supermarket; it felt normal. I had

43. Bella's Aunt Barbara was Rénee's sister; she died shortly after a head-on collision in the early days of 1990.

44. The kitchen.

45. A combination liquor store/supermarket that is common throughout the Pacific Northwest.

46. First incorporated in 1813, it was originally two stores: Thriftliquor and Foodway. Both companies were facing dire financial trouble and so decided to combine their individual strengths to form "Thriftway." The name "Foodliquor" was briefly considered.

shopped in supermarkets like the Forks Thriftway before, although never one that had such a selection of liquors, and felt much more at home in its wide aisles than I did in the crowded hallways of the Forks High School. 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 for bakes, 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 ponytail, and took out my diary to catalog my day at school, my close encounter with Fredward Cullen's beautiful kin, as well as all the things I had done since I had been home. Then I checked my email 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 emailed 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, among other things which I'd rather not talk about, at least not now.

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

I sent that, and began writing another email. Like mother, like daughter.

*Mom,
Everything is great. Of course it's raining. I was waiting for something to write about that wasn't the rain. School isn't bad, just a little repetitive. Everyone likes me. I met some nice kids who sit by me at lunch, but I think they just like to look at me while they eat.
Your blouse is at the dry cleaners—you were supposed to pick it up Friday.⁴⁷
Charlie bought me a truck, can you believe it? I love it. It's old, and red, but really sturdy, which is good, you know, for me.*

47. Bella and her mom are close. Sometimes, they know each other better than they know themselves.

*I miss you, too. I'll write again soon, but I'm not going to check my email 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 because I'm a pretty avid reader. 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. I wasn't sure how long I had been upstairs reading *Wuthering Heights*, but I guessed that it had been longer than I'd thought it had been.

"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 in the kitchen. As far as I was aware, he'd never shot the gun on the job. But he kept it ready, because that was his job. 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. After all, it was the memory of those happy days that inspired him to harm his own body and FedEx my mother the evidence.

"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.

"Sniff sniff. Smells good, Belle."

"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, if not minutes.

"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 friendly." *With one outstanding exception*, I thought to myself.

"That must be Mike Newton. Nice kid—great eyes, 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."

Backpackers? "Backpackers?"

"Yeah, most of the town's tourism is in...*backpackers*."

"Do any of them ever get lost?"

"Lost?" Chuck looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah," I was getting ramped up. "Do you ever have to go on rescue missions into the woods to find backpackers who get lost and never come back?"

"Hmm." Charlie set his fork down for a moment and looked at one of the yellow cabinets. He thought for a moment and then said, "Nope, not that I can remember," and resumed eating.

Man, nothing ever happens here. I sighed and suddenly remembered Fredward. "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 damn town," he muttered. "Dr. Cullen is a brilliant surgeon who could probably work in any hospital in the world and 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 that are almost as old as they are. I thought we might have some problems with them, some weird polygamy shit, but they're all very mature—I haven't had a 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've felt strongly about whatever he was saying.

I backpedaled. "They seemed nice enough to me. I just noticed they kept to themselves. They're all very attractive," I added, although I didn't know if Charlie was capable of finding anyone besides my mother attractive.

"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—my mom had taken the dishwasher with her when she left, and Charlie had never bought a new one because he hoped she would come back and bring it with her—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.

Fredward 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 with Jessica and Mike and my other admirers, including Eric. 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 any desire to spend time with him at a beach. Beaches should be hot and dry, and so should Mike.

By Friday I was perfectly comfortable entering my Biology IV class, no longer worried that Fredward would be there. For all I knew, he had dropped out of school. I tried not to think about him, his European buckskin pants, pale skin and stiff bod, 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 getting 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 of having to pay for a lot of gas just so I could get a few books.

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*, me and Mike. It was straightforward, very easy, although I could hardly say as much about Mike... or could I?

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

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, tussled with my nose.

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

Oh, *that's* what it was. I bit my tongue, trying not to get nasty with Mike. I watched the little cotton fluffs building up along the sidewalk and swirling erratically past my face.

"Ew." Snow. There went my good day that was absent of snow.

He looked surprised, hurt. "Don't you like snow?" He simpered, gauging my reaction like a lost puppy who had approached a man working a hot dog stand.

"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."⁴⁸

Mike's face looked like it had been stepped on. "Haven't you ever seen snow fall before?" he asked incredulously.

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

Mike laughed, throwing his big head back and showing me for the first time his horsey teeth. And then a big, squishy ball of dripping snow smacked into the back of his bulbous 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. Horsetooth 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 features.

Throughout the morning, everyone chattered excitedly about the snow; apparently they had never seen snow before. I kept my mouth shut, avoiding the flaky, white substance. Sure, it was drier than rain—until it got in your mouth.

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. I *hate* snow. Jessica thought I was hilarious, but I didn't. Something in my expression kept her from lobbing a snowball herself.

Mike caught up to us as we walked into the doors laughing with ice melting the spikes in his perfect, blond hair. He and Jessica were talking animatedly about the snow fight, and the snow, and how interesting it all was, as we got in the food line to buy food. I glanced toward that table in the corner out of habit. And then I froze, like ice, where I stood. There were *five* people at the table.

Four, plus one previously missing Fredward. Jessica pulled on my arm.

"Hello? Bella? What do you want?"

Nothing from you, you shrew, I thought. I pulled my arm back and looked down; my ears were hot. I had no reason to feel hot in that area, I reminded myself. I hadn't done anything wrong.

"What's with Bella?" Mike asked Jessica.

"Nothing," I answered for myself. "I'll just get a soda today." I caught up to the end of the line.

"Aren't you hungry?" Jessica asked.

48. A trademarked cotton swab product owned by Johnson & Johnson, subsidiary of Unilever Incorporated.

"Actually, I feel a little sick," I said, my eyes still on the floor.⁴⁹

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

I sipped my soda slowly, stomach churning. Twice Mike asked, with unnecessary concern, how I was feeling. What made him think I wanted to talk to *him* about it? 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 from the one I love.

I decided to permit myself one glance at the Cullen family's table. If Fredward was glaring at me, I would skip Biology IV, 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. Fredward, 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 at the Forks High School, only they looked more like a scene from a movie than the rest of the students.

But, aside from laughter and playfulness, there was something different, and I couldn't quite pinpoint what that difference was. For obvious reasons, I decided to examine Fredward 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. He looked *different*. I pondered, trying to isolate the change. What was it?

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

At that precise moment, his eyes flashed over, all the way across the cafeteria, 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 as harsh or unfriendly as he had the last time I'd seen him. He looked merely curious again, unsatisfied in some way. Like he wanted something he couldn't have, or needed something he couldn't need.⁵⁰

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

I wiped at my ear. "He doesn't look angry, does he?" I couldn't help asking; I needed to know.

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

"I don't think he likes me," I confided, though I wished and secretly suspected it wasn't true. 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 was stealing my thunder.

She snickered but looked away. Thank god. I raised my head enough to make sure that she did, contemplating violence if she resisted. I even played out a few scenarios in my head; they were ugly.

Mike interrupted us then—he was planning an epic battle of the blizzard in the parking lot after school and wanted us to join. Unaware that Mike was probably just trying to get closer to me, Jessica agreed enthusiastically, excited to spend time with Mike, no matter what they were doing. The way she looked at Mike left little doubt that she would be up for anything he suggested. I kept silent. Mike had obviously forgotten our earlier conversation where I had said I hated the snow and realized that he had horsetooth. 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

49. Bella's original two-eyeball configuration may be in the process of being disrupted by them literally falling out, which could potentially be the first step in the mutation process that gives the students of the Forks High School their extra eyes.

50. The author is foreshadowing Fredward's insatiable desire to eat Bella's blood, and that he will spend the rest of the book constantly telling her that he can smell it bubbling underneath her skin.

the bargain I'd made with myself.⁵¹ Since he didn't look angry, I would go to Biology IV. My stomach did frightened little flip-flops at the thought of sitting next to him; being so close, and yet so far.

I didn't really want to walk to class with Mike as usual. He seemed to be a popular target for the snowball snipers,⁵² and besides, *I didn't like him*. When we got to the door, everyone besides me groaned in unison. It was raining, washing all traces of the snow away in clear, icy ribbons down the side of the walkway. I pulled my hood up, secretly pleased; partially because the snow was gone, and partially because I wouldn't have to deal with everyone's excitement anymore. Plus, I would be free to go straight home after Gym.

Mike kept up a string of complaints on the way to Building Four. I began to wonder, why was I even walking beside him? Why didn't I just make an excuse or run away and leave him to drown in his boring, shallow, Aryan sea of dissatisfaction? Why couldn't I meet a *real* Aryan for once?

Once inside the classroom, I saw with relief that my table was still empty. Mr. Banner⁵³ was walking around the room, distributing one microscope and a 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 in my notebook.⁵⁴

I heard very clearly when the chair next to me moved, but my eyes stayed carefully focused on the pattern⁵⁵ I was drawing.

"Hello," he said a quiet, musical voice. It was strange, unreal, *gorgeous*.

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 though his hair looked less glamorous than usual, he still 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. His eyes were on me.

"My name is Fredward Cullen," he continued. "I didn't have a chance to introduce myself last week; how rude. You must be Bella Duck."

My head was spinning with confusion. Had I made up the whole thing? He was perfectly polite now, overly polite even. I had to speak; he was waiting. But I couldn't think of anything conventional to say, anything to mask my confusion or at least the fact that I was interested in him.

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

He laughed a soft, enchanting, graceful 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 assured him. "But I think Chuck—I mean Charlie—I mean, my dad—must call me Isabella behind my back; he must have referred to me that way back when I lived in Phoenix. 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. Banner⁵⁶ started class at that exact moment. I tried to concentrate as he explained the lab we would be doing today.

51. Bella deals with her emotions by dividing herself into two parts and pitting them against one another.

52. A notorious gang based in the Forks High School in Forks, Washington. They are known for their specialization in eyeballs in the international black market organ trade. Their name, the Snowball Snipers, comes from their predilection to collect eyes by hitting people in the back of head with snowballs.

53. Hulk... out!

54. One can only assume that her "doodles" consisted of coloring the entire page black.

55. Presumably less of a pattern than an 8.5" x 11" black rectangle.

56. HULK OUT!!

- The slides in the box were out of order.
- Working as lab partners with our neighbors sitting next to us, 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 book-documents.
- In twenty minutes, he would be coming around to see who had it right.

Not only had I done this already in Biology III, I thought to myself, but I had also done it in Biology II. I sighed. At least I hadn't already done it in Biology I.

"Get started," he commanded.

"Ladies first, *partner*?" Fredward asked. I looked up to see him smiling a crooked smile so beautiful that I could only stare at him like an idiot; first of all, because he was so beautiful, and second because there was something so peculiar about it. Something about it that made it unlike any smile I had ever seen before in my entire life, something that made me forgive how crooked it was.

"Or I could start, if you wish." The smile faded. He was obviously wondering if I was mentally competent; I was.

"No," I said, flushing. "I'll go ahead."

I was showing off, just a little, I think. 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, spending the time alone fantasizing about how smart Fredward would think I was, and how right he would be.

My assessment was confident. "Prophase," I breathed.

"Do you mind if I look?" he purred as I began to remove the slide. Do I mind? Fredward, if you only knew. 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, a static shock. What was he wearing under all that buckskin of his, fleece? Did he spend lunch shuffling his feet all over the rug? Was he a shuffler?

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, pulling his hand back immediately. However, he continued his impetuous reach for the microscope. I watched him, still staggered by the thought that he might actually be weird under all that beauty, breathing 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.

Anaphase? Who was that, an ex of his? 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 by my mistake. *Anaphase*, the a small script on the slide read, *is the stage of mitosis when chromosomes separate in a eukaryotic cell*. I felt like an idiot. 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.⁵⁷

"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 while he looked, but I didn't want to betray his trust and

57. The author leaves it up to the reader to decide exactly where Bella took it.

besides, 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, probably a result of his having a horsebrain⁵⁸ as well, 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 auburn hair. Today, his eyes were a completely different color: a strange ocher, darker than any butterscotch, but with the same golden tone of my favorite butterscotch. I didn't understand how that could be, unless he was lying for some reason about the contacts. Or maybe Forks⁵⁹ was making me crazy in the literal sense of the word.

I looked down. His hands were clenched into hard fists again.

Mr. Banner⁶⁰ 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, Fredward, didn't you think Isabella should get a chance with the microscope?" Mr. Banner asked, a tinge of anger in his voice.

"Bella," Fredward corrected automatically. Mr. Banner seemed to become more agitated at this, and he was beginning to look a little green around the gills. "Actually, she identified three out of the five."

Mr. Banner leaned onto the table, gripping the edge hard and shaking, his face a combination of skepticism and rage, and asked, "Have... have you done this lab before?"

I smiled sheepishly, trying to defuse the situation. "Not with onion root."

"Whitefish blastula?"

"Yeah."

Mr. Banner nodded, seeming to control his temper. "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 took a deep breath, the green draining from his face. He mumbled something else as he walked away. After he left, I began doodling⁶¹ on my notebook again.

"It's too bad about the snow, isn't it?" Fredward 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 enchantingly, instead of pretending to be normal like everyone else in this godforsaken town. I was still trying to dislodge the stupid feeling of suspicion, and I couldn't

58. Horses are famed for their ability to count, although their ability to identify the phases of mitosis remains untested.

59. Forks, Washington is known for its almost constant cloud-cover, not only making it the ideal place for a family of vampires to settle down, but also leading to a larger than average number of mental health cases involving depression, hallucinations and logical delusion. The reader should note that the Ducks do not own a sun lamp.

60. Hulk-out.

61. Black rectangle.

concentrate.

"You don't like the cold." It wasn't a question.⁶²

"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 or my desire to look at it absolutely demanded.

"Why did you come here, then?"

No one had asked me that—not straight out like he did, demanding to know an answer to a question.

"It's... complicated."

"I think I can keep up," he pressed on, against the table.

I paused for a long moment, trying to imagine whether I thought he really could keep up, and then I made the mistake of meeting his gaze. His mercurial dark gold eyes confused me, and I answered without thinking.

"My mother got remarried to a man named Phil," 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, who knew it was sad.

"And you don't like him," Fredward 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 worth penetrating.

"Phil travels a lot. He plays ball for a living. And besides, his name is 'Phil.'" I half smiled.

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

"Probably not. I never said he played well, just that he played." I sassed. "Strictly minor league. He moves around a lot."⁶³

"And your mother sent you here so that she could travel with him." He said it as an assumption again, like he knew me. Like he knew what I was thinking.

But he didn't. I raised my chin a fraction. "No, she did not send me here," I clarified. "I sent myself."

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

I sighed. Why didn't he understand? 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 Chuck." My voice was glum by the time I finished, but I hope he wouldn't pick up on the fact that I wasn't happy.

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

"And?" I challenged.

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

I laughed without humor. "Hasn't anyone ever told you? Life isn't fair." Hadn't anyone ever told him? Who *was* this guy?

"I believe I *have* heard that somewhere before," he agreed dryly. His mood had visibly dropped.

62. The first of many commands Fredward directs at Bella.

63. As a ball player, Phil's job requires him to be very active.

Had I dropped it? Had I popped it?

"So that's all," I insisted, wondering why he was still staring at me, like he was waiting for something. Why was he always *looking* at me?

His gaze became appraising. "You put on a good show," he said slowly. "But I'd be willing to bet five dollars that you're suffering more than you let anyone see." I reached into my pocket as though I was going to pull out five dollars, but surprised myself by losing the will to make this sarcastic gesture.

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

"Am I wrong?"

I tried to ignore him, but my eyes fell on him like they always did.⁶⁴

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

"What does it matter to *you*?" I asked, irritated that he seemed to care about my life more than I did. 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. He wasn't a very good conversationalist.

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, thinking of how few books my mother had read in her lifetime.

"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. I began to suspect that he wasn't much of a reader, either.

"You must be a good reader then," I replied kindly, in a manner which featured a hint of flirtiness.

"Usually." He smiled wildly,⁶⁵ flashing a set of perfect, ultrawhite teeth lining his crooked mouth.

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 super attentive as Mr. Banner illustrated, with transparencies on the overhead projector, what I had seen without difficulty through the microscope. But despite my feigned concentration, my thoughts were unimaginable.

When the bell finally rang, Fredward rushed as swiftly and as gracefully from the room as he had last Monday. And, like last Monday, I stared after him in amazement, heartbroken that I would not see him, this irrevocably beautiful creature again until lunchtime the following day. Had I been too hard on him? Had I ruined my chances?

Mike skipped quickly to my side, interrupting my troubled daydreams with his mundane thoughts, and picked up my books for me. His tail was wagging.

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

If only he knew!⁶⁶

"I didn't have any trouble with it," I said, stung by his assumption that I hadn't already done this

64. Woops.

65. The reader can only imagine Fredward throwing his head to and fro.

lab twice in Phoenix. I regretted the snub instantly. "I've done this lab before, though. In Phoenix," I added, before he could get his feelings hurt by feeling that he was as dumb as horse.

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

I tried to sound indifferent and not give away my true feelings. "I wonder what was with him last Monday."

I couldn't concentrate on Mike's chatter as we walked to Gym,⁶⁷ and P.E.⁶⁸ didn't do much to hold my attention, either. Mike was on my team. 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 all the way off, put the hood down, and fluffed my long, wet hair out so the heater could blow it dry all the way home.

I looked around me to make sure the way was clear. That's when I noticed the still, white figure. It was so still, so white.

It was Fredward Cullen.

He was leaning against the front door of the Volvo, three cars down from me, so close and yet so far, staring intently in my direction. I swiftly looked away and threw the truck into reverse, almost hitting a rusty Toyota Corolla in my haste.⁶⁹ Lucky for the Toyota, I stomped on the brake in time. It was just the sort of feeble car that my red truck would make rusty 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 managed to pull out. I stared straight ahead as I passed the Volvo, but from a peripheral peek, I could swear I saw his smirk.

66. There are two things Mike didn't know that Bella thinks it would be good for him to know. First, that all the slides did not look the same to someone who had already done the lab twice. Second, how lucky Bella was to have had Fredward Cullen for a partner.

67. Sometimes known as P.E.

68. More commonly referred to as Gym.

69. This almost-accident foreshadows similar car trouble in the later pages of this novel.

3.

HENOMENON

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES IN THE MORNING, SOMETHING WAS DIFF-erent.

It was the light that was different.

It was still the still, 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 a state of 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 took all this in from my bedroom window after I'd just woken, and I groaned. Again. I had enough trouble not falling down when the ground was dry; it might be safer for me to go back to bed now and avoid the coming disaster that I was sure to meet.

Charlie had left for work⁷⁰ 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 straight 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, although I really was interested in seeing what Mr. Banner would have us do today; neither was it the prospect of 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 Fredward 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 gorgeous 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 different leagues that would never, ever compete in the World Series. 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 cobblestone 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, Ford built superior trucks and iron mirrors. As I hauled myself upright, I had a feeling that my day was going to be nightmarish.

Driving to school, I distracted myself from my fear of falling and my unwanted speculations about Fredward Cullen by thinking about horsey Mike and nerdballs 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 "in that way." Perhaps it was because I was a novelty here, where novelties were few and far between. Possibly my physically crippling clumsiness, my propensity to fall over anything and everything in sight, was seen as endearing rather than pathetic, casting me in the starring role of Damsel in Distress...

My truck seemed to have no problem with the black ice that covered the roads.⁷¹ I drove very

70. Charles Duck is chief of police in the small town of Forks. He is one of the most powerful people in town, third only to Dr. Carlisle Cullen, the eternally youthful doctor-in-charge at Forks Midland Hospital, and Mayor Gumball.

71. American ingenuity.

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 it wasn't Fredward's Volvo. 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. Snow chains. Charlie had gotten up who knows how early⁷² 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, startledly.

I saw several things simultaneously. Nothing was moving in slow motion, the way it does in the movies.⁷³ 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. That is to say, I saw more than one thing happen at the same time.

Fredward Cullen was standing four cars down from me wearing, for a change of pace, a nice black turtleneck sweater and slacks, and staring at me in horror. His face stood out from a sea of people 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 going to be caught in the middle. I was going to be squished between an ugly van and my bulbous truck, and 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, pinned to the ground with a cracked head, next to 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 gracefully around the end of the truck and, still spinning and sliding and gliding, was about to collide with me *again*.

A low oath⁷⁴ made me aware that someone was with me; someone who hadn't been there before and whose 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 providentially⁷⁵ into a deep dent in the side of the van's body. How did the hands know that dent would be there, at that time, for them to fit into? My mind buzzed for answers.

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, 'til they hit the tire of the tan car. A groaning metallic thud hurt my ears and the van settled, glass popping and locking, falling to the asphalt—exactly where, a second ago, my legs had been.⁷⁶

It was absolutely⁷⁷ silent for one long second or two 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 Fredward Cullen's low, frantic voice in my ear.

"Bella? Are you alright?"

72. At least two people do: Charlie and God.

73. The author's first solid indication that the events in the novel are not happening in a movie.

74. A promise, sometimes made to a deity.

75. With providence.

76. Her savior is evidently blessed with precognitive powers. Not only did he/she/it know where to put his/her hand to fit into the van's pre-existing dent, he also knew that glass would fall onto a spot where Bella's legs would be a few seconds later. This is not to imply that Bella's legs fell off.

77. With Absolut.

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

"Be careful," he warned as I struggled, but was no match for his buff buck bod. "I think you hit your head pretty hard." I wanted to hit *him* 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. What was he laughing at?

"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 couldn't believe my ears.⁷⁸

I turned to sit up and this time he let me, releasing his unbelievably tight hold around my waist and sliding as far from me as he could in the limited space between the van and my truck, both of which had recently collided. I looked at his concerned, innocent expression and was disoriented again by the of his gold-colored eyes. What was I asking him? What was he trying to tell me?

And then they found us, a crowd of people with tears streaming down each of their cheeks, shouting at each other, shouting at us.⁷⁹

"Don't move," someone instructed.

"Get Tyler out of the van!" someone else shouted. I wondered why people were always telling each other what to do.⁸⁰ There was a flurry of activity around us. I tried to get up, but Fredward's cold hand pushed my shoulder down with more force than he could have possibly intended.

"Just stay put for now."

"But it's cold," I complained. It surprised me when he chuckled under his breath. Why was he always laughing at me? And now, after I had just been hit by a van? There was an edge to the sound of my thoughts.

"You were over there," I suddenly remembered, and his chuckle stopped short. "You were by your car," I insisted.

"Nope," he countered.

I really thought he had been. "I saw you." All around us was chaos. I could hear the gruffer voices of the adults arriving on the scene. But I obstinately held onto our argument because I was right, and he was going to admit it. For what it was worth, I *knew* he had been over by his car earlier, like I had said, and not right next to me, like he had said.

"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,⁸¹ as if trying to communicate something crucial.

I wasn't having it. "No." I set my jaw in a 'no' position.

The gold in his eyes blazed.⁸² "Please, Bella."

"Please *what*?" I demanded; demanded to know why he wanted me to forever live a lie.

"Trust me," he pleaded, growing even more attractive in such a pathetic state.

I could hear sirens now. "Will you promise to explain everything to me later?"

"Fine," he snapped, abruptly exasperated.

"Fine," I repeated angrily, happy that I had gotten my way, and happier yet that we already had

78. Bella would rather question her ears than the words that come out of her almost-boyfriend's mouth.

79. Bella and Fredward were not shouting at anyone.

80. Please see discussion question #2.

81. Vampire hypno-eyes.

82. Melted.

plans for our next date.

It took six EMTs and two teachers—Mr. Varner and Coach Capp—to shift the van far enough away from me to bring the stretchers in. Fredward 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. As if! I almost died of humiliation when they put on the neck brace, even though I did have a concussion and probably needed it.⁸³ It looked like the entire school was there, watching soberly⁸⁴ as they loaded me through the back of the ambulance. Fredward got to ride in the front. It was maddening.

To make matters worse, Chief Duck 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—⁸⁵ 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. I had never had so many thoughts in my head before, much less images. When they'd lifted me away from the wreck, I had seen the deep dent that fit the contours of Fredward's brawny hands... as if he had braced himself against the truck with enough force to damage the all-American steel frame... How could a person, *any* person, be so strong? It just didn't make sense.

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, since he was clearly fine.

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.⁸⁶ What made it worse was that Fredward simply glided through the hospital doors under his own power. I ground my teeth together. For how gorgeous and perfect he was, he sure made me angry sometimes.

They put me in the emergency room, a long emergency 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 obliged to wear the stupid-looking neck brace anymore. When the nurse walked away, I quickly unfastened the Velcro and threw it in the trash.

There was another flurry of hospital personnel, another stretcher brought to the bed next to me. I recognized that turd Tyler Crowley from my government class beneath the white, bloodstained bandages wrapped tightly around his head. Tyler looked a hundred times worse than I felt, but he was staring anxiously at me. I began to feel claustrophobic, and wondered if there were any other rooms they could have put him in so that I wouldn't have to talk to him. I didn't want to talk to *anyone*, let alone the crazy--

"Bella, I'm so sorry!" He sputtered, spraying spittle and blood.

I cringed, swallowing my rage and revulsion. "I'm fine, Tyler—you look awful, are you alright?" I feigned interest in his head-bandages.

As we spoke, nurses began unwinding his soiled bandages, exposing a myriad of shallow slices all over his forehead and left cheek. It was disgusting and I wished I hadn't asked.

83. It is likely that Bella is admitting that she needed a concussion.

84. Without Absolut.

85. Because Bella is in a high-adrenaline state of confusion, she temporarily forgets her manners and almost calls her dad by his first name, like she does when he isn't around.

86. There is a stint of time that passes where the ambulance is driving to the hospital. Bella is referring to the acute embarrassment she felt when, after arriving at the hospital and parking the vehicle, the EMTs went around back and spent twenty seconds unloading her.

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

"Don't worry about it, you missed me." I wished he'd forgive himself so he would stop talking to me. That way I wouldn't have to look at his face anymore.

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

"Umm... Fredward pulled me out of the way."

He looked confused. "Who is *Fredward*?"

"Fredward Cullen—he was standing next to me." I'd always been a terrible liar. It was one of my faults, but it was not immediately noticeable, so it didn't prevent boys at the Forks High School from popping hard ones whenever I entered the room.

"Cullen? I didn't see him... wow, it was all so fast, I guess. Is he okay?" Tyler wasn't very good at picking up that I didn't want to talk to him.

"I think so. He's here somewhere, but they didn't make him use a stretcher. Apparently he didn't need stretching."

I knew I wasn't crazy. I'd never been crazy, so why would I start now? But there was no other way to explain away what I'd seen.

They wheeled me away 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 for almost smashing me, and his promises to make it up. 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 that I tried to ignore.

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

Fredward 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, Fredward, I'm really sorry—" Tyler began to blubber.

Fredward, full of grace, lifted his hand to stop him.

"No blood, no foul," he said, flashing his perfectly even and beautiful teeth. He moved to sit on the edge of Tyler's bed, facing me. He smirked that crooked smirk of his, again.

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

God, what *isn't* the verdict? "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, crossing himself.⁸⁷ "But don't worry about that, 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 Fredward's father.

"So, Miss Duck," Dr. Cullen said in a remarkably appealing voice, "how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," I said.

He walked to the light board on the wall over my head and leaned over me to turn it on. He smelled like fresh bread.

"Your X-rays look good," he said. "Does your head hurt? Fredward said you hit it pretty hard on the pavement after he saved your life."

"It's fine," I repeated with a sigh, throwing a quick scowl toward Fredward.

The doctor's cool fingers probed lightly along my skull. He seemed to notice when I winced.

87. Fredward is evidently of the Roman-Catholic faith.

"Tender?" he asked.

Duh. "Not really."

I heard a chuckle, and looked over to see Fredward's patronizing smile. My eyes narrowed, although maintained an overall round shape.

"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 eyesight⁸⁸ at all."

"Can't I go back to school?" I asked, trying to imagine Charlie being attentive, and failing.

"Maybe you should take it easy today."

I glanced at Fredward lounging in the corner like a statue, wishing I could take *him* easy. "Does he get to go to school?"

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

"Actually," Dr. Cullen corrected, "most of the school seems to be in the waiting room, waiting to hear the good news. You wouldn't have to go anywhere near the school to spread it."

"Oh no," I moaned, covering my face with my hands, afraid of their prying eyes.

Dr. Cullen raised his eyebrows.⁸⁹ "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 like⁹⁰ you were extremely lucky," Dr. Cullen said, smiling as he signed my chart with a flourish.

"Lucky that *Fredward* happened to be standing next to me," I amended with a hard glance⁹¹ at the subject of my statement.⁹²

"Oh, well, yes," Dr. Cullen agreed, suddenly occupied with the paper-documents 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, and was using Tyler's more serious injuries as an excuse to not talk to me.

"I'm afraid that *you'll* have to stay with us just a little bit longer," he said to Tyler, who whimpered as Dr. Cullen began to pick at his cuts.

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

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

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

"*Your* father is waiting for *you*," I countered.

"What?"

I glanced at Dr. Cullen and Tyler. The doctor seemed absorbed with rubbing Q-tips in all of Tyler's cuts and didn't appear to be listening. Tyler, for his part, was trying to make eye contact with me while mouthing 'sorry' over and over.

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

88. It is unknown if Dr. Cullen is aware of the ocular situation at the Forks High School, home of the Bears.

89. *Raise High The Eyebrows*, Cullen was J. D. Salinger's tribute to *Fredward Bound*, and one of his last published works before going into seclusion.

90. Vampire echo-location.

91. A very technical glance that is difficult to do.

92. Which is to say Fredward Cullen, bane of Bella's existence and the burning flame that consumes her eternal heart.

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,⁹³ he pirouetted to face me.

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

His unfriendliness intimidated me. I thought he loved me as much as I loved him. With my reality shaken, 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 resentment⁹⁴ in his voice. "You promised."

"Bella, you hit your head, you don't know what you're talking about." His tone was cutting me to ribbons.

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 you want to break your promise to me. I want to know why I'm lying for you."

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

It⁹⁵ came out in a rush.

"All I know is that you weren't anywhere near me—Tyler didn't see you, I didn't see you, so don't tell me I hit my head too hard, because I didn't see you and I have Tyler to back me up on that one. That van was going to crush us both—and it didn't, and your hands either left dents in the side of it or you knew where to put them ahead of time, before the dents were actually in front of you—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 before it even had a chance..." I could hear how crazy it sounded, how crazy *I* sounded, and I couldn't continue. I was so mad that I could feel the tears coming; I tried to force them back in by grinding my teeth together.

He was staring at me incredulously. His face was incredible.

"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 perfect actor. And it wasn't a question.

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 carefully, so my meaning wouldn't get muddled or lost in the space between us.

Surprise flitted across his face, like a butterfly. "Then why does it matter?"

"It matters to me," I insisted. "I don't like to lie. And I especially don't like to lie to myself. And I also don't like—"

"Can't you just thank me and get over it?" Get over the fact that he had just saved my life in a mind-blowingly mysterious way? Forget his face? Forget the way his eyes looked, half gold and half black, as he was looking down on me from his godly stance?

"Thank you." I waited, fuming and expectant.

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

"No." I wasn't.

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

I didn't.

93. A hallway that is under four feet, eight inches tall.

94. A sentiment redoubled.

95. Seminal horror novel by Stephen King. Published in 1912, *It* is about a shape shifting monster that terrorizes a bunch of people for no particular reason. Due to the pace at which King publishes books, some believe that his works can be a bit rushed.

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

"Why did you even bother?" I asked frigidly. His face had melted my heart,⁹⁶ but not my will to discover the truth—*that* persisted, continued to challenge him.

He paused, and for a brief moment his stunning face was unexpectedly vulnerable.

"I don't know," he whispered so softly that I had no idea what he meant.

"What?" I asked.

"I said," he walked closer, and leaned down into the personal space that I was more than willing to share with him, as mad as I may have been in the moment. "I said," he continued, his eyes moving from side to side, from me, to the window, to the wall. Was he trying to avoid my glance? Was he *failing* to avoid it because he, too, felt a certain heat between us that transcended the laws of physics? "I said: I don't know." He exhaled, feeling like the conclusion of an epic trilogy that had taken him only thirty seconds to write.

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

I was so angry, it took a few minutes until I could move. When I did move, I walked slowly to the exit at the end of the hallway.

The waiting room was more unpleasant than I could have imagined. It seemed like every face I knew 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 and definitely not in the mood for chitchat, which was probably what he was in the mood for.

"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 Chessclub Eric were all there, beginning to converge on us. "Let's go," I urged, eager to avoid the claustrophobia I felt every time the Forks High School students smothered me with questions, affections, or admirations.

Charlie put one arm behind my back, not quite touching me, and led me into the glass doors of the exist.⁹⁷ I waved sheepishly at my friends, hoping to convey that they didn't need to worry anymore. It was a huge relief 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 Fredward'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 need to call Rene  ." He hung his head, guilty.⁹⁸

I was appalled. "You told Mom!"

"Sorry," was all he could say.

I slammed the cruiser's door a little harder than necessary on my way out. I couldn't believe that Charlie had told Mom that I had narrowly escaped death earlier that day. Now she was going to squeal and cry and ask me a ton of questions I had already been asked by multiple other people.

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 to her—forgetting the fact that home was empty at the moment—but her pleas were easier to resist than I would have thought. I simply said, "No." She continued to try to convince me, but I wasn't listening. I was still saying no, and privately consumed by

96. Oh my fucking god.

97. A portmanteau of "exit" and "exist." In this case, it means that the exit exists.

98. That is, with the feeling that stems from becoming such a doormat, constantly having to respond to the demands and needs of his ex-wife and tormented daughter, even though both refused to love him after he'd cut his own arm off.

the mystery Fredward presented. And more than a little obsessed by Fredward himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid.⁹⁹ I wasn't as eager to escape Forks as I should be; as any normal, sane person should 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. Why did he have to care about me *now*, when I clearly didn't want anyone to care about me? I stopped in the bathroom on my way to empty the bottle of Tylenol into my hand. It did help and, as the pain eased, I drifted to sleep.

That was the first night I dreamed of Fredward Cullen.

99. Stupid.

4.

SINVITATIONS

IN MY DREAM IT WAS VERY DARK, AND WHAT DIM LIGHT there was seemed to be radiating from Fredward's translucent, mysterious skin. I couldn't see his gorgeous face, just his sculpted, bare 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.

No matter how much I strained my eyes, I couldn't see any trace of his life-giving body or intoxicating mind.

Troubled, I woke in the middle of the night and couldn't sleep again for what seemed like a very long time. He had been in my dreams every night since the accident, butt always naked in the dark periphery and never in reach.

The month that followed the accident was uneasy, tense and, at first, embarrassing. To my dismay, I found myself in the center of attention¹⁰⁰ for the rest of that week. Tyler Crowley had become obsessed with following me around and trying to make amends: opening doors, refilling my water bottle, attempting to follow me into the girl's bathroom so that he could help wipe my ass. I tried to convince him that what I wanted, more than anything else, was for him to *not* wipe my ass—especially since nothing had actually happened to me in the accident—but he remained insistent. He followed me between classes and sat at our now-crowded lunch table with a roll of toilet paper in one hand and a bottle of baby powder in the other, just waiting for the moment. Horsetooth Mike and Chessclub Eric were even less friendly toward him than they were towards each other, which made me worry that one of them might get the idea to pop out of the toilet and lick my ass clean before Tyler could even get there.

No one seemed concerned about Fredward, though.

I explained over and over that he was the hero—how he had pulled me out of the way and nearly been crushed, too. Jessica, Mike, Eric, and everyone else¹⁰¹ kept saying that they hadn't even seen him there 'til the van was pulled away. I tried to convince them. I tried to be convincing. I tried over-explaining, under-explaining, metaphors, similes, diagrams, dioramas, dramatic *and* historical reenactments, passing notes, mnemonics, songs and raising my voice, but none of it worked. I eventually became exhausted and quit trying, and allowed Tyler to finish hand-feeding me my Lunchable.

I wondered to myself why no one else had seen him standing so far away, before he was so suddenly, impossibly, irrevocably and unconditionally saving my life. With chagrin, I realized the probable cause—no one was as aware of Fredward as I was. No one else watched him like I did; tracing every line of his god-like body, mentally grooming each one of his visible body hairs. How pitiful.

Fredward was never surrounded by crowds of curious bystanders eager for his firsthand account. People avoided him as usual, like they didn't find him as excruciatingly interesting as I did.

100. A psycho-therapeutic procedure where a someone is placed in the middle of a circle of people and showered with compliments.

101. There are a lot of people sitting at the table.

The Cullens and Hales sat at the same table as always, not eating, talking only amongst themselves. None of them, especially Fredward, glanced my way anymore, which unfortunately only heightened my enchanted feelings, setting my heart and hormones aflame from all the way across the lunchroom.

When Fredward sat next to me in class, as far away 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—white skin stretched whiter over the ivory bones—did I wonder if he wasn't quite as oblivious as he appeared.

It was clear that he wished he hadn't pulled me from the path of Tyler's van—he'd rather I died, our love extinguished. 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 that I had to go home and abuse my father just to feel sane again. Even so, 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 a hot gratitude.

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

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

He turned his head a fraction¹⁰² 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, even though he was there, a foot away from me, every day in Biology IV. I watched him sometimes, unable to stop myself—from a distance, though, in the cafeteria or parking lot, in Biology IV or around the corner from his locker. I watched as his golden eyes grew perceptibly darker day by day as the fire of our love slowly burned out. 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 about my love life. I tried to convince her it was just the weather that had me down and not my horrific accident, or living with Charlie "I Cut Off My Arm For You" Duck, or Tyler "Let Me Wipe Your Ass For You" Crowley forcing me to hold it in until I got home, and *especially* not the fact that Fredward "I'm a Jerk" Cullen didn't seem to love me anymore.

Mike, at least, was pleased by the obvious coolness between me and my lab partner. I could see he'd been worried that Fredward'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, on top of my homework-documents, to talk before Biology IV started, ignoring Fredward as completely as he ignored us.

I'll admit it: I flirted back.

The snow washed away for good after that one dangerously icy day. Mike was disappointed that it didn't hold so that maybe *he* could get a chance to save me, but was pleased that the beach trip would soon be possible. The rain continued to pour though, and the weeks passed.

Jessica made me aware of another event looming fat on the horizon—she called on the first Tuesday of March to ask my permission to invite Mike to the Girls' Choice Spring Dance in two weeks.

"Um." Jesus, where to begin? "I don't know if you noticed, but Mike is a fag. And I don't see why you need my permission to ask him *today*, let alone in two weeks."

"Are you sure you don't mind... you weren't planning to ask him?" she persisted. I swear to God.

"No, Jess, I'm not going," I assured her. As much as I hated Mike's being such a horse, dancing was also glaringly outside my range of abilities.

102. Best estimates say he turned it 1/10th of a circle, or 36°.

"It will be really fun." Her attempt to convince me was halfhearted.¹⁰³ 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 because she apparently hadn't heard me call him a fag while she asked me if it was okay to ask him out.

My fears were strengthened during lunch when Jessica sat as far from Mike as possible, chatting animatedly with Eric. Mike was unusually quiet, perhaps jealous that Eric might take what he'd denied.

Mike was still quiet as he walked me to class, the uncomfortable look on his face a bad sign. But he didn't broach¹⁰⁴ the subject until I was in my seat and he was perched on my desk. As always, I was electrically aware of Fredward 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." I tried to suppress a smile at the thought of him thinking.

"Why would you do that?" My disapproval colored 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 minute, hating the wave of guilt that swept through me, the guilt that he was making me feel just by existing. But I saw from the corner of my eye, Fredward's head tilt reflexively in my direction.

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

"Did you already ask someone?" Did Fredward notice how Mike's eyes flickered in his direction? I sure hoped so.

"No," I assured him, cursing the gods. "I'm not going to the dance at all. I hate dancing. Maybe you haven't noticed but I am clumsy and I hate my body, and I hate anything that reminds me of that."

"Why?" Mike demanded.

I swallowed my rage and tried a different tact.

"I also can't go to the dance with you because 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, Mike."

"Yeah, you're right," he neighed and turned, dejected, to walk back to his seat. I closed my eyes and pressed my fingers to my temples, trying to physically push the guilt and sympathy out of my brain. Mr. Banner began talking. I sighed and gave up—I couldn't touch emotions with my fingers anyways—and opened my eyes.

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

103. A cruel irony: Jessica was actually born with only half a heart, and as a result has faced a lifetime of health problems.

104. **Broach**: any of various pointed or tapered tools, implements, or parts.

a: a spit for roasting meat,

b: a tool for tapping casks,

c: a cutting tool for removing material from metal or plastic to shape an outside surface or a hole

I stared back, surprised, aroused, 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 from the intensity of it all.

"Mr. Cullen?" the teacher¹⁰⁵ called, seeking the answer to a question that I hadn't heard.

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

I looked down at my book-document 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 rainbow 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. It was scary. More than pathetic or scary, it was unhealthy. It was basically domestic abuse.

I tried very hard not to be aware of him for the rest of the hour; but, since that was impossible, at least not let him know how and to what extent I was aware of him. When the bell rang at last, I literally 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 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.

"What? Are you speaking to me again?" I finally asked, an unintentional note of petulance in my voice, surprising even myself.

His lips twitched, fighting a crooked smile. It seemed he was always either glaring at me, or laughing at me at inappropriate moments. "No, not really," he admitted.

I closed my eyes and mouth, and inhaled slowly through my nose, aware that I was grinding my teeth. He waited. I should have been ecstatic that he was paying me attention, that he was initiating a conversation which was possibly a gateway to a full reunion. I should have been overjoyed that those eyes rested on me again, and that crooked smile was coming out despite all of his efforts to keep it in. What was my *problem*?

"Then what do you want, Fredward?" I asked, keeping my eyes closed; it was easier to talk to him coherently that way, without his sweet face in my face like a delicious hot dog floating under my nose while I tried to cook a vegan feast for my new, more conscious friends. *It was so tempting it wasn't fair.*

"I'm sorry." He sounded sincere. "I'm being very rude, I know. But it's better this way, really. Trust me." He paused. "Can't you trust me?"

I opened my eyes, staring the hot dog straight in the face, intaking its odors and forgetting how to speak. I felt giddy, but his face was serious; this hot dog meant business.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, my voice guarded.¹⁰⁶

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

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

"It's too bad you didn't figure that out earlier in the parking lot," I hissed through my teeth, which were clenched. "You could have saved yourself all this regret." It was a low blow, suggesting that he should have let me die that day in the Forks High School parking lot...*but I was serious.*

"Regret?" The word and my tone had caught him off guard. "Regret for what?" Did I really have to spell it out for him?

I spelled it out for him. "For not 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?"

105. David Banner, a mild-mannered scientist who developed super powers after over-exposure to gamma rays.

106. See thought question #3.

"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 the wild accusations I wanted to hurl at him. I gathered my book-documents together, then stood and walked into the door. I meant to sweep dramatically out of the room, but of course caught my toe on the door-jamb and dropped my books. I stood there for a moment, thinking about leaving them there to rot in the un-nurturing wasteland that was the biology lab of the Forks High School. 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. Thinking back, I should have thought there was something strange about the way he was able to pick up my books, stack them, and hand them to me in the time it took me just to make the decision to bend over as a first step in picking them up myself.

"Thank you," I said icily, blowing a cold wind across the frozen lake over my heart.

His eyes narrowed.

"You're welcome," he retorted.

I straightened up stiffly, turned away from him again, and stalked off to Gym without looking back, and almost without wanting to look back...

Gym was brutal. We'd moved on to basketball. My team never passed me the basketball, 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 FREDWARD! I tried to concentrate on my feet, but he kept creeping under them, back into my thoughts just when I really needed my balance. Fredward and sanity were mutually exclusive.

It was a relief, as always, to leave the Forks High School. I almost ran to my red 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 tail lights, and if I'd had a real paint job, I would have touched that up. In contrast, 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 that Eric. I started walking again.¹⁰⁷

"Hey, Eric," I called, reluctantly.

"Hi, Bella," He oozed, eagerly.

"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. Although now that I think about it, I guess I did notice it.

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

I almost laughed, mostly at the fact that I hadn't been expecting another boy to want to go to the dance with me.

"I thought it was girl's choice," I said, too startled to be diplomatic. Did he think he was a girl? Did he think *I* thought he was a girl?

"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, clearly disappointed that I wouldn't give him the time of day. "Well, maybe next time." He was clearly grasping on any thread of hope that I might, someday, enjoy his company.

"Sure," I chortled, and then bit my lip to ease the laughter. I wouldn't want him to think I was having a good time with him, for any reason.

107. Bella had stopped walking when she almost had a stroke.

He slouched off back toward the school. I heard a low chuckle. Fredward was walking past the front of my truck, looking straight forward, his lips pressed tightly together. I yanked that door open and jumped on inside, slamming it loudly behind me. I revved the engine and reversed out into the aisle. Fredward was in his car already, two spaces down, sliding out smoothly in front of me and cutting me off. Did he think he was *funny*? Was this a *joke*? He stopped there—to wait for his family, I assumed; I could see the four of them walking this way, arm in arm, but still by the cafeteria. I considered slamming the rear of his shiny Volvo, but there were too many witnesses. I looked in my rear-view mirror. A line was beginning to form; the Forks High School student body eager to flee to their exciting extracurricular existences, I thought, depressed. As if remembering my isolation wasn't bad enough, directly behind me Tyler Crowley was in his recently acquired Cadillac, waving.

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 rear-view mirror, confused. Was he still in his car? His car was still running, the door left open; he wasn't in it. He'd moved up to my passenger window and was now knocking at it. I leaned across the cab to crank the window down. It was stiff. I got it halfway down, but it was still halfway up. I gave up.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I'm stuck behind Cullen. Y'know?" I was annoyed—obviously the hold-up wasn't my fault.

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

This could not be happening. I considered cranking the window back up and decapitating Tyler.

"Will you ask me to the spring dance?" He continued, risking life and limb every moment he intruded on my personal space.

"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, two boys that were equally as undesirable as he was, had already used up my quota of patience for the day.

"Yeah, Mike said that," he admitted. He already knew.

"You already knew!"

He shrugged. "I was hoping you were just letting him down gently. After all," he leaned in, "Mike *is* kind of a fag."

I laughed against my will, and unwillingly had a moment with that idiot Tyler.

"Sorry, Tyler," I said, working to hide my irritation as well as my laughter behind a completely emotionless facade.

"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, Emmet and Jasper—the whole incestuous gaggle of gorgeous geese—*slide* into that Volvo. Fredward's eyes were in his rear-view mirror and on me. He was 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. The paint would crack and flake off all over my big red truck. They'd cry. I'd laugh. It'd be nice. I revved the engine.

But they were all already in, and Fredward was speeding away at an ungodly speed.¹⁰⁸ I drove home slowly, carefully, muttering to myself the whole way.¹⁰⁹

When I got home, I decided to make chicken enchiladas for dinner. Jessica had told me how to make them at least five times, once in her sleep during Biology IV. It was a long process and it would keep me busy, away from my thoughts, my troubles. While I was simmering the onions and chilies, the

108. Not unlike a god.

109. Bella has a lot on her mind. If she drives quickly, she will have less time alone in the truck before she has to deal with another over-accommodating man. At least, we can assume she reflects, Chief Duck won't ask her to the dance.

phone rang. I was almost afraid to answer it, but it might be Charlie or my mom. Not that I wanted to talk to either of them, but I kind of had to. If I didn't talk to them now, I'd have to talk to them later, and that conversation would be elongated by having to include an explanation of why I didn't pick up the phone the first time. In the interest of avoiding an extended interaction, I grabbed the phone.

It was Jessica and she was jubilant; Mike had caught her after school to accept her invitation to the Forks High School Girl's Choice Spring Dance. I celebrated with her briefly while I stirred. After exploding her tunnel-visioned euphoria all over me via telephone, Jessica had to go; she wanted to call Angela and Lauren to tell them. I suggested—with cool, casual innocence—that maybe Angela, the shy girl who had Biology IV with us, could ask Chess Master Eric. And Lauren, a standoffish dyke who had always ignored me at the lunch table, could ask Tyler; I'd heard he was still available. I considered telling Jessica how I'd heard, but was loathe to bring her into my life anymore than she had already inserted herself.

Jess thought that was a great idea. Now that she was sure of Mike's intentions—oh if only she knew—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—boiling the beans, flapping the tortillas, stewing the stuff and especially dicing the chicken; I didn't want to take another trip to the emergency room. I'd already had one too many.

But my head was spinning, trying to analyze every word Fredward had spoken today. What did he mean, it was better if we weren't friends? Not even lovers: friends. My stomach twisted when 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* wasn't even interested in me, I thought angrily, my eyes stinging with rage-filled tears—a delayed reaction to the onions, I tried to tell myself. I wasn't *interesting* and he was. Interesting... and brilliant... and mysterious... and perfect... and beautiful... and rich... and continental... and possibly able to lift full-sized vans with one hand... and...

Well, that was fine. I could leave him alone. No, 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 the tropical country of Hawaii,¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹

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.¹¹² 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, although he refused to give me a definite answer when I asked. In any case, it was fun to watch as he slowly began trusting me in the kitchen. I hoped that with any luck, he would soon start trusting me in other rooms of the house as well.

"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 but I felt rude, so I tacked it on at the end.

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

"Well, I wanted to get a few books—the library here is pretty limited; are people here illiterate?—and maybe look at some clothes." I had more money than I was used to having, since, no thanks to

110. The 50th state to join the union. Famous for its pineapples, surfboards and hang-loose attitude.

111. It is important to note that the protagonist, Bella, enjoys the sun.

112. "The Sunshine State." Notable exports: sunshine, dreams.

Chuck, I hadn't had to pay for a car or repairs for a car. Not that the truck didn't cost me quite a bit in the gas department, but it was a small department when one considered that it was only three blocks to school and I refused to go anywhere else in town, because I hated it so much.

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

"I know, I'll stop in Montesano and Olympia—and Tacoma if I have to," I said, implying that gas stations were now in every city, town and hamlet in America.

"Are you going all by yourself? Why don't you take Mikey Newton with you?" he asked, and I couldn't tell if he was suspicious I had a secret boyfriend, one who was shaped like a horse, or just worried about car trouble.

"Yes; no. I just want to get away from it all, Dad."

"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 me getting lost in a small city that I've never been to. It just isn't possible."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

Arrrrgh! 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." I tried to sound informative.

"Oh, okay." He paused. "Will you be back in time for the dance?" I froze with terror, a sinking feeling that he, too might ask me to the dance. Luckily, he strangled my troubled thoughts by continuing, "I've heard it through the grape vine, from a small birdy, that Mikey Newton might, you know..."

ARRRRRRGH! So he didn't want to go with me, but *still*. I was irritated. 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 that. "Oh, that's right, you're clumsy as hell," he realized with a chuckle.

The next morning, when I pulled into the parking lot at the Forks High School, I deliberately parked as far as possible from The Silver Volvo. I didn't want to put myself on the path of too much temptation¹¹³ 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 of thin air and grabbed it before I could. I jerked upright. Fredward Cullen was right next to me, leaning casually against my truck.

"How do you DO that?" I asked in amazed irritation. Amazed that I was irritated, irritated because he now had my key and would probably use it to torment me in some way.

"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 you are exceptionally huma... nunobservant." His voice was quiet as usual—soft as a piece of velvet, smooth as a muted trumpet.

I scowled at his perfect face. His eyes were light again today, a deep, golden-honeydew color. Then I had to look down, to reassemble my now-tangled thoughts as they writhed on the ground.

"Why the traffic jam last night?" I demanded, still confused about how traffic jams happened. "I thought you were supposed to be pretending I don't exist, not irritating me to death."¹¹⁴

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

"You..." I gasped at the dawning realization: he'd done it on purpose! I couldn't think of a bad

113. (Proverbs 22:5) "In the paths of the wicked lie thorns and snares, but he who guards his stool stays far from them."

114. A bit of an overstatement; Bella is arguably more alive than she's ever been, now that Fredward Cullen has entered her life.

enough word. It felt like the heat of my angry passion 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? And your lies about telling me the truth were so lieful that I just about died? And you hate me?"

Anger flashed in his tawny eyes. His lips pressed together into a hard line and his nose wrinkled, all signs of humor gone.

"Bella, you are utterly absurd," he said, his low voice cold as an iceberg.

My palms tingled¹¹⁵—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, images of slapping Fredward's big, beautiful teeth out of his mouth running rampant in my brain. I had to get away before I did something rash.

"Wait," he called. I kept walking, sloshing angrily through the rain. I am not absurd, I told myself. If anyone's absurd it is that fool Fredward Cullen, 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, you really are an absurd woman," he continued, "but it was rude to say it, anyway."

"Why won't you just leave me alone?"

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

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

"You're doing it again."

I sighed. Yeah, *I'm* the crazy one. "Fine then. What do you want to ask?"

"I was wondering if, a week from Saturday—you know, the day of the spring dance—" a shit-eating grin was spreading across that beautiful face of his.

"Are you trying to be *funny*?" I interrupted him, wheeling toward him on my feet. 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. What I mean is, would you like me to drive you in my silver Volvo to Seattle?"

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 by his strange ways.

"Myself, obviously." He enunciated every syllable, as if he were talking to someone mentally handicapped.¹¹⁶

I was still stunned. "*What?*"

"Well, I was planning to go to Seattle in the next few weeks," he said, his tempo increasing. "And, to be honest, I'm not sure your truck can make it."

"My truck works fine, thank you very much for your concern." I patted Daisy, my truck, and started to walk again, but was too surprised to maintain the same level of anger that I had begun the conversation with.

"But can your truck make it there on one tank of gas?" He matched my pace again. What was this, a car show? Could my truck stand on one leg? Could my truck jump over ten other

115. Spidey-sense.

116. Retarded.

trucks? Could my truck suck its own exhaust pipe? What was it with these car owners?

"I don't see how that is any of your business."

"The wasting of finite resources is everyone-business."

"Honestly, Fredward." I felt a thrill go through me as I said his name—I wonder if he ever felt this way when saying my name? When saying his *own* name?—and I hated it. "I can't keep up with you." You're just too fast, I thought to myself. You're just too damn fast, and your ride is too thrilling. "I thought you didn't want to be my friend."

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

"Oh, thanks. Now *that's* all cleared up." Heavy sarcasm. I hope it came down on him like a cement block or an iron curtain. I realized I had stopped walking again. We were under the shelter of the Forks High School Cafeteria Roof again. I could more easily look at his face here; it was dryer, and safer. Which certainly didn't help my clarity of thought.

"It would be more... prudent¹¹⁷ for you not to be my friend," he explained. "But I'm tired of trying to stay away from you, Bella."¹¹⁸

His eyes were gloriously intense as he uttered that last sentence, his voice smoldering.¹¹⁹ I couldn't remember how to breathe.

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

I couldn't breathe yet, let alone speak, so I just nodded.

He smiled briefly, and then his face became serious.

"You really *should* stay away from me," he warned, his voice conveying so many emotions at once, acting as a mirror or doppelgänger for the emotions brewing inside my own chest. "I'll see you in class."

He turned abruptly and walked back the way we had come.

117. Prude-like. Fredward is suggesting that Bella might lose her virginity if she befriends Fredward. It is unclear whether he thinks this is a bad thing.

118. It is extremely strenuous for Fredward to suppress his physical and emotional urges, much like any 100-year-old young man.

119. An action usually reserved for his eyes.

5.

BLOOD HYPE

I MADE MY WAY TO ENGLISH IN A DAZE.¹²⁰ I DIDN'T EVEN REALIZE when I first walked in that class had already started.

"Ahh, thank you for joining us, Miss Duck," Mr. Mason said in a disparaging tone.

I flushed and hurried to my seat, groping through my bag for my 3D glasses. I ended up having to borrow Mike's extra pair. He always kept an extra pair in his desk, probably just in case I ever needed them. As he handed them to me, his hand touched mine a bit and I thought I saw his left eye twinkle behind those plastic lenses. I shuddered, and then sighed.

It wasn't 'til class ended that I realized Mike wasn't sitting in his usual seat next to me. I touched the 3D glasses on my face; if Mike hadn't given them to me, who did? I felt a twinge of guilt, wishing I knew who to thank for the favor. But he and Eric both met me at the door as usual, so I figured they were still willing to lay down on the ground to prevent my shoes from wearing on the concrete. That was comforting.

Mike seemed to become more himself as we walked, gaining enthusiasm as he talked about the weather report for this weekend. "Wow," I alternated with "oh," as he talked on and on. The rain was supposed to take a minor break, and so maybe his beach trip would be possible.

"Woot," I said, trying to sound eager, and make up for disappointing him yesterday. It was hard; rain or no rain, it would still be in the high forties,¹²¹ 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 Fredward had said, and the way his eyes had looked and his voice had sounded. Maybe it was just a very convincing dream I'd had while walking to English. That seemed more probable than the idea that I actually appealed to him on any level. He wasn't just a regular the Forks High School boy; he was *Fredward*.

So I was as impatient and frightened as Jessica was yesterday when 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 few weeks. Or if, by some miracle, I'd really heard what I thought I'd heard this morning: that he loved me and wanted to take me away to Seattle, maybe forever.

Jessica babbled on and on about her dance plans, surprised that they were even happening—Lauren and Angela had asked the other boys, as per my recommendation, and they were all going together. Jessica was so involved in talking about this while she chewed on a tamale from yesterday that she was 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? Was he hiding? Was he *under* the table? I followed the still-babbling Jessica through the line, crushed. I'd lost my appetite and bought nothing but a bottle of lemonade. I just wanted to go sit down and sulk.

"Fredward Cullen is staring at you again," Jessica said, finally breaking through my

120. The Forks High School is the only high school in the United States to pilot "English in a Daze" courses for grades 11 and 12. These courses differ from traditional high school-level English courses because the students are forced to wear 3D glasses.

121. E.g. Camo, Private Stock, Rainier, Steel Reserve

abstraction¹²² with his name. "I wonder why he's sitting alone today."

My head snapped up, but thankfully not off. I followed her gaze to see Fredward, 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, his left 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. Was she really that surprised?

"Maybe he needs help with his Biology IV 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. Sucker.

When I reached his table, I stood behind the chair across from him, unsure whether I should sit in it or on it.

"Why don't you sit with me today?" he asked, smiling. Did he mean on his lap? My eyes drifted to his lap, but when I looked up, he was glaring at me, his eyes black, so I quickly pulled out the chair I had been standing behind, and sat myself onto it. He was still smiling. It was hard to believe that someone so beautiful could be so real. I was afraid that he might disappear in a sudden puff of smoke and fly away,¹²³ and I would wake up: cold, wet, and alone in Forks. Just like I had been before I met him.

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 came out 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."

I smirked. "I don't see any chains," biting my lip seductively.

He looked confused. "What?"

"I mean, you're not keeping me against my will." It's called *metaphor*, Fredward.

"Oh," he said lamely. He sure was beautiful, if not brilliant.

"They'll survive." But the look he gave me said that he secretly, like I, doubted that they would. Did I think I was beautiful? Did he think I was beautiful?

I could feel my friends' stares boring into me like four blunt knives.

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

I swallowed.

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. It... it hurt too much."

My eyes drifted to his lap and he glared at me. "I'm sorry," I blushed. "Please continue."

"So I'm giving up," he finished. He was still smiling, but his other eyes were not.

"Giving up?" I repeated in confusion.

"Yes—giving up trying to be... good. I'm just going to do whatever I want now, and let the chips fall where they may. I'm a bad boy now, Bella." He looked down at his lap. His smile faded, and a hard edge crept into his voice.

"You lost me again."

122. Bella likes to think her thoughts are abstract.

123. Bella subconsciously wishes that Fredward were a magical, puffing vampire. Little does she know... that he is!

The breathtaking crooked smile reappeared. "I always say too much when I'm talking at you—that's one of the problems."

"Don't worry—I don't understand any of it," I said wryly.¹²⁴

"I'm counting on that."

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

"Friends..." he mused dubiously.¹²⁵

"Or not," I muttered, wondering if he even knew what the word 'friends' meant.

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.

What was he trying to imply about us? Was it ever going to make sense? I was now more confused than ever. "You say that a lot," I noted.

"Yes, because you're not listening to me."

"Yes I am."

"No you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, because if you were smart you wouldn't listen to me." He smiled apologetically.

I paused. "So... as long as I'm being unsmart, we'll try to be friends?" I struggled to sum up the confusing exchange.

"That sounds about right."

It sounded odd, but it wouldn't be the first time I'd played stupid. I looked down at my arms wrapped around the lemonade bottle, not sure what to do now. I waited for Fredward to give me a sense of purpose.

"What are you thinking?" he asked curiously.

I looked up into his deep gold eyes, became even more befuddled,¹²⁶ 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 through his forced smile. "Well, what are your theories?"

I blushed. He wanted to know what I thought! 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 having such stupid thoughts, though.

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

I shook my face. "Too embarrassing."

"That's *really* frustrating, Bella. I asked you a question and you just—" he threw up his hands in disgust.

"No," I disagreed quickly, my eyes narrowing in a way that was attractive, "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 annoying flowing freely now, "say that person also did a

124. On rye, like most German open-faced sandwiches.

125. With doobies.

126. With fudd. The root of "fudd" comes from Elmer Fudd, and denotes qualities such as baldness, short temper, and susceptibility to the sexual advances of a rabbit.

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 to. That too would be *very* non-frustrating."

Heh. Got 'im.

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

"I don't like double standards."

We stared at each other without smiling.

He glanced over my shoulder and then unexpectedly snickered.

"WHAT!?" I flipped my hair over one shoulder and then around to the other. I was so pissed.

"Your boyfriend seems to think I'm being unpleasant to you—he's debating whether he's man enough to come break up our little fight."

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

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

"Except mine, of course."

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

I had to look away from the intensity of his stare, which was like a hot and hard drill boring into my brain. Instead I concentrated on unscrewing the lid of my lemonade. I took a big swig of the stuff and stared at the table.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked, distracted by my use of the word swig.

"No." I didn't feel like mentioning that my stomach was already full—of butterflies, that is.

"You?" I looked at the empty table in front of him.

"No, I'm never hungry." I didn't understand his expression—it looked like he was enjoying some private joke that wasn't very funny.

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

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

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

He waited, engorged and curious.

"I just wondered... if you could warn me beforehand the next time you decided to ignore me for my own good.¹²⁷ Just so I'm prepared." I looked at the lemonade bottle as I spoke, tracing the circle of the opening with my little pinky finger.

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

"Thanks."

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

"One." I held up a single finger to emphasize just how much of 'one' I meant. Not one after the other, not one now and one later; just one now and forever.

"Tell me *one* theory."

Whoops. "Not that one."

"You didn't qualify, you just promised one answer," he reminded me.¹²⁸

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

"Just one theory—I won't laugh."

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

He looked down, and then glanced up at me through his long, black lashes, his ocher eyes

127. Fat chance; ignoring women drives them crazy.

128. At no point did Bella actually make any promises.

scorching mine. I could feel my insides melting again.

"Please?" he breathed, his breath like the fingers of God caressing my face.

I blinked, my mind going black. Holy crow! How did he *do* that?

"Er, what?" I asked, dazzled.

"Pwease tell me just one wittle feorwy?" His eyes still smoldered at me, smoky.

"Um, well," my voice shook in the heat, "bitten by a radioactive spider? Playboy-badass crime-hater?" 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 got," I sighed.

"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.

"Kryptonite doesn't even exist, jerk," I retorted. "... wait, does it?"

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.¹²⁹

"Oh," I said, as several things he'd hinted at 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... a supervillain?" I guessed, having no idea what he'd been getting at but having a sneaking suspicion that it probably sucked. My pulse quickened as I intuitively realized that I was probably right, he probably *was* a supervillain. 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 emotion nonetheless.

"But not bad," I whispered, prayed, shaking my head. "No, I don't believe you're a bad supervillain." What was I even saying? Was I crazy?

"You're wrong. All supervillains are evil. Even the good ones." 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 the cafeteria was almost empty.

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

"I'm not going to class today," he said, twirling the lid so fast that it was just a blur and I got really turned on just watching his twirling prowess.

"Why not?"

"Even *supervillains* ditch class now and then, Bella." He smiled up at me, but his eyes were still troubled.

129. 'GO: EYES OF IMPENETRABILITY,' thought Fredward, smolderingly.

"Well, *I'm* going," I told him. I was far too busy being a pussy to risk getting caught.

He turned his attention back to his makeshift top. "I'll see you later, then." Maybe I only imagined it, but he seemed to mouth the word '*pussy*' after that. 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 half-spinning faster than I'd half-watched Fredward spin that bottle cap. So few questions had been answered in comparison to how many new questions had been raised. At least the rain had stopped questioning my soul.

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 Lauren were staring at me. Mike looked resentful; Lauren looked like a lesbian.

Mr. Banner came into 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 put them on. The sharp slap of latex gloves snapping against his wrists seemed ominous to me. "The first should be an indicator card," he went on, grabbing a white indicator card with four squares marked on it and displaying it. "The second is a fur-pronged applicator—" he held up something that looked like a nearly hairless toothpick. "—and the third is a sterile micro-lancer." He held up a small piece of blue plastic and split it open. The barb was invisible from this distance, but my stomach flipped like a greasy cheeseburger nonetheless.

"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. Mike yelped.

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 'til the blood squirted onto the prongs. Why were we *poking* each other in class? It was so wrong. I swallowed convulsively, my stomach heaving at the thought of being poked.

"And then apply it to the card," he finished, holding up the dripping red card for us to see. Mike's eyes were watery. I closed my own eyes, trying to hear through the ringing in my ears.

"The Red Cross is having a blood drive in Fort Angles next weekend, so I thought you should all know your blood type." He sounded proud of himself, though this lesson had nothing to do with what we had been studying earlier. He probably just thought of it ten minutes ago. "Those of you who aren't eighteen yet will need a parent's permission—I have slip-documents 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 onto my consciousness. All around me I could hear squeals, complaints, and giggles as my classmates skewered their fingers. I didn't squeal, complain, giggle, or skewer myself. It was struggle enough just to sit there with my head against the table and breathe 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. Ban... ner." I said in a weak voice. I was afraid to raise my head.

"Are you feeling faint?"

"Yes, sir," I muttered.

"Can someone take Bella to the nurse, please?" he called out, for everyone to hear. I could

imagine the frenzy that would ensue as each individual in the room fought for the chance to accompany me to the nurse. It would be almost too much to bear. I began to wish I was unconscious.

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

"Can you walk?" Mr. Banner asked.

"Yes," I whimpered, sounding more pathetic than I would have hoped. Just get me out of here, I thought. I'll crawl... but not if Mike is watching.

Mike seemed eager to put his arm around my waist and pull my big 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.

"Please, just let me sit for a minute," I begged.

He thought about it for a minute, his desire to please me crossing wits with his desire to suck Mr. Banner's dick. After a moment he nodded and helped me sit on the edge of the walk.

"And whatever you do, keep your hand in your pocket," I warned. Mike looked confused. He turned around, slowly, trying to be subtle, and pulled his hand out of his pocket; he examined it, put it back in his pocket, and returned to face me. 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 excitedly. Was he excited because I was green, or because he was getting slightly turned on by the sight of me on the floor, half-unconscious? Maybe he was thinking about Mr. Banner, wondering if maybe I turned into *him* when I turned green.

"Bella?" a different, objectively superior voice called from the distance.

No! Please let me be imagining that horribly familiar, super-sinister voice.

"What's wrong—is she hurt? Did you hurt her, you—you—you —" 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, to not throw up. I had high hopes.

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

"If you so much as think about Bella's fingers again," Fredward said in a voice so low I couldn't hear him, "I will chop your dick off and feed it to my brother. You got that?" Fredward wiped some spittle off his chin. Mike scurried away. Then Fredward looked back at me. "Bella." Fredward's voice was right beside me now. "Can you hear me?"

"No," I groaned. "Go away." How embarrassing! I could obviously hear him, and he knew it!

He chuckled knowingly.

"I was taking her to the nurse," Mike explained in a defensive tone from halfway down the sidewalk, "but she wouldn't go any farther."

Fredward looked up at Mike and made a soft, attractive growling sound. Mike scurried the rest of the way down the sidewalk, and I never saw him again.

Suddenly the sidewalk disappeared from beneath me. My eyes flew open in shock. Fredward had scooped me up in his arms, as easily as if I weighed ten pounds instead of eighty-five.

"Put me down!" Please, please do not let me vomit on him. He was walking the walk before I had even finished talking the talk.

"Hey!" Mike called from all the way down the sidewalk.

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

"Put me back on the sidewalk, Fredward," 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 that I weighed eighty-five pounds, or that I was struggling and moaning.

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

sicko.

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. I could imagine that this outburst was caused by the sight of Fredward's bulging arms ripping through his designer shirt, forty-two and a half pounds of me stressing each bicep.

"She fainted in Biology IV," Fredward explained, ignoring the flattery and focusing on my problem.

I opened my eyes. I was in the office, and Fredward was striding past the front counter toward the nurse's door. My heart did a flip and fell over.

Ms. Crabnutt, the redheaded front office receptionist, ran ahead of him to hold it open, clearly excited about something. The grandmotherly nurse looked up from a novel, astonished as Fredward swung me into the room and placed me gently on the crackly paper that covered the brown vinyl mattress on the one stained cot. Then he moved to stand flat against the wall as far across the narrow room as possible.

"She's just a little faint," he reassured the startled nurse. "They're blood-typing in Biology IV."

The nurse nodded saggly. "There's always one."

"I had a traumatic childhood incident involving blood," I moaned.

He muffled a snicker with another, less overt, chuckle.

"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. Fredward 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 further.

"I'll go get you some ice for that forehead, dear," she said to me and then bustled out of the room. Nice; some Fredward time. Maybe I was wrong about this nurse.

"You were right," I moaned enchantingly, letting my eyes close.

"I usually am—but about what in particular this time?" he slithered to the side of my cot, idly toying with a thermometer.

"Ditching *is* healthy." I practiced heavy breathing, preparing for the day when I would be giving birth to Fredward's children.

"You scared me for a minute there," he admitted after a minute. His tone made it sound like he was confessing a humiliating weakness, as if caring about me were so wrong. "I thought that fag Newton was dragging your dead body off to bury it in the woods."

"Ha ha." I still had my eyes closed, and tried to imagine Newton having the balls to kill me but got caught up in the fact that I'd never even seen a boy's balls before. I tried to imagine what they looked like but had no luck. "I doubt Mike even *has* balls," I said in my confusion. 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," Fredward said cheerfully.

"You can't know that," I teased.

"I saw his balls—I could tell."

"How did you see them? 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'd be thinner, at least.

"I was in my car, listening to a CD, and there they were..." Such a normal response—it surprised me. I wondered what Fredward Cullen listened to in his car when he ditched class, and couldn't imagine it.

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."

"I think I'm fine," I said, sitting up and letting the compress fall to my lap. There was 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. Crabnutt's greasy voice slithered in.

"We've got... *another* one," she intoned.

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

And then Mike staggered through the door, now supporting a sallow-looking Lee Stephens, another boy from our Biology IV class. Fredward and I drew back against the wall to give them room.

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

Oh shit! Was he going to kick Mike's ass? I looked up at him, bewildered, excited.

"Trust me—go."

As much as I wanted to see Fredward punch Mike in his ball-less crotch, the prospect of Mike's crotch-blood getting everywhere caused me to spin me around and catch the door before it closed, darting out of the infirmary. I could feel Fredward's hard body right behind me.

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

"I smelled the blood," I said, wrinkling my nose. And, I admitted to myself, I didn't *really* want to see Fredward beat up Mike.

"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. Did I describe blood wrong? I began to turn red.

"Nothing. Nevermind."

I did, I totally did. I flipped my hair over my shoulder to hide how ugly and red my face was turning.

Mike came through the door then, glancing from me to Fredward. The look he gave Fredward confirmed what Fredward had said about seeing his balls. He looked back at me, embarrassed.

"*You* look better," he accused, hand thrust deep in his pocket.

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

"It's not bleeding anymore, here: look," he began to pull his hand out but Fredward did another grizzly growl, making him shove it all the way back down. "Are you going back to class?"

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

"Yeah, I guess... So are you going this weekend? To my beach party? The one where no jerks are invited?" While he spoke, he flashed another glare toward Fredward, 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 sporting goods store, at ten." His eyes flickered to Fredward again, wondering if he was giving out too much information. His body language made it clear that Fredward

was one of the uninvited.

"I'll be there," I promised. Maybe I didn't promise. Maybe it was just something I said I'd do. Who knows what the heart wants, Mikey-boy.

"I'll see *you* in Gym, then," he said, moving toward the door with a bounce in his step.

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

"Gym," I groaned. The bane of my existence. Gym class. I thought about all of the ways in which a basketball could bounce off of my head.

"I can take care of that." I hadn't noticed Fredward moving to my side, but he spoke now in my ear. A shiver ran down my spine. "Go sit down and look pale," he whispered into my conch.

That wasn't a challenge; I was always pale, had been since birth, and my recent swoon had left a slight sheen of sweat all over my face. I sat in one of the creaky, haunted folding chairs and rested my head against the wall with my eyes closed. Fainting spells, of which I'd endured my fair share, always exhausted me.

I heard Fredward speaking softly to the counter.

"Ms. Crabnutt?"

"Yes?" I hadn't heard her return to her desk. Was Ms. Crabnutt *literally* the counter?

"Bella has Gym next hour, and I don't think she feels well enough. Actually, I was thinking I should take her home now." My heart double-timed. "Do you think you could excuse her from class? So that I could *take her home now*?" His voice was like molten honey. I could imagine how much more overwhelming his eyes would be, mostly because I'd seen them in action and so there wasn't anything left to imagine.

"Well, I—Oh! Do you need to be excused too, Fredward?" The desk fluttered. Why couldn't I do that?

"No, I have Mrs. Golf, she won't mind."

"Okay, it's all taken care of. You feel better, Bella," the desk 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-desk, 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 my human weakness. I walked out into the cold, fine mist that had just begun to fall. It felt nice—the first time I'd enjoyed anything about Forks—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, squirming 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 the Forks High School; he didn't belong here, in the excruciatingly mortal realm that was Home of the Bears. But just hoping that he might gave me the first twinge of enthusiasm I'd felt for the outing.

"Where all are you going, exactly?" He was still looking down, his eyes on the ground, expressionless.

"Down to La Push, to First Beach."¹³⁰ I studied his face, trying to read it like a book-document.

130. Bella refers to the beach as First Beach because she is uninformed about ancient history; she assumes that since Native Americans live in a way that she perceives as incredibly savage (e.g. men having long hair), that they were the first people to inhabit the earth. Thus, this reservation beach is the first beach to ever exist.

His eyes seemed to narrow infinitely, although not so that they seemed squinty or crooked.

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

I sighed. I was just trying to show him off to make Horseshit Mike, Loser Eric, and all the rest of the Forks High School leave me alone for good. "Well, *I* just invited you."

"Let's you and I not *la push* that poor Mike any further this week. We don't want him to snap." His eyes danced and invited mine to join in; our eyes waltzed, untrained but intuitive, across the ballroom of possibilities.

"Mike-schmike," I muttered, so preoccupied by the way he'd said "you and I" that my glowing wit was not up to par.

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

"Where do you think you're going?" He yelled, outraged. He had turned on me once again, but I knew that after a brief fight, our eyes would go back to the lovedance once more, and I would feel whole again.

"I'm going home," I teased.

"Did 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, pulling me by the jacket. It was all I could do to keep from falling backward.¹³¹ He'd probably just drag me along anyway if I did. I had a brief but vivid flashback of the time when my Uncle Clyde had tried to force me into his own shiny Volvo. I was seven years old at the time; I weighed only seventy-five pounds then.

"Let go!" I insisted. Or was it, 'let's go'? I couldn't decide. Either way, he ignored me and continued to pull me forward. I staggered along sideways across the wet sidewalk until we reached the Volvo. Then he finally freed me—I stumbled against the passenger door, forgetting how to hold my own weight because he had been holding it for so long.

"You are so *pushy*!" I grumbled, loving it.

"It's open," was all he responded with. 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 my hair was dripping down my back.

He lowered the automatic window¹³² and leaned toward me across the seat. "Get in, Bella." Those were the most beautiful three words I had ever heard, and his invitation made it hard to resist his invitation.

I struggled to not answer, mentally calculating my chances of reaching the truck before he could catch me. Even if I was able to do that, would I be able to reach the truck before I regretted having left him?

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

I tried to maintain what dignity I could as I got into his Volvo. I wasn't successful—I looked like a half-drowned cat, my boots squeaked, and I had a big, ugly witch's scowl on my brooding teenage face.

"This is completely unnecessary," I said stiffly.

"Au contraire," he countered in French, his voice like a breaded brie that had been in the oven just a minute too long and was now oozing all over the racks; my racks. "This is *completely* necessary." He fiddled with the controls, turning the heater up and the music down. As he pulled out, I was

131. It is unclear exactly what all Bella was doing to keep from falling backward, although she remained doing it.

132. With just a flick of the wrist.

preparing to give him the silent treatment—my face in full pout mode—but then I recognized the music playing. I had been drum major, solo soprano, as well as first violin back at Phoenix High School. Since the Forks High School didn't have bands, choirs, or orchestras, I had been forced to try to suppress my undying passion for music. Mostly I just listened to it alone by myself under the covers, shaking with terror that Charlie might discover me being, God forbid, *cultured*.

"Clair de Lune?" I asked, surprised. I was expecting that someone of his European style and grace would listen to something like Rammstein or Kylie Minogue.

"You know...*Debussy*?" The French minstrel's name rolled off his tongue with equal amounts of surprise and suspicion.¹³³

"Not well," I lied. "My mother Rénee plays a lot of classical music around the house—I only know my favorites." Little did Fredward know, I actually preferred several other French Impressionists to Debussy. Honestly, I thought "Clair de Lune" was a little overdone in modern circles.

"It's one of my favorites, too," He stared out through the windshield, lost in the swirling melancholy of music and rain. I wondered if he would cry.

I listened to the music, the rolling chords arpeggiating upwards and such.

"Ooh!" I shrieked, loudly. He was surprised, again. "Don't you just love how Debussy sets the triplets against the straight eighths here? It's almost as though time stands still," I was almost whispering now. "It's almost as if time stands still because *it doesn't know what else to do!*" It was impossible not to respond to the familiar, soothing melody. The rain blurred everything outside the window into gray-green smudges, like the imprecise strokes of an Impressionist painting. 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, like he was trying to figure out where the music ended and I began.

"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. Lying about how my mom was my best friend and how much better she was than me was making me depressed. I felt ashamed for lying to Fredward and cupped my face in my hand.

"How old are you, Bella?" His voice sounded frustrated for some reason I couldn't imagine, but had a feeling I would understand sooner or later. 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 of Impressionist paintings.

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

"You don't *look* seventeen."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Was he fantasizing about my mom?

"What?" he asked, curious again.

"My mom always said that I was born thirty-five years old and that I get more middle-aged every year, like I live in cat years," I laughed and then sighed. "Well, someone has to be the adult around there." I paused for a second to watch him licking his lips and rubbing his hands together furiously. He saw me looking, flashed me a perfectly crooked smile, and went back to looking at me attentively. "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?"

133. If Bella did in fact know Claude Debussy, she would have to be over 100 years old.

I was surprised that he would remember the name; *I* hardly remembered Phil's name. 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, his ball-playing." I shook my head. The attraction was a mystery to me, but I had always figured I'd understand when I was older.

"Do you approve?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" I countered, irritated that he was thinking about my feelings again. "I want her to be happy... and he is who she wants."

"Phil?"

"... yes."

"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 for mine amidst the rain and music.

"I—I think so," I stuttered, putting myself in my mother's shoes temporarily and forgetting who I was. "But she's the parent, after all. It's a little different then."

"No one too scary, then," he teased.

I grinned in response. "What do you mean by scary? Multiple facial piercings and hella tattoos?"

"That's one definition, I suppose. What's *your* definition?" He asked.

But he ignored his own 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 whatever my imagination could brew up first.

"Hmmmm... hmmm..... huhhhhhh..... I think you *could* be, if you wanted to..... I dunno."

"Are you frightened of me now?" His smile vanished, and his heavenly face was suddenly seriously... ?

"... No."

"Are you frightened of me... now?" He put his hands behind his head, crossed his eyes, and started thrashing about wildly while making a kissy face.

I wasn't sure how to react. "Um, no?"

"Are you frightened of me...*now*?" He turned around in the seat so his behind was up in the air. He bounced it up and down, rubbing on the steering wheel, arms wrapped around the headrest.

"Not really," I said with a brave tone.

He resumed his sitting position, folded his hands in his lap, and smiled crookedly at me.

"So, now are you going to tell me about your family?" I asked to distract him. To tell the truth, I was starting to get a little worried. "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?" Sometimes people are touchy about these kinds of topics.

"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. A *very* long time... "

"Oh yeah? How long?"

"What?"

There was a silence.

"And you love them." It wasn't a question; it was a statement. It was obvious in the way he spoke of them.

"Yes." He smiled. "I couldn't have imagined two better people."

"You're very lucky." I said, for lack of anything better to say.

"I know I am."

"No, I mean you're *very* lucky." There was another silence. "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 all very lucky, too."

"So everyone's lucky." I don't know how we got started talking about his stupid family, but I sure wished he'd change the subject.

"Yeah, and they're 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 blew it again.

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

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

He laughed, and there was an edge in his laughter, as if he had some secrets of his own.

"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 hulking out in the Goat Rocks Wilderness, just south of Rainier."

I remembered Charlie had said the Cullens went camping frequently, so it seemed like a plausible story. I mean, it didn't *seem* like he was trying to ditch me.

"Oh. Well, have fun." I tried to sound enthusiastic. I don't think I fooled him, though. A smile was playing around with the edge of his lips, twitching this way and that.

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

I nodded helplessly. I'd read about stuff like this in my mom's dirtybooks and couldn't believe that he, Fredward Cullen, was making a book out of me.

"Don't be offended," he breathed, "but you seem to be one of those people who just attracts accidents like a mago-net. So... try not to fall into the ocean or get run over or anything, alright?" He smiled crookedly.

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

"I'll see what I can do, *Fredward*," I snapped as I jumped out into the rain. Fredward could be so thick, and so hard to understand. I wondered how much more of that dick I could take. I slammed the door behind me with excessive force.¹³⁴

He was still smiling as he drove away, smoldering in the rain. I went inside to do a little smoldering of my own.

134. Excessive force, something that small town cop Charlie Duck would have no experience with.

6.

NATIVE SEDUCTION

AS I SAT IN MY ROOM, TRYING TO CONCENTRATE ON THE third act of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*,¹³⁵ I was really listening for my truck. Fredward had promised that his sister Alice would drop my truck off and it still wasn't here. I would have thought, even over the pounding rain, that I would have heard the engine's roar, and so I only half paid attention to the trials and tribulations of MacBeth McScrooge. I'd read it twice already in Phoenix, but it was different this time with the 3D glasses. And 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.¹³⁶

Jessica especially seemed to be concerned. Luckily Mike had kept his gay mouth shut, and no one seemed to know about Fredward's involvement. She did have a lot of questions about lunch, though.

"So what did Fredward 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 said with concern.

"Did I?" I kept my expression blank, trying to keep her out of it. Maybe I just look like that, Jessica, I thought, verbally assaulting her in my head. Did you ever stop thinking about yourself, and Mike, and hot dogs, to think that maybe I just *want* to look that way?

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

"Weird," I agreed. She seemed frustrated and sipped her mind-morning-snack juice box while looking down at her sandwich quietly—it was none of her business and I wanted to keep it that way. Let her slobber on someone else for a change. Fredward was mine.

The worst part about Friday was that, even though I knew he wasn't going to be there, I still hoped he would. 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 like little rascals.¹³⁷ And I couldn't stop the gloom that engulfed me as I realized I didn't know how long I would have to wait to see Fredward's crooked smile beam down on me 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 began to wonder if Mike *liked* the feeling of smoke being blown up his ass. But it was warmer today that it had ever been—almost sixty. Maybe the outing wouldn't be *completely* up Mike's ass...

I intercepted a few unfriendly glances from Lauren during lunch, which I didn't understand until we were all walking out of the cafeteria together. I was right behind her, just a foot from her slick,

135. The act in which MacBeth, fed up with his scheming wife, decides to start fantasizing about one of his daughter's friends from school while masturbating.

136. 'Duh, hey Bella, heard you fainted during class! Are you alright?'

'So how are you feeling?'

'Oh Bella, sorry to hear about yesterday :(.'

137. A 1900's short film series following the exploits of a group of children as they explored and conquered the Missouri River. Generally thought to be based on the exploits of Lewis and Clark.

greasy blond hair, and she was evidently unaware of that.

"...don't know why *Bella*"—she sneered my name, twisting the sound so that it smelled like eggs—"doesn't just sit with the Cullens from now on. I bet she's already put her mouth 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. I'd even hooked her up with Tyler, or Eric; one of those two. God knows that she'd be home alone on her precious prom night, banging a cucumber if it weren't for me.

"She's my friend; she sits with us," Mike whispered back loyally, but also a bit territorially.¹³⁸ I paused to let Jess and Angela pass me. I didn't want to hear any more about what I had probably put my mouth on.

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 their pets as well, and their imaginary friends. He seemed to approve. I wondered if he would approve of my plan to ride to Seattle with Fredward Cullen. Not that I was going to tell him. I wanted him to think I was a lesbian for as long as possible.

"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 getting together and doing some Wiccan stuff there."

"It's not a very good place for Wiccan stuff." He sounded surprised. "Too many bears. Yeah. Most people go there during the hunting season. To hunt stuff."

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

I meant to sleep in, but an unusual brightness woke me. Had I gotten smarter or was it bright out? Ho ho, good one, Belle. A nice day in Forks? I mentally high-fived and kissed myself on the cheek, happy to have both zinged the place I hate while gaining IQ points in my sleep. Ready for the elation of being right, 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. I was thrilled to see my old friend from Arizona. 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,¹³⁹ worried that it might be up to me, that it might be my desert spirit that fueled the sun.

The Newtons' *Paralympic Outfitters* store was just north of town. I'd seen the store but had never stopped there. First of all, I hated Mike. Second, I hated the outdoors as well as anything having to do with disabled people. In the parking lot I recognized Mike's wood-paneled station wagon and Tyler's lowrider. As I pulled up next to their vehicles, I could see the group standing around in the front of the Woody. Eric was there, along with two of his Chinese friends. Jessica was there, flanked by Angela and Lauren. Three other girls stood with them, including one I remembered falling over in Gym on Friday. That whore gave me a dirty look as I got out of the truck, and whispered something to Lauren. Lauren shook out her cornmeal 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. It was the weather, I thought. That big ball in the sky made me come; *not* you. "And I said it would be sunny today, didn't I?"

"I told you I was coming." I reminded him. I was simply keeping a promise and responding to

138. Another reference to westward expansion.

139. A psychological thing in babies where they think things they can't see stop existing.

pleasant weather.

"We're just waiting for Lee and Samantha... unless you invited someone... a certain jerk..." Mike added. The memory of inviting Fredward sent chills up and down my spine.

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

Mike looked satisfied.

"Will you ride in my Woody? It's that or Lee's minivan." Only Mike could make minivans sound appealing, I thought.

"Yeah. Mind if I ride in the back?"

"Sure," he said, "but I don't have *seat belts* back there," he warned. He smiled blissfully. It was so easy to make Mike happy. "You can have shotgun," he added. "Up front with me.

"I want to ride in the back," I clarified.

Mike leaned in. "If you don't ride in the front," he whispered, "I'm going to kill myself." I hid my chagrin. I knew Jessica was going to kick my ass. I could see her glowering at us now.

The numbers worked out in my favor, though. Lee brought two of his second-cousins, and suddenly every seat was necessary. I managed to wedge Jess's ass in between Mike and me in the front seat of the Woody. 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 Quillayutitlikjtaewrkj¹⁴⁰ River snaking beneath it twice. Everyone was enjoying the view except Mike, who was looking past Jessica at me, and panting. We'd rolled the windows down—the station wagon was a bit claustrophobic with nine grody teenagers in it—and I tried to absorb as much sunlight as possible.

I'd been to 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 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-gray 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: terracotta, sea green, lavender, blue gray, purple gray, brown gray, dull gold, gold gray, dull lavender, lavender gray, gold gold, and sea gray. It was like looking into an infinite kaleidoscope. 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' waving fingers.

There was a brisk wind coming off the waves, cool, and briny. Pelicans floated on the swells like seagulls and a lone eagle wheeled above them. There were so many birds, I almost couldn't watch them all at the same time, although I did. The clouds circled the sky like birds.

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 his Chinese friends gathered broken branches of driftwood, tiny little logs, 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.

"I could light your fire," he whispered, almost inaudibly. Things were getting weird. I hoped

140. Bella is too frustrated with the 'ethnic name' to look up how to spell it.

Jessica couldn't hear him.

A seagull hovered above us and took a fat shit on Mike's horseface. I pretended that nothing had happened and he continued. "You'll like this—watch the colors." He lit another small branch and laid it alongside the first. The flames started to lick quickly up the dry wood. Mike winked at me, and some of the feces on his head dripped onto his cheek.

"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. They say that when you see a blue flame, a supernatural being is thinking of you... I wondered if it was true...

After a half hour of listening to Jess and Mike talk about Blues Traveler, some of the boys wanted to hike to the nearby tidal pools. It was a dilemma! On the one hand, I loved tidal pools. They had fascinated me since I was a child; they were one of the only things that had ever fascinated me in Forks. I loved the way they were full of hidden secrets, and the way they represented entire sufficient ecosystems, and the way there were animals in them. On the other hand, I'd also fallen into them a lot. Not a big deal when you're seven and with your dad, but now... It reminded me of Fredward's request—that I not fall into the ocean.

Lauren was the one who made my decision for me. Even though she was a lesbian, 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 Eric and Tyler had committed to remaining with them before I got up quietly to join the hiking team. Mike gave me a huge smile. Heh!

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 teenage laughter, too murky and ominous to be in harmony with the light banter around me. Everyone around me was so... *seventeen*. I thought ill of them briefly before remembering my promise to Fredward. I had to watch each step I took, 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 baby sea 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 precipitous edge. They were so careless. I found a very stable-looking rock on the fringe of one of the largest pools and sat there cautiously, without moving or poking, spellbound by the natural aquarium below me. The bouquets of brilliant anemones undulated ceaselessly in the invisible current and twisted shells, presumably containing a live animals, scurried about the edges, obscuring the green-blue crabs within them, while big purple-gray starfish were stuck motionless to the rocks and each other, intertwined in an embrace which I could only assume was consensual, and one small black eel with white racing stripes wove through the bright green weeds, waiting for the sea to return. I was completely absorbed into the sea, except for one small, disobedient part of my mind that wondered what Fredward was doing now, and trying to imagine what he would be saying if he were here with me beside this tidal pool instead of doing whatever he was doing with that big bison brother of his, Emmett. Would he comment on the crabs? Would he find the starfish to be particularly interesting? Would he admire the anemones? Would he be able to stick a finger into the water without falling into it, like I wished I could?

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. "Why can't I walk?" I asked myself from my spot on the ground. Mike ran over to make sure I was alright.

"Are you alright?" he gushed, his eyes gleaming at the sight of me on the ground, possibly

needing his assistance.

"I got some shallow scrapes on my palms, and the knees of my jeans were stained green, but it could have been worse," I reflected.

"Oh!" He said, his voice cracking. He was clearly turned on by the mention of my body parts and jeans.

When we got back to the First Beach, the group we'd left behind had multiplied. As we got closer we could see the shiny, straight, long black hair and copper skin of the newcomers; teenage Natives 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 the last to be introduced, and, as Eric said our names, I noticed a younger Native sitting on the stones near the fire glance up at me in interest. I sat down next to Angela, keeping close, and Mike brought us sandwiches—"I made this one especially for you," he said—and an array of sodas—"If there were a Bella-flavored soda, *I'd drink it all day*," he moaned under his breath—while a boy who looked to be the oldest of the locals rattled off the names of the seven others with him. All I caught was that one of the girls was also named, surprisingly, Jessica, and that the boy who noticed me was named Squaw.¹⁴¹

It was relaxing to sit with Angela; she was a restful kind of person I needed to be around—she didn't feel the need to fill every silence with chatter, to spend hours talking about things I wouldn't care about, things like: how she isn't Fredward, what Fredward isn't doing right now, whether I really did touch Mike's penis, if I knew everyone else thought I had touched his penis, and if I was totally sure I hadn't touched it, because Mike seemed to think I had.

She left me free to think undisturbed while we ate.

And I was thinking, undisturbed, 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 crooked difference, and it disturbed me.

During lunch the clouds started to advance, slinking like slugs across the blue sky, crawling 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, pairing up for a very different kind of feast. Some walked down to the edge of the waves, others were gathering a second expedition to the tide pools. Mike—with Jessica clinging to his arm—headed up to that one shop in the village with the... things.¹⁴² 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 three teenagers from the reservation, including the boy named Squaw and the oldest boy who had acted as a spokesperson.

A few minutes after Angela left with the hikers, Squaw sauntered over to take her place by my side. He looked fourteen, maybe fifteen, and had long, straw-like black hair held together with a rubber band that wrapped around the nape of his neck. His skin was beautiful, silky and russet-colored;¹⁴³ his eyes were dark, set deep above the high planes of his eyebrows. He still had just a hint of childish fattiness 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 Duck, aren't you?"

It was like the first day of school all over again, where I had to tell everyone my nickname.

"Bella," I sighed.

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

141. Presumably named after the dark, multi-grain bread.

142. Presumably fireworks.

143. Like a potato.

"Oh," I said, relieved, shaking his 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." At that, he cupped his hands to his chest, hefting two pendulous invisible weights.

"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 their asses enough times to end the fishing trips by the time I was eleven.¹⁴⁴

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

"No." Squaw shook his head furiously. "Rachel got a scholarship to Washington State but met someone and got married, 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. Maybe it was time *I* got married...

"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 relieved 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 denied, vehemently.

"Have you tried to go over sixty?" He grabbed an invisible steering wheel and stomped on an invisible accelerator, raspberrying his lips to imitate a farting engine.

"No," I admitted, wishing he would stop.

"Good. Don't." He grinned.

I couldn't help grinning back. "It does great in a collision," I said, struggling to find something to say about the shitty truck he sold me.

"I don't think a tank could take out that old monster," he agreed with another laugh. He sure seemed to like laughing.

"So you build cars?" Why do I always get trapped in these kinds of conversations?

"When I have the free time, and parts. Me and my dad, before he lost his legs..." It looked like he was winding up for a long one, and I was thankful. It gave me time to worry about Fredward, if he was okay in the woods, whether I should try to find him, if love was really a two-way street or if it was one-way but had two lanes. Squaw continued. "You wouldn't happen to know where I could get my hands on a master cylinder for a 1986 Volkswagen Rabbit?" he finished jokingly.

"Sorry!" I laughed hard, trying to make it seem like I had been paying attention to his blue collar humor. "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. Why does this keep happening to me? Why do all of these hicks want poor little me? I wasn't the only one who noticed that I seemed to be getting all the male attention.

"You know Bella, Squaw?" Lauren asked from beneath her dykey haircut.

"We've sort of known each other since I was born," he laughed idiotically, smiling at me again. God, this was not happening.

"How nice." She didn't sound like she thought it was nice at all, and her pale, fishy eyes narrowed at the thought of it.

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

144. On the reservation, Bella's reputation precedes her. She is known locally as "The Wraith," for both her slight physique and her wasted looks.

expression of concern was unconvincing.¹⁴⁵

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

"Yes, do you know them?" she asked condescendingly, evidently believing that a wise man is no match for her wits.

"The Cullens don't come here. They know what they did," he said in a tone that closed the subject.

Tyler, trying to make me jealous by getting her attention, asked Lauren's opinion on a CD he held. I can guarantee you that whatever she said, it was wrong.

I stared at the deep-voiced boy, taken aback by how much of a man he was, but he was looking away toward the dark forest behind us. He'd said that the Cullens didn't come here, that they knew what they'd done, 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.

Squaw interrupted my adult-like thoughts with another inane question. "So is Forks driving you insane yet?"

"Oh, I'd say that's an understatement." I grimaced. He grinned like an idiot again.

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 Squaw was as yet inexperienced in the wiles of women, so that he wouldn't see through my thinly veiled attempt at manipulating him.

"Do you want to walk down by the beach with me?" I asked, trying to imitate the way Fredward had of looking at me with his eyelashes. It couldn't have nearly the same effect, I was sure, but Squaw jumped up with what looked to be a hard-on.

As we walked north across the multihued stones toward the driftwood seawall, the clouds finally closed ranks across the sky, causing the sea to harden 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.

"I j-j-just turned f-fifteen," he confessed, flattered.

"Really?" My face was full of surprise, mouth widened into a big O. "I would have thought you were *older*."

"I'm big my for age," he said, evidently trying to work some magic of his own.

"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 me on and it would be disgusting, and I would feel like a fraud, but he still seemed flattered.

"Not too much," he admitted with a frown. My ears perked up. Had I had finally found someone to discuss my second favorite topic with? "But when I get my car finished I can go up as much as I want to—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 Squaw.

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

"What was he saying about the doctor's family?" I asked innocently. I didn't want him to know that Fredward was my guilty pleasure.

"The Cullens? Oh, they're not supposed to come onto the reservation," he looked away, out toward J3rjilek3jr3j Island, as he confirmed what I'd thought I'd heard in Sam's voice: the Cullens were

145. This is likely untrue, since Lauren has actually taken acting lessons since she was a toddler. It is more likely that Bella hates Lauren for having, at least as far as Bella perceives it, a homosexual haircut.

not allowed to come onto the reservation.

"Why not?"

He glanced back at me, biting his lip. "Oops. I'm not supposed to say anything about that. We Indians have to be careful about our folklore, you see. If white people get ahold of it, they usually wind up writing a stupid novel or making a shitty movie." He laughed.

"Oh, I won't tell any white people, I'm just curious." I tried to make my smile alluring, wondering if I was laying it on too thick. He looked like a deep-talking fifteen-year-old man that could take it, though.

He smiled back, looking allured. Then he lifted one eyebrow and his voice was even huskier than before. I fantasized about making love to him.

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

"I *love* them," I answered, wondering if he knew how deeply I was capable of loving. I made an effort to smolder at him.

Squaw strolled to a narby 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 stared off into the distance, feeling an alluring, crooked smile overtake my own lips. My lips met his lips in an all-knowing smile. I could see he was going to try to make this good.

"Do you know any of our old stories, about where we came from—the Quaaludes, I mean?" he began.

The *what*? I didn't even know about my *own* origins.¹⁴⁶ "Not really," I admitted, not wanting to reveal my thoughts and offend him by not caring about his culture.

"Well, there are lots of legends," he began. "Lots and lots and lots of legends."

I groaned silently but remained hopeful that one of them would give me an idea about why Fredward didn't come to the beach with me today.

"Some of them claiming to date back to the Flood¹⁴⁷—supposedly, the ancient Quaaludes tied their canoes to the tops of the tallest trees on the mountain to survive like Noah and the ark. 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, his hands pretending to shiver.

"The cold ones?" I asked.

"The cold ones."

"What are the cold ones?" I was starting to get a little intrigued. I felt my eyes widen and my mouth open a bit. My nostrils even flared.

"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."

"Your great-grandfather?" I squeaked out. This was way scarier than I'd bargained for.

"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 could call them werewolves."

"If I wanted to hear about werewolves, I would have picked up a *Goosebumps* book," I muttered under my breath. He looked up at me.

"Did you say something?"

146. The Forks High School is also piloting a Sex Ed in a Daze program; Bella hasn't learned much in this course.

147. The historic flood of 1987, when the Forks River overflowed and the town roads were closed for two days.

"No."

There was a silence.

"Werewolves have enemies?" I asked, picking up the conversation where we'd—or should I say, *he'd*—left off.

"Only one."

I stared at him earnestly, feeling like my eyes were about to bug out in anticipation.

"So you see," Squaw continued, "the cold ones are traditionally our enemies."¹⁴⁸ 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. At my pale face.

Did he think I had a pale face? I was outraged and pinched him fiercely on the left bicep.

"Ow!" he exclaimed.

"What?" I asked. I put on the most innocent face I had and then winked at him and licked my lips. He didn't respond.

"If they weren't dangerous, then why...?"

"There's always a risk for humans to be around the cold ones, even if they're civilized like this clan was. You never know when they might get too hungry to resist." He deliberately worked a thick edge of menace into his tone. I shuddered.

"What do you mean, 'civilized'?" I chortled, looking at his long hair and thinking about the fact that Squaw himself lives in a cone-shaped hut made out of bear skin and a pole, and that his dad didn't have any legs.

"They claimed that they didn't hunt humans. They supposedly were somehow able to prey on animals instead."

I tried to keep my voice casual. "But what about Fredward?!" I blurted out in one enormous breath, spraying spit and little chunks of whole wheat bread all over his brown face. "Are the Cullens, like, their great grand-colds?" I asked, chortling incredulously.

"No," he paused dramatically. "They are the *same* ones...!"

He smiled at my engorged eyes, pleased, and continued.

"There are more of them now, a new female and a new she-male, but the rest are all 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. Was Squaw making a *racist joke*?

"And what are they?" I finally asked. It was time to get some answers. "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; that wasn't so bad. I mean, it didn't change my feelings about Fredward. I still loved him, and he still loved me.

"You have goose bumps," he laughed delightfully.

"You should WRITE *Goosebumps*." I complimented him, still staring into the waves. But apparently he didn't get the reference to the pale-faced author R.L. Stine¹⁴⁹ or his series of children's books.

"Pretty crazy stuff, though, isn't it? No wonder my dad doesn't want us to talk about it to anyone..." Squaw trailed off as if he just realized he was telling me probably the biggest, most important secret in the entire universe.

148. Apparently the Quaaludes are werewolves?

149. Author of the world's greatest series in children's literary history, *Goosebumps*.

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. "Whatever!"

"Yeah, whatever!" I promised. "Don't worry, I won't tell. I'll die before I tell, you know, I'll take it to the grave!" and then shivered. "As they say."

"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 was puzzled. "I didn't know that middle-aged men had arguments with each other."

"I guess they do. Charlie thinks my dad's stupid for believing Carlisle is a vampire, and my dad thinks Charlie is stupid for letting a vampire give him open-heart surgery. It's like the circle of life, I guess."

"Charlie's never had open-heart surgery," I countered.

He paused. "Whatever!"

"Yeah, *whatever!*" I agreed.

"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. Did he think I would try to think he was stupid, and that he'd have to think I was stupid in return? 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. You could probably outsell R.L. Stine." I said, accidentally making the reference again. It was lost on him.

"Cool." He smiled, playing it cool even though he didn't know who the world's greatest children's literature author was.

And then the sound of the beautiful beach rocks clattering against each other ominously 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. Even though it was two people walking towards us, I then realized that they were each about half a person, so my earlier estimation was probably about right.

"There you are, Bella," Mike called in relief, waving his arm over his head like he was waiting to be rescued from the deserted, barren island that was Jessica.

"Is that your boyfriend?" Squaw asked, alerted by the jealous edge in Mike's voice. I guess it was so obvious that even a wolf-man could pick up on it.

"No, definitely not," I whispered sensually. I was tremendously grateful, and eager to make him as happy as possible.¹⁵⁰ 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.

"Your whale-hunting license?" I cut in.

He gave me a weird look. "Bella, I don't hunt whales."

"Oh."

"So when I get my license..." he began again.

I finished his sentence for him, feeling so close to him already that I wondered if I was cheating on Fredward emotionally. "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 Squaw. He was someone I could easily be friends with, as long as he didn't mind me staring off into space when he was rambling on about car parts.

Mike had reached us now, with Jessica still a few paces behind and reaching out for the back of

150. Bella has now entered into a cycle of non-satisfying relationships with men that border on domestic abuse. She believes that her purpose on this Earth as a female is to satisfy as many men as possible, without giving them the satisfaction of actually caring about them.

his shirt so she could have something, anything, to hold onto. I could see his eyes appraising Squaw, and looking satisfied with his obvious youth.

"And where have *you* been?" Mike asked, twitching a little, though the answer was right in front of him. I've been in Squaw, *Mike*.

"Squaw was just telling me some local stories," I volunteered. "It was really interesting once he stopped going on and on about Noah's Ark, and started telling me things that relate to my relationship with Fredward."

I smiled at Squaw warmly, and he grinned back.

"Well," Mike paused. He frowned, as though he had just microwaved a bowl of soup and carried it all the way to the living room before realizing it was still cold. Mike was carefully reassessing the situation as well as his horsebrain was capable of doing. "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 it was going to rain; maybe Mike was on to something.

"Okay." I jumped up. "I'm coming."

"It was nice to see you *again*," Squaw said, and I could tell he was taunting Mike with the non-real idea that I had met him before at some point in my life.

"It really, really was. Next time Charlie comes down to see Billy, I'll come too," I promised.

His grin stretched all the way across his face. "That would be *coool*."

"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 drop, making black spots on the stones where they landed. When we got to the Woody, the others were already loading everything back in. I crawled into the backseat by Angela and Tyler, announcing that I was on my period, and so it was someone else's turn to take shotgun. 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 weary eyes and try very hard not to think.

7.

KNIGHTMARE

AS YOU MAY HAVE GUESSED, IT WAS DIFFICULT BEING A NATURALLY thoughtful person.

I told Charlie I had a lot of homework to do, and that I didn't want anything to eat, but there was a basketball game on that he was excited about, and so he didn't notice me. I briefly wondered what things would be like if he spent less time watching TV basketball and more time thinking about me, but couldn't bring those thoughts to bear. Not now.

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 CD¹⁵¹ player. I picked up a Compact Disc that Phil had given me for Christmas. It was one of his favorite bands, but they used a little too much bass guitar and shrieking for my tastes.¹⁵² I popped it into place and lay down on my bed. I put on the headphones, hit the Play button, and turned up the volume until it hurt my ears. I closed my eyes, hard, but the tears kept coming:

Fredward, a *vampire*!

My desk light was intruding on my attempted seclusion, so I added a pillow over the top 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, and mumble-sang my way through everything else. I'd have to thank Phil again for the swell jams.

And it worked. The shattering beats made it impossible for me to think 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, my precious sun. I was trying to follow the sound, but then Squaw Black was there, except he wasn't the Squaw I knew; he'd been turned into a loaf of Squaw bread and was tugging on my hand, pulling me back toward the darkest part of the forest.

"Squaw? What's wrong?" I asked. His face was unleavened as he yanked with all his strength against my resistance; I didn't want to go run in the dark.

"Run, Bella, you have to run!" he whispered somehow, terrified.

"This way, Bella!" I recognized Mike's neigh calling out of the gloomy heart of the trees, but I couldn't see him.

"Why?" I asked, still pulling against Squaw's loaf-grasp, desperate now to find the sun.

But Squaw let go of my hand and yelped, suddenly drying, crumbling, falling piece-by-piece to the forest floor. He twitched on the ground as I watched in horror.

"Squaw!" I screamed, but he was gone. In his place was a large red-brown loaf of Beet Bread

151. Compact Disc, a form of digital media invented by Huey Lewis & the News for their hit album, *Sports* (1984).

152. It is actually a two-piece band made up of Phil and René.

with black sesame seed eyes. The loaf faced away from me, pointing toward the shore, the seeds on the back of his shoulders bristling, low growls issuing from between his exposed crevices.

"Bella, run!" Mike neighed again from behind me, but I didn't turn. I was watching a light coming toward me from the beach.

And then Fredward stepped out from the trees, his skin faintly glowing, his eyes black erotic. He held up one hand and beckoned me to come to him. The loaf growled at my feet, angry that they were walking toward my real love.

I took a step forward, toward Fredward. He smiled then, and his teeth were sharp, pointy.

"Trust me," he purred.

I took another step, trusting him. The loaf launched himself across the space between me and the vampire, canines 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, the batteries popping out.

My light was still on and I was sitting on the bed, fully dressed and with my shoebees still 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 shoebees. 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 brain 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 the wrinkles smooth with my fingers. I pulled the pillow back over my face.

It was all no use, of course. My subconscious¹⁵³ had dredged up exactly the images I'd been trying so desperately to avoid. I was going to have to face them now, face to face, *Bella à Bella*.

I sat up, my head spun around 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 for a serious bathroom sesh.

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. Cruising again.¹⁵⁴

I dressed slowly in my most comfy sweats and sweaters and then made my bed—something I never did, but I was anticipating this vampire crisis to end in my bed. I couldn't put it off any longer. I went to my desk and switched on my rusty-trusty old computer.

I hated using the Internet here. My 28k kilobaud modem was sadly outdated, my free service substandard to all of the other terrible free services; just dialing up took so long that I decided to go get myself a bowl of Lunky Charms while I waited.

I ate slowly, chewing each marshmallow with care. When I was done, I washed the bowl and spoon, dried each one individually, and put them away. My feet dragged as I climbed the stairs, dreading what I would learn on the Internet. With another sigh, I turned to my computer and sat down.

Naturally, the screen was covered with child pornography that had popped up onto my screen the last time I emailed Renéé. I sat in my hard chair and began closing all the little windows. It took a long time because some of them were interesting. I shot down a few more pop-ups and then typed one word into my Hotbot search engine:

153. The level of consciousness that lies below what Bella usually thinks about, and is usually inaccessible. One must wonder what it means that both her conscious and unconscious minds seem to only think about Fredward.

154. Cruising is the act of searching for anonymous male sex. Whatever combination of factors it was that drove Charles Duck to this point in his life, what is most surprising is that Bella seems to know about it.

Vampire.

It took an infuriatingly long time for the page to load, and as I sat back in my chair, the tension began to mount. What information would Hotbot bear? Would it help me confirm my suspicions that Fredward was a vampire? *Was* Fredward a vampire? When the results finally came up about twenty minutes later, there was a lot to sift through—everything from movies and TV shows/shoes and young adult literature to role-playing gear, underground metal, and Hot Topic.

Then I found a promising site—Vampires A-Z. It seemed like it would be well-organized in a way that would make it easy to navigate. I won't pretend that I'm any better at navigating the World Wide Web than I am at walking up my stairs. Sigh. I waited impatiently for the site to load, quickly clicking closed each pornographic ad that flashed on my screen. I only lingered on one—a kind of vampire-firefighter fantasy sequence starring a very pale, skinny vampire wearing overalls and no shirt and holding a big red... 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 dreadful and abhorred, so beautiful and so gorgeous, 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 but is somewhat appealing, especially to those who are vacant and have nothing to live for.

-Rev. Montague Cummer

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,¹⁵⁵ of priests, of magistrates, magi and the many men of God; the judicial proof is most complete. And with all that, who is there who believes in vampires?

-Rousseau

Opening quotes by both a reverend *and* a philosopher? I was immediately impressed by the Web Sight. The rest of the Sight 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 sucked out all of her blood through her finger. Note to self: don't cut my finger around Fredward. I was learning a lot from the Web Sight already.

I read carefully through the descriptions, looking for anything that reminded me of Fredward. It seemed that most vampire myths centered around beautiful women as demons and children as victims. I shuddered: Fredward halfway fit the first description, and I halfway fit the second. Many of the stories involved bodiless spirits and warnings against improper burials. There wasn't very much that sounded like movies I'd seen, only 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*, powerful undead beings who could appear as beautiful, pale-skinned Europeans; the Slovak *Nelapsi*, creatures so strong and fast they could probably save someone from a car accident, and one other, the *Stregoni Benefici*.

About this last one there was only one brief sentence.

155. Such as Carlisle.

Stregoni Benefici: Italian vampires said to be on the side of goodness, and mortal enemy of all evil vampires.

What was evil? I wondered.¹⁵⁶

It was a relief, that one small entry, the one myth among hundreds that claimed the existence of good vampires. This was a chance I was willing to take.

Overall, though, there was little that coincided with Squaw's stories or my own observations. I'd made a little catalog 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 Squaw's criteria: blood drinkers, enemies of the werewolf, cold-skinned, and immoral. There were very few myths that matched even one factor. I was probably safe.

And then another problem with the theory, one that I'd remembered from the small number of scary movies I'd seen—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. Fredward *definitely* didn't do this; I had *definitely* seen him during the day. School was during the day, I chortled.

Aggravated at everyone else's stupidity, I snapped off the computer's main power switch, not waiting to shut things down properly. I was too aggravated to wait. Through my irritation, I felt overwhelming embarrassment. It was all too stupid. *I* was being stupid. I was sitting in my room, researching vampires, on the... on the Internet! 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. And I wasn't sure if I'd feel this upset in three days, much less in six, which would be the time it would take me to drive somewhere and back. 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. No one heard my dramatic stomping; it was no matter, I was protesting fate itself.

It was overcast, as always, but not raining yet. I ignored my truck¹⁵⁷ and started east on foot, angling across Charlie's yard toward the ever-encroaching forest. It didn't take long 'til 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 trail that led through the forest here, or I wouldn't risk wandering on my own like this. My sense of direction was hopeless, as were most of my senses after the accident; I could get lost anywhere. I could get lost with a map. I could get lost with a tour guide *and* a map. I could get lost with a tour guide and a map if I was on a bus tour.

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, and lots of other trees I was able to identify. I'd learned many of their names from earlier days with Charlie, when he would point them out to me from the cruiser window while we were doing some father-daughter cruising, before the accident. A cruising of a different breed. There were many I didn't know, and others I couldn't be sure about because they were so covered in the ultimate green parasite: life.

I followed the trail as long as my anger at myself pushed me forward; it was a long time, probably forty minutes. I was *so* angry. 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 or other liquids being retained since yesterday, held high in the leaves above me, slowly trickling their way back to the earth. A recently fallen tree—I knew it was recent because I had studied

156. Do you know what evil is? Please turn to thought question #4 to explore.

157. Wouldn't even give it the time of day.

trees—rested against the trunk of her sisters. She created a sheltered little bench just a few safe feet off the trail. I only fell once while getting to it. I 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. The forest was too green and far too much like the scene in last night's dream to allow me to stop thinking about Fredward. Now that there was no longer the sound of my soggy footsteps, the silence was piercing. The ferns stood higher in my head now, now that I was seated, and I knew someone could walk by on the path, three feet away, and not see me. Would this happen, just because it was possible? *Anything could happen at any time*, I reminded myself, thinking about the flux of the universe.

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: *nothing*. And all the myths and legends of a hundred different lands, full of foreign people, 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.

1. Did I love Fredward?
2. Did Fredward love me?

First, I had to decide if it was possible that what Squaw had said about the Cullens could be true. What if Fredward *was* a vampire like Squaw had said? Was my love for him so unconditional that I would still love him under these circumstances? I shook my head, laughing at myself. The real question was: Could I ever *not* love Fredward?

Immediately my mind responded with a resounding negative. It was silly¹⁵⁸ 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 listened again in my head to the things I'd observed myself: the impossible speed and strength that couldn't possibly be normal, the eye color shifting from black to gold to black to gold to black to gold to black to gold and so on, the inhumane beauty haunting me even in my sleep, the pale, frigid skin I wanted so badly to rub and lick. And more—small things that registered more slowly, despite my fast processing speed—how they never seemed to eat, the disturbing grace with which they moved. And the way *He* 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.¹⁵⁹ He had skipped the day we'd done blood typing. He hadn't said no to the beach trip 'til he heard where we were going, and what the weather was going to be like. He seemed to know what everyone around him was thinking... except me. He had told me he was a supervillain, that he was Bangkok-dangerous...¹⁶⁰

Could the Cullens be vampires?

Well, they were *something*. Something outside the possibility of rational justification was taking place in front of my incredulous brain. Whether it be Squaw's "cold ones" or my own superhero theory, Fredward Cullen was not human. He was something more... better... faster... stronger...

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 Fredward was a vampire—and that was a very big *If*—then what should I do? Involving someone else was definitely out. I couldn't even believe it myself; anyone I told would probably have

158. An example of something that is silly is a clown.

159. Bella is comparing Fredward to a classroom because he is schooling her in the ways of love.

160. *Bangkok Dangerous* (2020) is a retro-futuristic film set in the early 2000's, about an emotionally withdrawn hitman who learns to love.

an even harder time buying that big, bold, beautiful Fredward Cullen, hottie of the Forks High School, was a vampire.

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 big 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—*forever*.

I was gripped in a sudden agony of despair as I considered that alternative. My mind rejected the pain like a titan,¹⁶¹ quickly skipping on to the next option.

I could do nothing different. After all, if he was something... sinister,¹⁶² 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 love-muscle reflexes. And if it was a love-muscle reflex to save lives, how bad could he be? I retorted. My head spun around in answer-circles.

There was one thing I was sure of, if I was sure of anything. The dark Fredward in my dream last night was a reflection only of my fear of the word Squaw had spoken, and not Fredward himself. Even so, when I'd screamed out in terror at the wereloaf's lunge, it wasn't fear for the loaf that brought the cry of "no" to my hot lips. It was the 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.¹⁶³ 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, or then, in the moment that I thought about it.

Even if... but I couldn't think it. Not here, alone in the darkening forest. Not while the rain made it dim as *twilight*¹⁶⁴ under the canopy and pattered like a baby's 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, obviously, safe and clear, winding its way out of the dripping green maze. I followed it hastily, my hood pulled tight 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—so free—with Charlie's lawn stretching 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,¹⁶⁵ since I was staying indoors. It didn't take too much effort to concentrate on my task for the day, a paper of *Macbeth* that was due Wednesday.¹⁶⁶ 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 of me, the part I agonized with. 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, or

161. The Titan Atlas was charged with the eternal task of holding the sky aloft on his back, forever preventing it from reuniting with the Earth.

162. *Sinistar* (1938), a computer action game where the player must destroy a sinister star. Notable for its use of digitized speech, which includes lines such as "I hunger!" and "Run, coward!"

163. The New York Times called her secret "electrifying."

164. By Stephenie Meyer, published October 5, 2005 by Little, Brown and Company.

165. No bra.

166. Tuesday. Bella forgot to change her digital wristwatch for the last 24 years (it is a family heirloom, passed down from her mother when she Came of Age), and so is now a full day ahead.

not love my father after he sent us his arm. But it was still better than arm-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 a trout. The chills that flashed up my spine whenever I thought of my trip into the woods were no different than the ones I'd felt before I'd taken my walk with Squaw 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, suddenly nimble, stunned to see that there was hardly a cloud in the sky, and those there were just fleecy¹⁶⁷ little white vests 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 years¹⁶⁸—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 fat 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.¹⁶⁹ 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, the round pat of head on the back of his crown. But when he smiled I could see the little 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, save for that fateful day two days ago when it had been sunny, too.

By dint of much elbow grease,¹⁷⁰ I was able to get both windows in the truck almost completely rolled down; it was so pretty out, and I wanted to feel the fresh sunlight. I was one of the first ones to school. The benches on the south side of the cafeteria 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 and an obsessive heart—but there were a few Trig¹⁷¹ 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 doodled inattentively along the margins of my homework. After a few minutes, I suddenly realized I'd drawn a solid black rectangle over the whole sheet, covering my work. I began to scrub it out with the eraser.

"Bella!" I heard someone call, and it sounded like Mike.

167. Fleece vests, in colors ranging from pink to orange, are often on sale at Old Navy. Bella owns many of them, and the texture is a reference point for her descriptions of unrelated things.

168. Chief Chuck Duck runs a tight ship.

169. After 8 years of courtship that began in the sixth grade.

170. A lubricant that Bella found in her father's dresser.

171. Trigganomics, the economics of the trigger.

And indeed it was. I peeky-pooed around to realize that the school had become populated while I'd been sitting there, absentminded. Everyone was in matching t-shirts, some even in matching shorts though the temperature couldn't be over sixty. Mike was coming at me in shorts and a shirt, waving.

"Hey, Mike," I called, waving back, unable to be half-hearted on a morning like this.¹⁷²

He came and sat by me, the tidy spikes of his hair shining golden in the light, his blue eyes sparkling in the shine reflecting off his hair, and his grin absorbing the light refracting off both, stretching all the way across his big face. He was so delighted to see me, I couldn't help but feel gratified.

"Despite all the time I've spent looking at you," he began, moving closer. "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.

"You're touching me," I reminded him, my patience growing thin despite how flattered I was that Mike seemed to still love me.

"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. "And I browsed the Internets a little bit. I got some really interesting pop-ups."

He hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I'd love to come over and browse the Internets with you," he began, obviously missing that I hadn't said anything where I invited him anywhere. "But I have to work on my essay too. That's due Thursday, right?"

"Um, Wednesday I think."

"Wednesday?" He frowned. "What day is it?"

"It's Tuesday," I said.

"I think it's Monday, Bella," Mike said, leaning over to take a look at my watch. "Bella, I'm going to call my dad and ask." There was a pause. "Hey dad? Yeah, hey, I'm fine. Yep, I'm at school, no flat tires or anything. No, no, I didn't forget my lunch... Haha! Yeah!... So I'm calling because I'm sitting here with the beautiful Ms. Bella Duck, the Chief's daughter from Arizona, and she's telling me that today is *Tuesday*. It's clearly Monday, right dad? ... Yep. Yep, I knew it. Yep, I'm *totally* gonna make her suck my dick... Yep. See ya later!"

He hung up and turned back to me. "What are you writing your essay on?"

"Whether Shakespeare's treatment of the female characters is misogynistic." He stared at me like I'd just spoke in pig Latin. I bet Mike didn't even know a single word in regular Latin. What made him think he was good enough for me, I'll never know.

"I guess I'll have to get to work on that tonight," he said, deflatedly. "I was going to ask you if you wanted to go out." Some food that had been circulating in the lower part of my stomach came out, but I managed to choke it back in. "Oh." I was taken off guard. I thought I'd made it pretty clear to Mike that I didn't want to suck his dick, even if his father thought it was a good idea.

"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 by his protruding mouth and the enormous ears which stood atop his head.

"Mike, I just vomited in my mouth from talking to you for like three minutes. Do you know how long it takes to eat dinner? Not even counting the drive there, the drive back, and whatever other

172. The sun inspired Bella to tap into her empathy-reserves.

activities you invite me to do."

He didn't look convinced.

I needed another angle. "I think... and if you ever repeat what I'm saying right now, I will cheerfully beat you to death without the slightest regret," I threatened, "And I don't think anyone else would regret it either, and I don't think I'd get any trouble. After all, my father is the police chief, and he only wants what's best for me." I paused. "The point is, I think that would hurt Jessica's feelings."

He was bewildered, obviously not thinking in that direction at all. "Who's 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 book-documents up and stuffed them into my book-bag.

We walked in silence to Building Three, and his expression was distracted. I hoped whatever thoughts he was immersed in were making him hate me.

When I saw Jessica in Trigganomics, she was bubbling with enthusiasm. She, Angela, and that lesbot Lauren were going to Fort Angles tonight to go dress shopping for the dance, and she wanted me to come, too, even though I didn't need a dress. I was indecisive. It would be nice to get out of town with some girlfriends, but Lauren would be there. She was *such* a lesbian. And who knew what I would be doing tonight...¹⁷³ Or who I would be doing tonight...¹⁷⁴ But that was definitely the wrong path to let my uncoordinated self skip on down. Of course I was happy about the sunlight. But that wasn't completely responsible for the euphoric mood I was in, not *eeeven* 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, which had been truncated by five minutes, much to my despair. I was far too lost in my own frenzy of anticipation to notice much of what she said, figuring that it was basically the same thing over and over again. As we passed the lockers and students, I became aware that I was painfully eager to see not just him but all the Cullens—to compare them with the new suspicions that plagued my mind. When 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 Fredward be waiting to sit with me again? I almost fainted with joy.

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. Were they gone? Forever? Had they never existed? Had my awareness of their true identities negated their existence?¹⁷⁵ With dwindling hope, my eyes scoured the rest of the cafeteria, hoping to find him alone, waiting for me, feeling as I felt, and anxious to become one big ball, one epic nebula of feelings for each other that would shine to every corner of the cafeteria and make a jealous idiot out of every one of my acquaintances. The place was nearly filled—Spanish had made us late—but there was no sign of Fredward or any of his family. Desolation hit me with crippling strength.

I shambled along behind Jessica, not bothering to pretend to listen anymore. Nothing mattered anymore—not even preserving my image as an interesting and tolerant newcomer. All I could think of was myself and my feelings, and Fredward and his, which were intertwining more and more as the school year went on...

We were late enough that everyone was already at our table, starting to grow impatient with anticipation to see me. I avoided the carefully-placed empty chair next to Mike in favor of one by

173. Masturbating.

174. Her own hand, Mrs. Humphrey.

175. Something about Rumpelstiltskin.

Angela. I vaguely noticed that Mike held the chair out politely for Jessica, and that her face lit up in response. I was happy for them, I really was. Jessica had her horse, and Mike had his consolation prize.

Angela asked quite a few questions about the *Macbeth* paper, which I answered as naturally as I could while spiraling downward into misery. She, too, invited me to go out with them tonight, and I agreed now, grasping at anything to distract myself from my misery spiral.

I realized I'd been holding on to a last shred of hope when I entered Biology IV, 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 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 after that they would arm me with a six-inch diameter racquet and some small plastic shuttlecocks 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. *Anything* would be better than feeling sorry for myself all night. 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 was relieved that he finally seemed to be catching on—but my enthusiasm sounded false in my own ears. It was depressing, in general, to see her so happy with a boy that wasn't even worth talking to for three minutes. 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 had already chosen the silverware we would use that night—the sterling silver set from Charlie's grandmother—and which plates we would use. Charlie had had these green and blue fish-shaped plastic plates since before I was even born. They were the only thing in the house that he and my mother both liked. I sighed. I spent a focused half hour on homework, but then I was through with that, too. Why couldn't school be harder? I asked myself. I checked my e-mail, reading the backlog of letters from my mother, getting snippier as they progressed to the present. She always got *so* annoyed when I ignored her for long periods of time. I sighed and typed a quick response, because I didn't really have a lot of time to write a really long one like the one she probably wanted. Everyone wanted a piece of me, but nobody knew that there was only one person I wanted to give them all to...

Mom.

Sorry. I've been out. I went to the beach with some friends. And I had to write a paper and research vampires.

My excuses were fairly pathetic, so I gave up on that and drafted an email that told the truth.

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'll write more when I have less friends and homework. I love you.

Bella.

I decided to kill an hour with non-school-related reading, like I often did. I had a small collection of books that came with me from my enormous collection of books I'd had in Phoenix. The shabbiest volume was a compilation of the works of Jane Austen. It's funny, I enjoy reading the classics far more than I enjoy teen magazines, tabloids, or MTV. I guess I'm just different. I selected the Austen 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 accepted that as an inevitability. I took off my shoes, then my socks, left to right, then my pants, carefully shimmying them down my leg, then my red thong, followed by my cardigan, t-shirt, and tank-top. I was not wearing a bra that day because I only have one and it was in the laundry. Anyway, I lay on my stomach, crossing my ankles in despair, flipping through the different novels in the book, trying to decide which would occupy my complex mind 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 chapter three that the hero of the story happened to be named *Edward*. Angrily, I turned to *Mansfield Park*,¹⁷⁶ but the hero of that piece was named *Edmundo*, and that was just too close. Weren't there any other names available in the late eighteenth century for Jane Assten to write about? I snapped the book shut, annoyed with it all, and rolled over onto my bare back. I pulled my legs up as high as they would go and closed my eyes. I would think of nothing but the warmth on my loins, 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 fair skin...

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 that the light was gone, behind the trees, and I had fallen asleep naked in my father's backyard. I looked around, muddled, with the sudden feeling that I wasn't alone...

"Ch—dad?" 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 clothes, and my book. I ran inside to get some oil heating on the stove, realizing that dinner would be late. It would be another night of oil soup in the Duck household. I sighed. 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.

"Uh. Don't... worry about it," he said, avoiding me and instead making eye contact with the gun-belt rack. "I... uh... wanted to catch the score on the... on the... game... "

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, so good, to make him happy...

"Dad," I said during a commercial for condoms, "Jessica and Angela are going to look at dresses for the dance tomorrow night in Fort Angles, and they wanted me to help them choose... do you mind if I... go with them?"

"Jessica Stanley?" he asked while trying to not get a boner.

"And Angela Webber." I sighed as I gave him the details that I'd already detailed.

He was confused, not sure what exactly I was proposing here. "But you're not going to the dance, right?"

"No, Dad, but I'm helping *them* find dresses—you know, giving them constructive, um...criticism."

"Um... okay." He paused, uncomfortable. "It's a school night, though."

"We'll leave right after school, so we can get back early enough for you to tuck us in," I cheesed. "You'll be okay for dinner, right?" Probably feeling like I was teasing him now, he got a bit testy. "Hell's bells, Bells, I fed myself for seventeen years before you got here," he reminded me.

176. A novel about a field of men that gets turned into a park for women and children. It is seen as a key text in the Masculist movement.

"I don't know *how* you survived," I muttered, thinking of all the cans of egg-and-bacon flavored dog food that had lined the shelves when I arrived. More clearly, I added, "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 sunny Phoenix, California.

I had planned my arrival at school so that I barely had time to make it to class, forcing me to run and sweat through that skimpy little V-neck. With a sinking heart, I circled the lot pretending to look for a space, although there were already tons of free ones, as I searched for the silver Volvo that was clearly not there. I parked and hurried to English, arriving breathless and perspiring, 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 by the harsh foot of reality as I searched the lunchroom in vain and sat at my empty Biology table.

The Fort Angles scheme was back on again for tonight and made all the more attractive by the fact that Lauren had other obligations—which presumably involved convincing Tyler that she did not want to cut off his penis. 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 pre-ball dress hunting excitement. 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.

Surely.

Oh, who was I kidding? Fredward wanted nothing to do with me. I was just like silly little Jessica, pining away for an idiot who was more attractive than me, and who already loved someone else. I slammed my locker at the thought. But who? I cycled through the list of people, but none of them seemed like Fredward's type.

Lauren was clearly a lesbian, and not the hot kind.

Jessica was too... desperate.

Angela was too... I didn't know, but she was definitely too something.

Mike was too... wait a minute. Was it Mike? Were we in some hellish Shakespearian love triangle? Had Fredward been using me to get close to *Mike*? I thought of his horsey face, those spikes in his hair, that stupid fat grin...

That dork Eric had to snap me out of it: I'd been slamming my locker door repeatedly. I was too embarrassed to try to explain it, so I just ran out to the parking lot to meet Jessica.

She 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,¹⁷⁷ 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 with her usual blank expression. My excitement increased logarithmically as we actually drove beyond the town limits.

177. *In the fridge, right on top. If you run out of bread you can drive to the supermarket in the cruiser. Your keys should be in your left pocket, or maybe in the key bowl. Don't eat too much or you might get a tummy ache! Love, Bella*

8.

FORT ANGLES

JESS DROVE FASTER THAN THE CHIEF, SO WE MADE IT TO FORT ANGLES by four. By the time we arrived, my excitement had grown beyond my capability to understand it. I could feel the wrinkles in my brain coming undone, smoothing out, my brain inflating and pushing against the inside of my skull. It had been awhile 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 boys we hung out with. Jessica's dinner with Mike had gone very well, and she was hoping that by Saturday night they would progress to hand-holding. I smiled to myself, pleased that he obviously didn't like her. 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 who was going to have the ugliest dress at the ball, to spare her. Angela threw a grateful glance my way.

Fort Angles was a beautiful little tourist trap, much more polished and quaint than Forks. But Jessica and Angela had been around this block *many* times, and didn't plan to waste time on the picturesque boardwalk by the bay. Jessica drove straight to the one big department store in town, which was a few streets from the bay area¹⁷⁸'s visitor-friendly face.

The dance was billed as semiformal, and we weren't exactly sure that that meant. I wracked my brain, trying to recall all of the times we had learned about prefixes back in Phoenix. A *semitruck* is an enormous truck, and a *semibreve* is a whole note in music. Angela and Jessica were counting on me to solve this riddle, but I just didn't know. They both seemed surprised, but reminded me that I was still

178. A region in Northern California consisting of San Jose, San Francisco, Oakland, Fremont, Santa Rosa, Hayward, Sunnyvale, Concord, Vallejo, Santa Clara, Fairfield, Richmond, Berkeley, Daly City, Antioch, Alameda, Cupertino, Livermore, Milpitas, Mountain View, Napa, Novato, Palo Alto, Petaluma, Pittsburg, Pleasanton, Redwood City, San Leandro, San Mateo, San Rafael, Santa Cruz, South San Francisco, Union City, Vacaville, Walnut Creek, Benicia, Brentwood, Burlingame, Campbell, Dublin, East Palo Alto, Foster City, Gilroy, Hollister, Los Altos, Martinez, Menlo Park, Morgan Hill, Newark, Oakley, Pacifica, Pleasant Hill, Rohnert Park, San Bruno, San Carlos, San Pablo, San Ramon, Saratoga, Suisun City, Watsonville, Albany, American Canyon, Belmont, Clayton, Dixon, El Cerrito, Half Moon Bay, Healdsburg, Hercules, Lafayette, Larkspur, Mill Valley, Millbrae, Orinda, Piedmont, Pinole, Scotts Valley, Belvedere, Brisbane, Calistoga, Capitola, Cloverdale, Cotati, Emeryville, Monte Sereno, Rio Vista, Saint Helena, San Juan Bautista, Sausalito, Sebastopol, Sonoma, Danville, Hillsborough, Los Gatos, Moraga, San Anselmo, Windsor, Atherton, Colma, Corte Madera, Fairfax, Los Altos Hills, Portola Valley, Ross, Tiburon, Woodside, Yountville, Alamo, Ashland, Bay Point, Blackhawk-Camino Tassajara, Castro Valley, Cherryland, El Sobrante, Live Oak, North Fair Oaks, San Lorenzo, Stanford, Tamalpais-Homestead Valley, Amesti, Angwin, Aptos, Aptos Hills-Larkin Valley, Aromas, Bayview-Montalvin, Ben Lomond, Bethel Island, Black Point-Green Point, Bodega Bay, Bolinas, Boyes Hot Springs, Boulder Creek, Broadmoor, Buena Vista, Burbank, Byron, Clyde, Corralitos, Crockett, Day Valley, Deer Park, Diablo, Dillon Beach, Discovery Bay, East Richmond Heights, East Foothills, El Granada, El Verano, Eldridge, Elmira, Fairview, Felton, Fetzters Hot Springs-Agua Caliente, Forestville, Freedom, Fruitdale, Glen Ellen, Graton, Green Valley, Guerneville, Highlands-Baywood Park, Interlaken, Inverness, Kensington, Kentfield, Knightsen, Lagunitas-Forest Knolls, Larkfield-Wikiup, Lexington Hills, Loyola, Lucas Valley-Marinwood, Montara, Monte Rio, Moss Beach, Mountain View, Muir Beach, Occidental, Opal Cliffs, Pacheco, Point Reyes Station, Port Costa, Ridgemark, Rio del Mar, Rodeo, Rollingwood, Roseland, San Geronimo, San Martin, Santa Venetia, Seven Trees, Soquel, Stinson Beach, Strawberry, Sunol, Sunol-Midtown, Tara Hills, Temelec, Tomales, Twin Lakes, Vine Hill, Waldon, West Menlo Park, Woodacre, Bayo Vista, Bonny Doon, Eastport, Glen Frazer, Kenwood, Kilkare, La Honda, Loma Mar, Mount Eden, Mount Hermon, New Idria, Olema, Paicines, Panoche, Pasatiempo, Pescadero, San Gregorio, Tres Pinos, Summit and Valle Vista.

the coolest person they knew, so that was comforting. They were also surprised that I'd never been to a dance. In fact, they were so surprised, they almost didn't believe me.

"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. My self esteem had already taken a hit this afternoon. "I've never had a boyfriend or anything close. I didn't go out much. "

"Why not?" Jessica demanded. "You're *so* beautiful and outgoing and interesting and smart. I look up to you like you're my big sister, or a gorgeous cousin that I have. You're a role model to me in almost every way."

I appreciated her flattery. "I didn't ask me out because 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 a suspicious eye.¹⁷⁹

"Excuse me?" I ground my teeth. "Tyler said *what*?"

"I told you it wasn't true," Angela murmured to Jessica.

I was silent, lost in a shock that was quickly turning to irritation. Fucking Tyler.

"That's why Lauren doesn't like you," Jessica giggled while we pawed through the clothes.

I rolled my eyes. "Lauren is a *lesbian*." I said.

Angela laughed. "No she's not!"

I rolled my eyes again. "Have you *seen* her haircut?" I demanded. Angela suddenly looked off into the distance, as if thinking pensively.

"Yes," I asserted. "Lauren doesn't like me because she's a lesbian, and Tyler likes me because he almost killed me and feels bad about it. Maybe I should just let him suck my dick and be done with it!"

Angela snapped back into the conversation at the mention that I had a dick. "...what did you just say?" she asked, innocently.

Oh, wouldn't *you* like to know...

The dress selection wasn't large, but both of them found a few things to try on. There weren't a lot of dresses with enough room for Jessica's huge ass, but I helped her find a few that had enough material to make it look like it was just a bunch of extra material and not a fat ass that was making it puff out. She hugged me and thanked me for always looking out for her. I hugged her back, but rolled my eyes at myself in the mirror as I was doing it. While she tried to fit the dresses up over her child-bearing hips, I sat on a low chair just inside the dressing room, by the three-way mirror, trying to control my fuming.

Jessica was torn between two—one a long, strapless, basic black number, the other a knee-length electric blue number with electric straps. I encouraged her to go with blue; if she was going to not take my advice, and wear something form fitting, she might as well show her legs to distract everyone from her stratospheric backside. Angela chose a pale pink dress that draped around her tall frame nicely and brought out the honey tints in her light brown hair. At least, that's what I said to her.

"That pink dress drapes around your tall frame nicely and brings out the honey tints in your light brown hair," I said. "Jessica, don't you think that pink dress drapes around Angela's tall frame nicely and brings out the honey tints in her light brown hair?"

179. Jessica's eye thinks that Bella is up to something.

Jessica nodded. I continued to compliment them both generously until they needed help returning their rejects to the racks. The whole process was much shorter and easier than similar trips I'd taken with Rénee at home.¹⁸⁰

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 consume me. Why did he think I was going to prom with him? Just because I hadn't explicitly said no didn't mean that I said yes! Was English his *second language*? I made a mental note to myself to learn how to say "no" in Rapist.

"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 her ankle.

I chickened out. "I like those. "I think I'll get them—though they'll never match anything but the pink dress I'm buying for this dance," she mused.

"Yeah, you'll have to wear that dress for the rest of your life!" I exclaimed. But the joke was lost on her. "Oh, go ahead and buy them—they're on *sale*," I encouraged. She smiled, putting the lid back on a box that contained the more practical-looking off-white shoes that she would have chosen if I hadn't inspired her to be so balls-out nasty.

I tried again. "Um, Angela... " She looked up curiously. "Is it normal for the... Cullens"—I kept my eyes on the shoes so she couldn't see into my soul—"to be out of school a lot?" I failed miserably in my attempt to sound nonchalant. The fact that I brought up the Cullens immediately after convincing her to buy pink shoes must have totally given away that I was thinking about Fredward the whole time.

"Yes, when the weather is good they go backpacking all the time—even the doctor. They're all real outdoorsy. They like to swim the seas and climb mountains, if you know-know what I'm saying." She winked. I was beginning to really like Angela. She was in the top percentile of acceptable people I had met in Forks, the small elite group that didn't make me want to jump off a building and into a dumpster.

"Oh." I let the subject drop as Jessica returned to show us the rhinestone jewelry she'd found to match her silver shoes. "Oh." I said, in response to the jewelry, and the way her idea of matching was two things being the same color.

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, so, honestly, we weren't even really that hungry yet. Jess and Angela were going to take their clothes, shoes, and jewelry 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 where I could find books on vampires. I didn't tell them that, of course, as I realized it would sound a little bit strange, and they'd probably want to know more about it. They were both willing to come with me to the bookstore, but I encouraged them to go have fun. "Be young!" I shouted. They looked at me, then at each other, then at me again. "Go be young, frivolous! Don't waste your time sitting around a silly old book store!" They shrugged. They didn't know how preoccupied I could get when surrounded by books. It's like the books would open up and implode, drawing me into worlds unlike worlds I'd ever known; it was something I preferred to do alone. They walked off to the car, happily chattering their simple chatter, 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 and other New Age Indian hippie

180. Though Bella did not attend many high school dances in Phoenix, her mother did.

shit. 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.

I meandered through the streets, which were filling up with end-of-the-workaday traffic, and hoped I was headed toward downtown. I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have 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.

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 and I needed to get my mood in hand before I got *out* of hand. I ran my fingers through my hair a couple of times huffily and took some deep breaths before I continued around the corner.

I started to realize, as I crossed another road, after taking some more yoga breaths, that I was going in the wrong direction. The little foot traffic I had seen was going north, and it looked like the buildings 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. I thought it was a pretty solid plan, and I had no idea I was in for danger until...

A group of fourteen 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 repeatedly. I scooted as far to the inside of the sidewalk as I could to give them room for their homoerotic foreplay, 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 heavysset, 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 flannel t-shirt, cut-off flannel jeans, and thong sandals. He took half a step toward me. *You better not get any closer, you hobo*, I thought, wondering if he had robbed one of those clothing-collection boxes. Where *else* could he have got that outfit?

"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 there!" 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 store yard. I'd wandered far past the part of Fort Angles that I, as a simple guest, was intended to see. These were the acute differences between the tourist and tangential town areas of Fort Angles. 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. As if things couldn't get any worse, a single van passed by me and honked, blaring a grotesque rendition of "La Cucaracha," 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, and that it was likely they who had darkened the sky with their evil intentions.

They were from the same group I'd passed at the corner, though neither was the dark one who'd spoken with 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 Juicy Couture 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,¹⁸¹ and I thought about "accidentally" dropping my bag and walking away. But a small, frightened voice in the back of my soul warned me that they might be something worse than thieves.¹⁸²

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 for sure that they're following you. They might have just forgotten their keys at work, their jackets at their hovel, their... their...

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, of ending it all.

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, hard. 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, were sorry they'd ever thought of raping me. 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.¹⁸³ The street was lined on both sides by blank, doorless, windowless walls. I could see in the distance, two intersections down, street lamps, 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 I wasn't being followed. I was being herded. I paused for only a second, but it felt like a very long time. I turned then and darted to the other side of the road. I had a sinking feeling that it was a wasted attempt. The foot steps behind me were louder now. "There you are!" The booming voice of the stocky, dark-haired, flannel-clad man shattered the intense quiet and made me jump out of my skin. In the gathering darkness, it seemed like he was looking past me. "Yeah," a voice called loudly from behind me, making me jump out of my skin again as I tried to hurry down the street. "We just took a little—whaddayacallit—*detour*." He sounded mentally retarded; it scared me.

My steps had to slow now. I was closing the distance between myself and the lounging pair too quickly. I had a good loud scream, inherited from my mother, and I sucked in air, preparing to use it, but my throat was so dry I wasn't sure how much volume I could manage. With a quick movement I slipped my purse over my head, gripping the strap with one hand, ready to surrender it or use it as weapon as need demanded.

181. Best estimates place her total pocket-money to be between twenty-two and twenty-four dollars.

182. A list of things that, under Washington penal code, are worse than thieves: poachers.

183. Bella pulled the emergency brakes on her shoes.

The thickset man shrugged away from the wall as I warily came to a stop, and walked slowly down the street.

"Stay away from me," I warned in a voice that was supposed to sound strong and fearless. But I was right about the dry throat—no volume.¹⁸⁴

"Don't be like that, sugar," he called, and the raucous laughter started again behind me.

I braced myself, feet apart, trying to remember through my panic what little self-defense I knew. Heel of the hand thrust upward, hopefully breaking the nose or shoving it into the brain. Finger through the eye socket—try to hook around and pop the other eye out. And the standard knee to the groin, of course. That same pessimistic voice in my soul spoke up then, reminding me that I only had one knee and there were fourteen of *them*. Shut up! I commanded the voice before terror could incapacitate me. I wasn't going out without taking someone with me. I tried to swallow so I could build up a decent scream.

Headlights suddenly flew around the corner, the car almost hitting the stocky one, forcing him to jump back toward the sidewalk in his flannel flip-flops. I dove into the road—*this* car was going to stop, or have to hit me. But the silver Volvo car unexpectedly fishtailed around, skidding to a stop with the passenger door open just a few feet from me and "The Boys Are Back in Town" blasting from the stereo.

"Get in," a familiar furious voice commanded. I grinned, elated.

It was amazing how instantaneously the choking fear vanished, amazing how suddenly the feeling of security washed over me—even before I was off the street—as soon as I heard His voice. I jumped into¹⁸⁵ the seat, slamming the door shut behind me.

It was dark in the car, no light had come on with the opening of the door, and I could barely see his face in the glow from the dashboard. The tires squealed as he spun around to face north, accelerating quickly, too quickly, swerving toward the stunned men on the street. I caught a glimpse of them diving for the sidewalk as we straightened out and sped toward the harbor.

"Put on your seat belt," he commanded, and I realized I was clutching the seat with both hands. I quickly obeyed; the snap as the belt connector connected with the clasp was loud in the darkness. He took a sharp left, racing forward, blowing through several stop signs without a pause.

But I felt utterly safe and, for a moment, totally unconcerned about where we were going. I stared at his face in profound relief, relief that went beyond my sudden deliverance from gang rape. I studied his flawless Continental features in the limited light, waiting for my breath to return to normal, until it occurred to me that his expression was murderously angry.

"Are you okay?" I asked, surprised how hoarse my voice sounded.

"No," he said curtly, and his tone was livid.

I sat in silence, watching his face while his blazing eyes stared straight ahead, until the car came to a sudden stop. I glanced around, but it was too dark to see anything beside the vague outline of dark trees crowding the roadside. We weren't in town anymore. Against my will, I shuddered. I trusted Fredward as the love of my life; was he going to try to rape me, too? Had he only rescued me from gang rape so that he could gang rape me himself?

"Bella?" He croaked.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Distract me, please," he ordered.

"I'm sorry, what?"

He exhaled sharply.

184. *Pump Up the Volume* (1972), about a young radio DJ who just wants everyone to pump up the volume of their lives.

185. onto

"Just prattle about something unimportant, as you usually do, until I calm down,"¹⁸⁶ he clarified, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose with his brain and forefinger.

"Um." I wracked my brain for something trivial. Was there *anything* trivial in there? "I'm going to run over Tyler Crowley tomorrow before school?" I asked.

He was still squeezing his eyes closed and clenching his PC muscle, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Why?" He asked.

"He's telling everyone that he's taking me to prom—either he's insane or he's still trying to make up for almost killing me last... well, you remember it, and he thinks *prom* is somehow the correct way to do this. So I figure if I endanger his life, then we're even, and he can't keep trying to make amends. I don't need enemies and maybe Lauren would back off if he left me alone. I might have to total his Cadillac, though. If he doesn't have his wheels, he can't take me to prom..." I babbled on. Babbling on about trivial, teenage matters was more fun than I had anticipated.

"I heard about that." He sounded a bit more composed.

"You *did*?" I asked in disbelief, my previous irritation flaring. "If he's paralyzed from the neck down, he can't go to the prom, either," I muttered, refining my plan.

Fredward looked at me square in the eye and gave me a crooked smile. "You can't just paralyze someone from the neck down because they want to take you to prom."

I rolled my eyes. "Are you feeling better?"

"Not really."

I waited, but he didn't speak again. He leaned his head back against the seat, staring at the ceiling of the car. His face hardened.

"What's wrong?" My voice came out in a raspy whimper.

"Sometimes I have a problem with my temper. Sometimes I have a lot of problems, Bella." He was whispering too, and as he stared out the window, his eyes narrowed into squinty slits. "But it *wouldn't* be helpful for me to turn around and hunt down those..." He paused for a long time.

"It would be helpful for you to finish that sentence," I said.

He looked away, struggling for a moment to control his anger again. He made two fists and began to bang them against his ears. After about a minute, he regained composure and continued the conversation. "...*flannel-clad rapists*." He hit himself in the crotch and took a deep breath, held it, and continued once again. "At least," he continued, "That's what I'm trying to convince myself."

"Oh." The word seemed to be an appropriate approximation of my emotional capacity.

We sat in silence again. I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was past eight-thirty. I had been in Fredward's car for over three hours.

"Jessica and Angela will be worried," I murmured breathlessly under my breath. "I was supposed to meet them three hours ago."

He started the engine without another word, turning around smoothly and speeding back toward town. I guess he wasn't going to rape me after all... We were under the streetlights in no time at all, still going too fast, weaving with ease through the cars slowly cruising the boardwalk.¹⁸⁷ He parallel-parked against the curb I would have thought much too small for a Volvo, unless it was perpendicularly-parked, but he slid in effortlessly in one try. I looked out the window to see the lights of La Bella Italia, and Jess and Angela just leaving, pacing anxiously away from us.

"How did you know where...?" I began, but then I just shook my head. I heard the door open and turned to see him getting out.

"Fredward, if you are just trying to rape me, you're putting a hell of a lot of work into this." I

186. Please see thought question #5 for more.

187. Sometimes cars need anonymous male sex, too.

scolded quietly.

"What did you say?" He asked, his eyes turning black, then gold.

"What? Hey, where are you going?"

"I'm taking you to dinner." He smiled slightly, but he was hard. He stepped out of the car and slammed the door loudly. I fumbled with my seat belt connector, struggling to disconnect it from itself. I hated to keep Fredward waiting. He was waiting for me on the sidewalk.

He spoke before I could. "Go stop Jessica and Angela before I have to track them down, too. I don't think I could restrain myself if I ran into your other friends again."

I shivered. I would never wish gang rape upon my friends—or even my "friends"—but I was a little jealous that Fredward wanted to protect them, too. What if someone else tried to gang rape me, or run me over, while he was saving them from being gang raped? I wondered if he was spreading himself too thin...

"Jess! Angela!" I yelled after them, waving when they turned. They rushed back to me, the pronounced relief on both their faces simultaneously changing to surprise as they saw who I was standing next to. They hesitated a few feet from us.

"Where have you been?" Jessica's eyebrows raised with suspicion.

"I got lost," I admitted sheepishly. "And then I ran into Fredward." I gestured toward Fredward, in case they didn't know who I was talking about.

"Would it be all right if I joined you?" he asked in his sweet, seductive, silken, irresistible voice. I could see from their staggered expressions that he had never unleashed his talents on them before. I was feeling a little jealous that I had to share my man-meat with them, but I knew he loved me, so I convinced myself not to worry about it.

"Er... sure," Jessica breathed.

"Um, actually, Bella, we already ate while we were waiting... for three hours—sorry," Angela confessed, nudging Jessica.

"Uh, yeah," Jessica added. "I got really...*hungry*." Was she hitting on my man?

Fredward turned to me. "I think you should eat something," his voice was low and full of authority. He looked up at Jessica and spoke slightly louder. "Do you mind if I drive Bella home tonight? That way you won't have to wait while she... eats."

Jessica bit her lip, speechless. She was trying to figure out from my expression whether that was what I wanted. I winked at her. I wanted nothing more than to be alone with my perpetual savior. There were so many questions swelling up in my small brain inside my big head that I couldn't bombard him with 'til we were by ourselves in La Bella Italia.

"Okay," Angela was quicker than Jessica. "See you tomorrow, Bella...*Fredward*." I immediately fantasized about what kind of celebrity-fusion name we would have. *Frella? Bedward?* I liked *Bedward*... Angela grabbed Jessica's hand and pulled her toward the car, which I could see a little ways away, parked across First Street. As they got in, Jess turned and waved, her face eager with curiosity and about to burst.

"Honestly, I'm not hungry." I insisted, looking up to scrutinize his face. His expression was unreadable. If Fredward's world were a library, I would be illiterate.

"Yes you are." He walked to the door of the restaurant and held it open with an obstinate expression. Obviously, there would be no further discussion. I walked past him into the restaurant with a resigned sigh. Maybe I *liked* being controlled, but I'd never let him know it...

The restaurant wasn't crowded—apparently most people knew how much western Washington sucked and avoided it. The host was female, and I understood the look in her eyes as she assessed Fredward. Either she was an army recruiter, or a horny bitch. She welcomed him a little more warmly than necessary. I was surprised by how much that bothered me. She was several inches taller than I

was, and unnaturally blonde.¹⁸⁸

"A table for two?" His voice was alluring, whether he was aiming for that or not. I saw her eyes flicker to me and then away, satisfied by my obvious ordinariness, and by the cautious, non-contact space Fredward kept between us. I sighed. She led us to a table big enough for four in the center of the most crowded area of the dining floor. She wanted us to keep it public, for whatever reason.

I sighed, and was about sit, but Fredward shook his head at me.

"Perhaps something more... *private*?" he insisted quietly to the host, cupping a bit of her butt into his enormous hands. I wasn't sure, but it looked like he smoothly handed her a tip. I'd never seen anything like it except in old movies.

"Sure." She sounded as surprised as I was. She turned and led us around a partition to a small ring of booths—all of them empty. "How's this?"

"Perfect." He smashed his gleaming smile, dazing her momentarily.

"Um"—she shook her head, blinking wildly—"your server will be right out." She walked away unsteadily.

"You really shouldn't do that to people," I criticized.

"Do what?"

"*Dazzle* them like that—she's probably hyperventilating in the kitchen right now. You probably killed her."

He seemed confused.

"Oh, come on," I said dubiously. "You *have* to know the effect you have on people."

He tilted his head to one side, and his eyes were curious. "I razzle-dazzle people?"

"You haven't noticed? Do you think everybody gets their way so easily?"

He ignored my questions. "Do I razzle-dazzle...*you*?"

"Frequently," I admitted.

And then our server arrived, her face expectant. The hostess had definitely dished behind the scenes, and this new girl didn't look disappointed. She flipped a strand of short black hair behind one ear, hiked up her breasts, and smiled with unnecessary warmth.

"Hello. My name is Amber, and I'll be your server tonight. What can I get you to drink?" I didn't miss that she was speaking only to him and not to me.

He looked at me.

"I'll have a Coke?" It sounded like a question but was a bold statement.

"You'll have *two* Cokes," he said.

"I'll be right back with those Cokes," she assured him with another unnecessary smile. I'd never seen a waitress smile so much in my entire life. I was almost out of my seat after her, fists ready, when I saw that Fredward didn't even see those smiles. He had been watching me the whole time.

"What?" I asked when she left.

His eyes stayed fixed on my face. "How are you feeling...?"

"I'm *fine*," I replied, surprised by his intensity, hot from his attention.

"You don't feel dizzy, sick, cold...?"

"*Should* I?" I leaned in against my folded arms, pushing my breasts up and forward.

He chuckled at my tone.

"Well, I'm actually waiting for you to go into shock." His face twisted up into that perfect crooked smile.

"Oh, I don't think that will happen," I said after I could breathe again. "I've always been very good at.... *repressing* things."

188. Bella feels threatened because she assumes that men prefer tall blondes over protagonists.

"Just the same, I'll feel better when you have some sugar and...*food*... in you."

Right on cue, the waitress appeared with my drinks and a basket of fiddlesticks. Just when we were getting somewhere...

"Are you ready to order?" she asked Fredward.

"Bella?" he asked. She turned unwillingly toward me.

I picked the first thing I saw on the menu. "Um... I'll have the mushroom raviolio."

"And you?" She pivoted back towards him with a smile.

"Nothing for me," he said. Of course not. How could he hunger for anything more when he had...

"Let me know if you change your mind." The coy smile was still in place, but he wasn't looking at her, and she left dissatisfied.¹⁸⁹

"Drink," he ordered.

I sipped at my soda obediently,¹⁹⁰ and then drank more deeply, surprised by how thirsty I was. I realized I had finished the whole thing when he pushed the second glass toward me.

"Thanks," I muttered, still thirsty.¹⁹¹ The cold from the icy soda was radiating through my chest, and I shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked, the words delicately playing across his crooked smile.

"It's just the Coke," I explained, shivering again.

"Don't you have a jacket?" His voice was disapproving.

"Yes, *Fredward*." I looked at the empty bench next to me, ready to shake it in his face. "Oh—I left it in Jessica's car," I realized out loud. I hoped she wasn't sitting on it, or wearing it.

Fredward was shrugging out of his jacket. I suddenly realized that I had never once noticed what he was wearing¹⁹²—not just tonight, but ever. I just couldn't seem to look away from his face. I made myself look now, while I had the chance. He was removing a light beige leather jacket now; underneath he wore an ivory turtleneck sweater that had buttons running all the way up the front. It fit him snugly, emphasizing how muscular his chest was.

He handed me the jacket, interrupting my ogling.

"Thanks," I said again, sliding my arms into his buckskin jacket. It was cold—the way my jacket felt when I first picked it up in the morning, hanging in the drafty hallway. I shivered again. It smelled amazing.¹⁹³ I inhaled, trying to identify the delicious scent.¹⁹⁴ It didn't smell like cologne. The sleeves were much too long; I shoved them up to my shoulders so I could free my hands.

"That color blue looks lovely with your skin," he said, watching me. I was surprised; nobody had ever noticed that it perfectly matched my skin. I looked down, flushing, of course.

He pushed the fiddle basket toward me.

"Really, I'm not going into sh-shock," I protested.

"You should be—a *normal* person would be. You don't even look shaken, let alone stirred."¹⁹⁵ He seemed unsettled. He stared into my eyes, and I saw how light his eyes were, lighter than I'd ever seen them, golden butterscotch.

189. Most likely expecting a bad tip.

190. Vampire hypnosis.

191. Vampire osmosis?

192. As written in Emily Post's *Etiquette*, noticing what one's date is wearing, and then announcing that you have done so aloud, is the first and most important step towards making a good impression. Failure to do so may jeopardize the prospect of having further dates.

193. It smelled of vampire.

194. Vampire.

195. A reference to *Octopussy* (1943), the penultimate entry in the James Bond series in which he lists all of his favorite drinks and how he likes them to be made.

"I feel very safe with you," I confessed, mesmerized into telling the truth again.

That displeased him; his alabaster brow furrowed.¹⁹⁶ He shook his head, frowning.

"This is more complicated than I'd planned," he mumbled to himself.

I picked up a fiddlestick and began nibbling on the tip, measuring his expression. I wondered if he understood what I was saying.

"Usually you're in a better mood when your eyes are so light," I commented, trying to distract him from whatever thought had left him frowning and somber.

He stared at me, confused. "What?"

"You're always crabbier when your eyes are black—I expect it then," I went on. "I have a theory about that."

His eyes narrowed, his crooked smile sneered. "*More* theories?"

"Mm-hmm." I chewed on a small bite of fiddle, trying to look indifferent.

"I hope you were more creative this time... or are you still stealing from comic books?" He crooked smile was mocking; his eyes were still tight.

"Well, no, I didn't get it from a comic book, but I didn't come up with it on my own, either," I confessed.

"And?" he prompted.

But then the waitress strode around the partition with my food. I realized we'd been unconsciously leaning toward each other across the table, because we both straightened up, dusted ourselves off, and coughed into our fists as she approached. She set the dish in front of me—it looked pretty good—and turned quickly to Fredward.

"Did you change your mind?" she asked. "Isn't there anything I can get you?" I may have been imagining the double meaning in her words.

"No, thank you, but some more soda would be... *divine*." He gestured with a long white hand to the empty cups in front of me.

"Sure." She removed the empty glasses and walked away.

"You were saying?" he asked.

"I'll tell you about it in the car. If..." I paused dramatically.

"There are conditions?" He raised one alabaster eyebrow, his voice ominous.

"I do have a few questions, of course."

"Of course," he scoffed.

The waitress was back with two more Cokes. She sat them down without a word this time, and left again.

I took a victory sip.

"Well, go ahead," he pushed, his voice still rock-hard.

I started with the most undemanding. Or so I thought. "Why are you in Fort Angles?"

He looked down, folding his large hands together slowly on the table. His eyes flickered up at me from under his lashes, a hint of a smirk on his face.

"Next."

"But that's the easiest one," I spluttered.

"Next," he repeated.

I pounded my fist on the table and looked down, frustrated. I unrolled my silverware, picked up my fork, and carefully speared a raviolio. It was soft, succulent. I put it in my mouth slowly, still looking down but tasting, tasting the raviolio as I chewed and thought. The mushrooms were good. The raviolio was good. I swallowed and took another sip of Coke. I enjoyed it in the mix.

196. Evidently, Fredward has white eyebrows.

"Okay, then." I glared up at him, and continued slowly, as if he were the dumbest vampire in the world. "Let's say, hypothetically of course, that... someone... could know what people are thinking, read minds, you know—with a few exceptions."

"Just *one* exception," he corrected, "hypothetically."

"All right, with one exception, then." I was thrilled he was playing along, but I tried to play it cool.

"How does that work? What are the limitations? How would... *that someone...* find... someone else at... exactly the right time? How would he.."

"Or she," Fredward winked.

"Or she. How would he or she... find someone else at exactly the right time? How would he or she know that he or she was about to be gang raped in Fort Angles?"

"Hypothetically?" he asked.

"Sure." I squealed, thrilled that he was still playing along. It was becoming quite the game.

"Well, if... that someone..."

"Let's call him Rob Pattinson." I suggested.

Fredward smiled wryly. "Robert Pattinson, then. If Robert Pattinson had been paying attention, the timing wouldn't have needed to have been quite so exact."

"Hypothetically... ?" I teased.

He suddenly looked irritated. "Only *you* could get into trouble in a town this small. You would have devastated their crime rate statistics for a decade, you know. If you had let yourself get raped multiple times back there."

Was this turning into the *blame* game? "We were *speaking* of a *hypothetical case*," I reminded him frostily.

He laughed at me, his eyes warming.

"Yes, we were," he agreed. "Shall we call you 'La Bella Italia'?"

"How did you know?" I asked, unable to curb my intensity. I realized I was leaning toward him again and drooling quite a bit into the remaining glass of Coke.

He seemed to be wavering, torn by some internal dilemma. His eyes locked up my eyes in a heavenly prison, and I guessed he was making the decision right then whether or not to simply tell me the truth.

"You can trust me, you know," I murmured, trying to be casual. I reached forward, without thinking, to touch his enormous folded hands, but he slid them away minutely,¹⁹⁷ and I pulled my hand back.

"I don't know if I have a choice anymore." His voice was almost a whisper. "I was wrong—you're so much more observant than I gave you credit for. You knew the Rob Pattinson of our hypothetical conversation was..."

"You?" I asked, sweetly. This was the first time I had been able to complete one of his sentences, and it felt *so good*.

"*I thought you were always right*," I chortled.

"I used to be." He shook his head again, probably reminiscing about the times he had been right. "I was wrong about you on one other thing, as well. You're not a magnet for accidents—that's not a broad enough classification. You are a magnet for *trouble*. Do you know what I'm saying? If there is anything dangerous within a twenty-kilometer radius, it will invariably find you."

I did the quick math in my head; twenty kilometers was somewhere around one hundred gallons.

197. In a tiny fashion.

"And you put yourself in that *trouble* category? I guessed.

His face turned cold, hard, expressionless; his eyes were as jet black as Eric's Chinese afro. "Unequivocally."

"Unequivocally..." I said the word to myself, as quietly as possible, for a moment, trying to remember what it meant.

He came to my rescue. "Without a doubt."

I stretched my hand across the table again—ignoring him when he pulled back slightly once more—to touch the back of his hand shyly with my fingertips. Fredward's skin was cold as well as hard. The waitress, who had been looking at us the whole time, glared at me a bit. "Eat my dust!" I mouthed at her.

"Thank you." My voice was fervent with gratitude. "That's twice now."

His face softened. "Let's not try again for three, agreed?"

I scowled, but nodded. I was torn. He moved his hand out from under mine, and placed both of his under the table. But he leaned toward me a little bit, which made me feel somewhat better about my chances of him being in love with me.

"I followed you to Fort Angles," he admitted, speaking in a rush. "I've never tried to keep a specific person alive before, and it's much more troublesome than I would have believed. But that's probably just because it's you. Ordinary people seem to make it through the day without so many catastrophes." He paused. I wondered if it should bother me that he was following me; instead I felt a strange surge of pleasure, like I was being tickled in a place I hadn't been tickled in years. He stared, maybe wondering why my lips were curving into an involuntary smile?

"Did you ever think that maybe my number was up the first time with the van, and that you've been interfering with fate?"

"*Fuck* fate," he said, and his voice was hard to hear because he was speaking so quietly. I stared at him in amazement, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking down at his lap. "Your number was up the first time I met you."

I felt a spasm of fear in his words, and a spasm of tickle in my groin, and the abrupt memory of his violent black glare that first day... but the overwhelming sense of safety I felt in his presence stifled it. By the time he looked up to read my eyes, there was no trace of fear in them. If he was going to kill me or rape me, I remembered, he would have had plenty of opportunities to do these things earlier.

"You remember?" he asked, his angel's face grave.

"Yes." I was calm, cool, collected.

"And yet here you sit." There was a trace of disbelief in his voice; he raised one alabaster eyebrow.

"Yes, here I sit... because of you." I paused.

"And I sit here because of you." He added.

"If you hadn't known where to find me today, I'd probably be sitting in a dumpster somewhere."

He pressed his lips together, staring at me through narrowed eyes, deciding again. His eyes flashed down to my raviolio and fiddlesticks, and then back to me.

"You focus on your fiddlesticks. I'll talk." He bargained.

I quickly scooped up another raviolio and popped it in my mouth¹⁹⁸ before he could go back on his offer.

"It's harder than it should be," he began.

Finished with the first raviolio, I picked up a fiddlestick, smeared it around in the raviolio sauce

198. The Cream Team!

for awhile, and then ate it very slowly.

"It's harder than it should be," he continued, "keeping track of you. Usually I can find someone very easily, once I've read their mind before." He looked at me anxiously, and I realized I had frozen. I made myself swallow,¹⁹⁹ then stabbed another raviolio and tossed it in. It hit the back of my throat and I gagged for a second but then managed to spit it back into the front of my mouth and everything was okay.

"I was keeping tabs on Jessica, not carefully—like I said, only you could find trouble in Fort Angles—and at first I didn't notice when you took off on your own. Then, when I realized that you weren't with her anymore, I threw a fit. When I was finished with my fit, I went looking for you at the bookstore I saw in her head. I could tell that you hadn't gone in, and that you'd gone... south. And I knew you would have to turn around soon. So I was just waiting for you, hanging out, randomly searching through the thoughts of people on the street, like browsing fashion magazines at a checkout stand, real casual, to see if anyone had noticed you so that I would know where you were. I had no reason to be worried... but I was strangely anxious..." He was lost in thought, probably reminiscing, staring past me, seeing things I couldn't imagine...

"I started to drive my Volvo in very tight circles, still... listening. The sun was finally setting, and the Volvo was getting low on gas, so I was about to get out and follow you on foot. And then—" He stopped, clenching his teeth together in sudden fury. He made an effort to calm himself. "There there, Fredward," he whispered, probably hoping I couldn't hear him, fearing that I would laugh. "There there."

I wouldn't have laughed.

"Then what?" I whispered. He continued to stare over my head.

"I heard what they were *thinking*," he growled, tossing his head back, his upper lip curling slightly back over his teeth. "I saw your face in his mind." He suddenly leaned forward, one elbow appearing on the table, his hand covering his eyes. The movement was so swift it startled me. "I saw more than your *face* in his mind, Bella. It was very... hard—you can't imagine how hard... for me to take you away, and leave them... alive." His voice was muffled by his arm. I think he was sobbing. "I could have let you go with Jessica and Angela, but I was afraid if you left me alone, I would go looking for them," he admitted in a whisper. "I am just *so* protective of you, Bella. And you get into so much trouble, and most of it isn't even your fault. It's like the world is against you, Bella, and I can't stand it..."

I sat quietly, dazed, my thoughts incoherent. My hands were folded in my lap, and I was leaning weakly against the back of the seat. He still had his face in his enormous left hand, and he was as still as if he'd been carved from the stone his skin resembled.

Finally he looked up, his eyes seeking mine, full of his own questions.

"Are you all ready to go home?"

"With *you*?"

"Well, I'm driving you, but I'll take you to your house."

"I'm ready to leave," I qualified, overly grateful that we had the hour-long ride home together. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to him. Our relationship was developing really quickly now, and I didn't want to miss a minute of it. Every minute, I felt closer and closer to him.

The waitress appeared as if she'd been called. Or watching.

"How are we doing?" she asked Fredward.

"We're ready for the check, thank you." His voice was quiet, rougher, still reflecting the strain of our conversation. It seemed to muddle her. It seemed to kick mud all over her hopes that Fredward

199. Part deux!!

might be interested in her. Fredward looked up to find her looking down at him, trying to sneak a peak at his lap.

"S-sure," she stuttered in defeat when he used his two hands and wrists to make an X blocking the view of his crotch. "Here you go." She pulled his check out from between her sweaty breasts and handed it to him. He took it reluctantly, looking over at me with raised alabaster eyebrows. He smelled it. We shared a look of disgust, a strangely-romantic look of disgust.

The waitress seemed offended and was about to leave, but there was a bill in his enormous hand already. His hand was so enormous, the bill looked like Monopoly money. He put it on the edge of the counter, scooting away from her.

"No change." He smiled alluringly. The waitress was disappointed that Fredward wouldn't be going home with her, but relieved that he had left a good tip. Then he stood up to leave, and I scrambled awkwardly to my feet.

She smiled invitingly at him again. "You have a *nice* evening," she cooed, beckoning him with an index finger. I thought about beckoning her with my middle finger, but wasn't sure if that would make me less attractive to Fredward, so I passed.

He didn't look away from me as he thanked her. "You have a nice evening, too."

He walked close beside me to the door, still careful not to touch me. I remembered what Jessica had said about her relationship with Mike, how they were almost to the hand-holding stage. I sighed dramatically. Fredward seemed to hear my loud, dramatic sigh, and he looked down curiously. I looked at the sidewalk, grateful that he didn't seem to be able to know what I was thinking intuitively.

He opened the passenger door, holding it for me as I stepped in, shutting it softly behind me. I watched him walk around the front of the car, amazed, yet again, by how graceful he was. I probably should have been used to that by now—but I wasn't, and perhaps I never would be. I had a feeling Fredward wasn't the kind of person anyone got used to.

I also suspected that he was not actually a person.

Once inside the car, he started the engine and turned the heater on high. It had gotten very cold, and I guessed the good weather was at an end. I was warm in his jacket, though, breathing in the scent of vampire when I thought he couldn't see.

Fredward pulled out through the traffic, apparently without a glance, flipping around to head toward the freeway.

"Now," he said significantly, waving his large ivory hand, "it's your turn."

9.

QUEER THEORY

"CAN I ASK JUST ONE MORE??" I PLEADED AS FREDWARD ACCELERATED much too quickly down the quiet street. He didn't seem to be paying any attention to the road, again.

He sighed.

"One," he agreed. His lips pressed together into a crooked smile.

"Well... you said you knew I hadn't gone into the bookstore, and that I had gone... south. I was just wondering how you knew that."

He looked away, deliberating.

"I thought we were past all this," I waved my hand dismissively, "evasiveness."

He almost smiled.

"Fine, then. I followed your scent." He looked at the road, giving me time to compose my face. I couldn't think of an acceptable response to that, but I filed it carefully away for future study. I tried to refocus. I wasn't ready to let him be finished, now that he was finally explaining things.

"And then you didn't answer one of my first questions..." I stalled.

He looked at me with disapproval. "Which one?"

"How does it work—the mind reading thing? Can you read anybody's mind, anywhere? How do you do it? Can the rest of your family...?" I felt silly, asking for clarification on our pretend make-believe.

"That's more than one," he counted. I simply intertwined my fingers and glazed over, waiting. He sighed. "No, it's just me. And I can't hear anyone, anywhere. I have to be fairly close. The more familiar someone's... 'voice' is, the farther away I can hear them. But still, no more than a few miles." He paused thoughtfully. "It's a little like being in a huge hall filled with people, everyone talking at once. It's just a hum—a buzzing humdinger of voices in the background. Until I focus on one voice, and then what they're thinking is clear.

"Most of the time I tune it all out, like a radio—it can be very distracting to have a radio in your head." His eyes twinkled; I chortled. "And then it's easier to seem *normal*"—he frowned as he said the word 'normal'—"when I'm not accidentally answering someone's thoughts rather than their words."

"Why do you think you can't hear me?" I asked curiously.

He looked at me, his eyes enigmatic. "I don't know," his heart murmured. "The only guess I have is that maybe your mind doesn't work the same way the rest of theirs do. Like your thoughts are on the AM frequency and I'm only getting FM." He grinned at me, suddenly amused at his own genius.

"My mind doesn't work right? I'm a freak?" The words bothered me more than they should—probably because his speculation hit home. I'd always suspected as much, that I was unlike the others, a loner, too unique to ever fit in anywhere.

"I hear voices in my mind and you're worried that *you're* the freak," he laughed. "Don't worry, it's just a theory..." But a true theory; that I was sure of. I'd never had someone see through me so completely and felt a wave of emotion come over me. His face tightened, the muscles underneath rippling. "Which brings us back to you."

I sighed as the wave rolled back into the sea. How to begin?

"Aren't we past all the evasions now?" he mimicked me softly.

I looked away from his face for the first time, trying to find words. I happened to notice the speed-o-meter.

"Holy crow!" I shouted. "Slow down!"

"What's wrong?" He was startled, but the car didn't decelerate.

"You're going a hundred miles an hour!" I was still shouting. The forest along both sides of the road was like a black wall—as hard as a wall of steel if we veered off the road at this speed.

"Relax, Bella." He rolled his eyes in his head, still not slowing.

"Are you trying to kill me?" I demanded to know.

"No," he whispered into my ear, his cool breath blowing across its delicate folds.

I tried to modulate my voice. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I always drive like this." He turned to smile crookedly at me.

"Keep your eyes on the road!"

"I've never been in an accident, Bella—I've never even gotten a ticket." He grinned and tapped his forehead. "Built-in radar detector."²⁰⁰

"Very funny." I fumed. "Charlie's a cop, remember? I was raised to abide by traffic laws." I was grasping at straws, pretending my one-armed father had ever had an effect on me. The truth was more simple: I was scared of what might happen. "Besides, if you turn us into a Volvo pretzel around a tree trunk, you can probably just walk away."

"Probably," he agreed with a short, hard laugh. "But you can't." He sighed, and I watched with relief as the needle gradually drifted toward eighty, and I got my way. "Happy?"

"Almost."

"I hate driving slow," he muttered.

"This is slow?"

"Enough commentary on my driving, wench," he snapped. "I'm still waiting for your latest theory."

I bit my lip. He looked down at me, his honey eyes unexpectedly gentle, like a pot of honey.

"I won't laugh," he promised.

"I'm more afraid that you *won't* laugh."

"Is it that bad?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

He waited. I was looking down at my hands, so I couldn't see his expression.

"Go ahead." His voice was calm.

"I don't know how to start," I started.

"I have a suggestion." He said. "Why don't you start at the beginning... you said you didn't come up with this on your own."

I sighed. "No."

"What got you started—a book? A movie?" He probed.

I looked at him with a glint of irritation in my eyes. "No—it was Saturday, at the beach. It was sunny that day... that was a really nice day." Realizing I was getting caught up in reminiscing about something that wasn't even that good, I glanced up at his face. He looked puzzled.

"What were you doing at the beach?" He asked, as though he couldn't possibly fathom why I would go the beach.

"I told Mike I would go on his little trip, and so I kept my promise and went."

"Oh." He sounded hurt.

"I *tried* to invite you." I reminded him.

200. Alien technology, acquired during his "missing years."

"Oh, yeah." He perked up a bit.

"Anyway, I ran into an old family friend—Squaw Black," I continued. "His dad and Charlie have been friends since I was a baby."

He still looked confused, like he didn't know what a baby was.²⁰¹

"His dad is one of the Quaalude elders." I watched him carefully. His confused expression froze in place. "We went for a walk together down the beach. It really was a nice day. I totally used Squaw to make Mike feel jealous. It worked so well, oh man." One look at his face told me to leave my flirting conquests *out* of this story. "And he was telling me some old legends—trying to scare me, I think. Probably so that he could hold me. He told me one..." I hesitated.

"Go on," commanded Fredward with a crooked, confused smile.

"About vampires," I realized I was whispering. I couldn't look at his face now. But I saw his knuckles tighten convulsively on the wheel.

"And you immediately thought of me?" Still calm.

"No. He... mentioned your family. Your beautiful sisters, and bison brothers. Your extremely handsome young father. He *mentioned* them, Fredward."

He silently stared at the road in front of him, presumably wondering where it would lead.

"He just thought it was a silly Indian superstition," I said quickly. "He didn't expect me to think anything of it, much less go blabbing it to the very person—the very *vampire*—that the stories were about." It didn't seem like enough; I had to confess. "It was my fault. I told him I would show him my boobs if he told me."

Fredward took his eyes off the road for a quick second to look at my chest. "Bella," he began in a whisper. "This is hard to say, but you don't really have any boobs."

I was offended. "Well, he wanted to see my nipples." I shot back. I was hurt. What did *Fredward* know about boobs?

"Bella, the real question is why did you bribe him to tell you about me? What made you think that I might be a vampire? How did you... *know*?" He stared once more into the road ahead of him. What would our future *hold*?

"Lauren said something about you—she was trying to provoke me. That lesbian is just mad that her *boyfriend* wants to put his penis inside me. Anyway, an older boy from the tribe said your family didn't come up to the reservation. It made sense at first, that you wouldn't go to the reservation, because reservations aren't that great to begin with and I was sure you were a very busy boy, but then I started wondering if there was a different reason you didn't come to the reservation. I got Squaw alone and I tricked it out²⁰² of him," I admitted, hanging my head.

He startled me by laughing. I glared up at him. He was laughing, but his eyes were fierce, staring ahead at the road.

"Tricked him how?" He asked without looking at me.

"I flirted with him. Made him an offer. I don't really feel comfortable talking to you about this, *Fredward*."

"I'd like to have seen that." He chuckled darkly. "And you accused me of razzle-dazzling people—poor Squaw Black."

I blushed and looked out my window into the night.

"What did you do then?" he asked after a minute, during which his eyes had widened and he had been rubbing his palms together rapidly.

"I did some research on the World Wide Web. You know, HotBot, Web Sights, and shit like that."

201. It has been a very long time since Fredward was a baby.

202. Like Xzibit hot-dogging on a car.

"And did that convince you?" His voice sounded barely interested. But his hands were clamped hard onto the steering wheel.

"No. Nothing fit. Most of it was kind of silly. And then... " I stopped.

"What?"

"Well, I got really upset with myself for being so dumb, and I went out in the woods to pout. And then, at that point, as I was sitting there in the damp forest with all of its green dampness touching me from every angle, I decided it didn't matter."

"It didn't *matter*?" His tone made me look up—I had finally broken through his carefully composed face. His face was incredulous and incredible, with just a hint of the anger I'd feared.

"No," I said softly, about to drop a fat one on him. "It doesn't matter to me what you are."

A hard, mocking edge entered his voice. "You don't care if I'm... a monster? If I'm not... *human*?"

"I don't care."

"Cause I'm *not* human, Bella. And I *am* a monster." He was silent, staring straight ahead. His face was bleak and cold. He wasn't smirking.

"You're angry," I sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No," he said. "I'd rather know what you're thinking—even if what you're thinking is... *insane*!"

"So I'm wrong again?"

"That's not what I was referring to. 'It doesn't matter!'" he quoted me in a very high, dumb-sounding voice, gritting his teeth together.

"I'm right?" I gasped.

"Does it *matter*?"

I tried very hard to think of the response I thought he wanted me to have.

"I don't... think so?" I squeaked. "But I *am* curious."

He resigned with a sighed. "What are you curious about?"

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen," he answered promptly, as though it had been rehearsed.

"And how long have you been seventeen?"

His perfect lips twitched as he stared at the road. "A while," he admitted at last.

"Okay," I smiled. I was dating an *older man*! I couldn't wait to tell Jessica. Fredward stared down at me with watchful eyes. I smiled wider and he frowned.

"Don't laugh—but how can you come out during the daytime?"

He laughed hysterically, and while I was comforted by the sound, I found myself a little disoriented by the fact that he had disobeyed me. "Myth."

"Burned by the sun?"

"Myth."

"Sleeping in coffins?"

"*Myth!*" He hesitated for a moment, and a peculiar tone entered his voice. "I can't sleep."

It took me a minute to absorb that. He didn't... sleep?

"You don't sleep?"

"I can't sleep." He clarified.

"At all?"

"I *can't*!" He said, his voice nearly inaudible. He turned to look at me with a wistful expression. The golden eyes held mine, and I lost my train of thought.

"You haven't asked me the most important question yet." His voice was hard now, and when he looked at me again his eyes were no longer gold; they were *cold*.

I blinked, dazed. "Which one is that?"

"You aren't concerned ABOUT MY DIET?" he asked sarcastically.

My ears perked up. I used to talk to people about their diets all the time in Phoenix. It was kind of fun.

His voice was bleak. "Don't you want to know if I drink blood?"

I flinched. I admit, it was something I had thought about before, briefly. But I wasn't sure if I was ready to have this conversation yet. It all seemed a bit too soon. We were moving too fast. "Well, Squaw did say something about that, something about you drinking blood, now that I remember... "

"Oh yeah? What did SQUAW say?" he asked sarcastically.

"He said you didn't hunt people. He said your family wasn't supposed to be dangerous because you only hunted a-animals."

"He said we weren't a dangerous?" His voice was deeply skeptical.

"Not exactly. He said you weren't *supposed* to be a dangerous. But the Quaaludes still didn't want you on their land, just in case."

He looked forward, straight ahead as if looking at the road, but I couldn't tell if he was watching the road or not.

"So was he right? About not hunting people?" I tried to keep my voice as even as possible.

"The Quaaludes have a looong memory,"²⁰³ he whispered.

I took it as a confirmation.

"Don't let that make you complacent, though," he warned me, black eyes shining straight into the depths of my soul. "They're right to keep their distance from us. We are still a dangerous."

"I don't understand," I didn't understand.

"We try," he explained slowly. "We're usually very good at what we do. Sometimes we make mistakes. Me, for example, allowing myself to be alone with... you."

"This is a mistake?" My heart broke in an instant; it sounded like the snapping of a pea pod. I heard the sadness leaking out of my voice, but I didn't know if he could as well.

"A very dangerous one," he murmured.

We were both silent then. I watched the headlights twist with the dangerous curves of the road. They moved too fast; it didn't look real, it looked like a video game. I was aware of the time slipping away so quickly, like the black road beneath us, and I was hideously afraid that I would never have another chance to be with him like this again—openly, the walls between us gone for once.²⁰⁴ His words hinted at an end, and I recoiled from the idea. I couldn't waste one more minute I had with him. I had to make it count.

"Tell me more," I cooed desperately, not caring what he said, just eager to hear his juicy, life-giving voice again.

He looked at me quickly, startled by the change in tone. "What more do you want to know?" He asked casually.

"Tell me why you hunt aanimals instead of people," I suggested, my voice still tinged with desperation. I realized my eyes were wet, and I fought against the ancient grief that was trying to overpower me.

"I don't... *want* to be... a monster." He stumbled over his words like hurdles in the track-meet of life.

"But animals aren't enough?"

He paused. "I can't be sure, of course, but I'd compare it to living on tofu and soy milk; we call ourselves vegetarians. That is our little inside joke. That we don't eat 'meat.'" He laughed a shaky laugh,

203. Among other things ;)

204. Bella fantasizes about having sex in public without a condom.

blew out some air. "It doesn't completely satiate the hunger—or rather thirst. But it keeps us strong enough to resist... *most* of the time." His tone turned ominous, hard. "Sometimes it's harder than others."

"Is it very difficult for you now?" I asked coquettishly.

He sighed. "Yes."

"But you're not even *hungry* now!" I said chidingly—what if he got fat?

"Why do you think that?"

"Your eyes. I told you I had a theory. I've noticed that people—men in particular—are crabnier when they're hungry."

He chuckled, delighted by my genius. "You're observant, aren't you?"

I didn't answer; I just listened to the sound of his tinkling laugh, committing it to memory.

"Were you hunting this weekend, with Emmett?" I asked when it was quiet again.

"Yes." He paused for a second, as if deciding whether or not to say something or just think it. "I didn't want to leave, but it was necessary. It's a bit easier to be around you when I'm not thirsty."

"Why didn't you want to leave?"

"It makes me... anxious... to be away from you." His eyes were gentle but intense, and they seemed to be making my bones soft.²⁰⁵ "I wasn't joking when I asked you to try not to fall in the ocean or get run over last Thursday. I was distracted all weekend, worrying about what you would do when I wasn't looking. And after what happened tonight, I'm surprised that you did make it through a whole weekend unscathed." He shook his head, apparently unable to believe that everyone in the world hasn't already tried to rape me yet, when he seemed to remember something. "Well, not totally unscathed."

"What?"

"Your hands," he reminded me. I looked down at my palms, at the almost-healed scrapes across the heels of my hands. His eyes missed nothing.

"I fell," I sighed. "I scathed."

"You scathed yourself, just as I thought," he said protectively, his lips curving up at the corners. "I suppose, being you, it could have been much worse—you could've snapped your hands off in that fall—and that possibility tormented me the entire time I was away. It was a very long three days. I really got on Emmett's nerves." He smiled ruefully²⁰⁶ at me.

"Three days? Didn't you just get back today?"

"No, we got back Sunday."

"Then why weren't any of you in school?" I was frustrated, almost angry as I thought of how much disappointment I had suffered in his absence, away from his life-giving rays...

"Well, you asked if the sun hurt me, and it doesn't. No way. The sun would never hurt anyone.²⁰⁷ But, I can't go out in the sunlight—at least, not where anyone can see."

"Why?"

"I'll show you sometime," he promised.²⁰⁸

I thought about it for a moment.

"You might have called me," I decided.

205. As if Fredward needed anything more than vampiric strength, vampiric speed, vampiric coordination, vampiric good looks, vampiric telepathy, vampiric hypnosis, vampiric osmosis and a built-in radar detector, he also can make people's bones soft.

206. *The Murder at Rue-Morgue* by Edgar Allen Poe, considered to be the first mystery story as it includes all of the genre's major tropes: it has a mystery (who killed the guy in the morgue?), an exciting locale (a morgue in Paris) and a conclusion that nobody but the story's author could have come to (the gorilla did it.)

207. "Yo, the sun could never be pussy / he always come out"

- Ghostface Killah, "The Sun"

208. In no way did Fredward actually make a promise.

He was puzzled. "But I knew you were safe."

"But *I* didn't know where *you* were. I—" I hesitated, drooping my eyes.

"What?" His Velveeta voice was compelling.

"I Didn't Like It. Not seeing you. It makes me aNxIoUs, too." I blushed to be saying this out loud.

He was quiet. I glanced up, apprehensive, and saw that his expression felt pain,

"Ah," he groaned quietly. "This is wrong."

I couldn't understand his response. "What you say?"

"Don't you see, Bella? It's one thing for me to make myself miserable, make an ugly old hobbit²⁰⁹ out of myself, but a wholly other thing for you to be so... *involved*." He waved his hand dismissively at the word, turning his anguished eyes to the road and the words flowing almost too fast for me to understand. "I don't want to hear that you feel that way." His voice was low but urgent. His words cut me. "It's wrong. It's not right. I'm dangerous, Bella—please grasp that shit."

"No." I tried very hard not to look like a sulky child.

"I'm serious," he growled.

"So am I. I told you, it doesn't matter what you are. It's too late."

His voice whipped it out, low and harsh. "Never say that... !"

I bit my lip and was glad he couldn't know how much that hurt. I stared out at the road. We must be c-c-c-close now. He was driving much too fast.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, his voice still raw. I just shook my head, not sure if I could speak. I could feel his gaze groping my face, but I kept my eyes forward.

"Are you *crying*?" He sounded appalled. I hadn't realized the moisture in my eyes had brimmed over and turned into tears. I quickly rubbed my hand across my cheek, and sure enough, traitor tears were there, traitoring me.

"No," I said, but my voice cracked like an egg, letting all the yolk out.

I saw him reach toward me hesitantly with his right hand, but then he stopped and placed it slowly back on the steering wheel.

"I'm sorry," his voice burped with regret. I knew he wasn't just apologizing for the words that had upset me, but also their meanings as well.

The darkness slipped by us in silence.²¹⁰

"Tell me something," he asked after another minute, and I could hear him struggle to use a lighter tone.

"Yes?"

"What were you thinking tonight, just before I came around the corner and super-rescued you? I couldn't understand your expression—you didn't look that scared, you looked like you were concentrating very hard on something."

"I was thinking about my knee and all of their groins, trying to remember what I knew about self-defense... trying to figure out how to get them all with just one knee..." I thought of the dark-haired man in flannel with a surge of hate.

"You were going to fight them?" This upset him. "Didn't you think about running?"

"I fall down a lot when I run," I admitted.

"What about screaming for help?"

"What are you talking about?"

He shook his head. "You were right—I'm definitely fighting fate trying to keep you alive."

I sighed. I had no idea what he was talking about.

209. Aside from their hairy feet, hobbits are actually fairly attractive well into their old age.

210. Voted the most profoundly poetic sentence of the new century by *New York Times* literary critics in the year 20XX.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" I demanded.

"What?" He smiled. "I'll save you a seat at lunch."

It was silly, how that little promise sent flutters through my stomach, and made me unable to speak.

We were in front of Charles' house. The lights were on, my truck in its place, everything utterly normal. It was like waking from a dream. He stopped the car, but I didn't move.

"Do you *promise* to be there tomorrow?"

"I promise."²¹¹

I considered that for a moment, then nodded. I pulled his jacket off, taking one last whiff.

"You can keep it—so you have a jacket to smell tonight," he said with a wink.

I handed it back to him. "I don't want to have to explain to Charlie that a vampire saved me from getting raped while he sat at home and drank Vitamin R."

"Oh, right." He grinned.

I hesitated, my hand on the door handle, trying to prolong the moment.

"Bella?" he asked in a different tone—serious, but hesitant.

"Yes?" I turned back to him too eagerly.

"Will you make a proper promise to me too?"

"Yes," I said, and instantly regretted my unconditional agreement. What if he asked me to never marry him? I couldn't keep that promise.

"Don't go into the woods alone."

I stared at him in blank confusion. "Why?"

He frowned, and his eyes were tight as his face muscles, while he stared past me out the window.

"I'm not always the most dangerous thing out there. Let's leave it at that."

I shuddered slightly at the sudden bleakness in his voice, but I was relieved. This, at least, was an easy promise to properly honor. "Whatever you say," I said.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said amidst an exhale of his \$1,000,000 air, and I knew he wanted me to leave now.

"Tomorrow, then." I opened the door unwillingly, then closed it again and crossed my arms, making a pouty face. Fredward's eyes narrowed.

"Now look," he said.

"*You* look," I said under my breath.

"What?" He asked.

"*Nothing*." I clarified. I tried to get out of the car again, but could not will my arms to remove themselves from a pouting position and open the door.

Fredward reached over me, careful not to touch me with even the tip of his pinky finger, and opened the door. Arms still folded across my chest, I exited the car.

"Bella?" I turned back and he had crawled into the passenger seat, extending his neck outside of the car. His pale, glorious face was just inches from mine. My heart literally stopped beating.

"Sleep well," he said. His breath blew in my face like a hot tropical breeze, stunning me. It was the same exquisite scent that clung to his jacket, but in a more concentrated form, and it was then that I recognized it: coco-nuts. I blinked, thoroughly razzle-dazzled. He shrunk his neck back in and started crawling back into the driver's seat. I reluctantly swung my hips against the car door to make it closed, as my arms were still folded across my chest.

I was unable to move until my brain had somewhat unscrambled itself. I thought I heard him

211. This is an example of a proper promise.

chuckle, but the sound was too quiet for me to be certain.

He waited 'til I had stumbled to the front door, and then I heard his engine quietly rev. *Vroom vroom, Bella, vroom vroom*, it whispered. I was amazed at how quietly his engine revved. I turned to watch the silver Volvo car disappear around the corner. How quietly it had revved, and how quickly it disappeared into the dark.

I reached for the key, mechanically unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

Charlie called from the living room. "Bella?"

"That's my name, don't wear it out!" I yelled.

Charlie chuckled. I walked in to see him. He was watching a baseball game—at least he probably *thought* he was watching a baseball game. All I saw on the screen was a blurry, flesh-colored mass. There were *a lot* of empty-looking cans of Vitamin R on the ground.

"You're home early," he slurred.

"Am I?" I was surprised.

"It's not even eight yet," he told me. I looked at my watch. It was twelve-thirty. He continued, "Did you girls have fun?"

"Yeah—it was lots of fun." My head was spinning as I tried to remember all the way back to the girls' night out I had planned. "They both found dresses."

"Are you alright?" Charlie asked, swaying back and forth and chucking another empty can onto the floor.

"I'm just tired. I did a lot of walking."

"Well, maybe you should go lie down. I'm concerned." He didn't sound concerned. I wondered what my face looked like.

"I'm just going to call Jessica first."

"Weren't you just with her?" Was he *suspicious*?

"Yes—but I left my jacket in her car." Good save, *girl-genius*.

"Well, give her a chance to get home first," he reasoned.

I went to the kitchen and fell. Exhausted. Into a chair. I was feeling really dizzy now. Was I drunk just from *smelling* beer? I wondered if I was going to go into shock after all. Get a grip, I told myself.

The phone rang suddenly, startling me. I yanked it off the hook.

"Hello?" I breathed breathlessly.

"Bella?"

"That's my name, don't wear it out!"

Jessica laughed *hysterically*.

"Hey, Jess, I was just going to call you."

"You made it home?" Her voice was relieved... and surprised.

"Yes. I left my jacket in your car—could you bring it to me tomorrow?" I was all business.

"Sure. But tell me what happened!" She demanded with a girlish squeal.

"Um, tomorrow—in Trig, okay?" I was all business.

She caught on rather quickly. "Oh, is your dad there?"

"Yes, that's right... "

"Okay, I'll talk to you tomorrow then, Bye!" I could hear the impatience in her voice. She was just going to have to wait.

"Bye, Jess." I think I hung up before she could say "Bye, Bella."

I walked up the stairs slowly, a heavy stupor clouding my mind. I went through the motions of getting ready for bed without paying attention to what I was doing. It wasn't until I was in the shower—the water too hot, burning my skin—that I realized I was freezing. I shuddered violently for several

minutes before the steaming spray, spraying all over my frigid body, could finally relax my rigid muscles. Then I stood in the shower, too tired to move, too tired to shower, until the hot water began to run out.

I stumbled out, hitting my head on the toilet bowl ("the King's Throne" as Charlie likes to call it on nights like these) and wrapped myself securely in a towel, trying to hold the heat from the water in so the aching shivers wouldn't return. I dressed for bed swiftly and climbed under my blankie, curling into a ball, huggin' myself to keep warm. A few small shudders trembled through me.

My mind still swirly-whirled dizzily, full of images I couldn't understand, and some I fought to repress. Nothing was clear except these three certainties:

First, that Fredward was a vampire.

Second, there was a part of him—and I didn't know which part it might be—that thirsted for my blood.

And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with the vampire of my dreams.

10.

BACKDOOR INTERROGATIONS

IT WAS VERY HARD IN THE MORNING, FIRST THING, TO ARGUE WITH THE part of me that was sure last night was a dream. Logic wasn't on my side, or common sense. I clung to the parts of him I couldn't have imagined—like his smell. I was sure I could never have dreamed up his delicious, silken smell on my own.

It was dark and foggy outside my window; absolutely perfect. Absolutely perfect weather for hanging out with my vampire boyfriend. I dressed in my heavy clothes, remembering I didn't have a jacket. Further proof that my memory was real.

When I got downstairs, Charlie was gone again—I was running later than I'd realized. I swallowed a granola bar in three bites,²¹² chased it down with straight milk from the teat, and then hurried out the door with my feet.

It was unusually foggy, even for Forks, Idaho; the air was almost smoky with it. The mist was ice, ice cold where it clung to the exposed skin on my chest. It was such a thick fog that I almost didn't notice the silver Volvo in the driveway, with its one pale hand hanging out of the driver-side window. My heart thudded, stuttered, murmured, and then picked up again in double time.

I didn't see where he came from, but suddenly he was there, pulling the door open for me. I could get used to this.

"Do you want to take a ride in my hot rod today?" he asked, amused by my surprised expression as he caught me by surprise yet again. There was uncertainty in his voice. He was really giving me a choice—I was free to refuse, and a part of him—probably not the potent part of him that thirsted for my blood—that hoped for that. It was a vain hope.²¹³ I was far too unconditionally in love with him, and he irrevocably knew it.

"Yes, thank you," I said, trying to keep my cool. As I stepped into the warm car, I noticed a feminine-looking beige leather jacket was slung over the headrest of the passenger seat. Had someone else been in there? Did he have *another girlfriend*? I looked at the jacket, and then at him, refusing to sit in the seat before I got some answers.

"Why are you glaring at my jacket?" He asked. I immediately felt silly for forgetting how feminine his clothes were. I got into the car, took my seat, and buckled in. "I brought the jacket for you. I didn't want you to get... sick or something." His voice was guarded. I noticed that he wore no jacket himself, just a light purple gray knit V-neck shirt with tight, $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves. Again, the fabric clung to his perfectly muscled chest. It was a colossal tribute to his face that it kept my eyes away from his body.²¹⁴

"I'm not quite that delicate," I said, but I pulled the jacket onto my lap, pushing my arms through the too-long $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves, curious to see if the scent could possibly be as good as I remembered. I took a big whiff; it was better: the biggest coco-nut.

"Aren't you?" he contradicted in a voice so low I wasn't sure if he meant for me to hear. We drove through the fog-shrouded streets, always too fast, feeling awkward. I was, at least. Last night all

212. Bella swallows with her teeth.

213. More like a *vein* hope!

214. For more, please see thought question #6.

the walls were down... almost all.²¹⁵ I didn't know if we were still in walls-down mode today. It left me tongue-tied. I waited for him to speak.

He turned to smirk at me. "What, no twenty questions today?"

"Do my questions bother you?" I asked, relieved that I had managed to come up with something to say.

"Not as much as your reactions do." He looked like he was joking, but I couldn't be sure.

I frowned. "Do I react badly?"

"No, that's the problem. You react *goodly*. You take everything so... *coolly*, kind of... *unnaturally coolly*."²¹⁶ It really makes me wonder what you're thinking!"

"I always tell you what I'm really thinking."

"You edit," he accused.

"Not very much."

"Enough to drive me *insane*!" I looked up at him. How could someone so average drive someone so perfect *anywhere*?

"You don't want to hear it," I mumbled, almost whispering. As soon as the words were out, I regretted them. The pain in my voice was very faint; I hoped he hadn't noticed it, but I knew he had. The bonds between us were too strong to keep secrets like these.

He didn't respond, and I wondered if I had ruined the mood. His face was unreadable as we drove into the school parking lot. Something occurred to me belatedly.

"Where's the rest of your family?" I asked—more than glad to be alone with him, but remembering that his car was usually full.

"They took Rosalie's car." He shrugged as he parked next to a glossy red convertible with the top *down*. "Ostentatious, isn't it?"

"Um, wow," I breathed. "Shouldn't she put the top up? I mean, with the rain and all..."

Fredward winked at me. "Even *we* have some tricks up our sleeves." I looked at his sleeves once again, amazed at the things that I still didn't know about him.

"So if she has *that*, why does she ride with you?"

"Like I said, it's ostentatious. We try to blend in."

"You don't succeed." I laughed and shook my head as we got out of the car. I wasn't late anymore; his lunatic driving had gotten me to school in plenty of time. "So why did Rosalie drive today if it's more conspicuous?"

"Hadn't you noticed? I'm breaking *all* the rules now," he said while doing a karate chop and a jiu-jitsu high-kick. He met me at the front of the car, staying very close to my side as we walked onto campus.

"Why do you have cars like that at all?" I wondered aloud, to no one in particular. "If you're looking for privacy?"

"An indulgence," he admitted with an impish smile. "We all like to drive fast."

"Figures," I muttered under my breath.

Under the shelter of the cafeteria roof's overhang, Jessica was waiting, her eyes preparing to bug out of their sockets. Over her arm, bless her soul, was my jacket.

"Hey, Jessica," I said coolly when we were a few feet away. "Thanks for remembering." She handed me my jacket with her jaw hanging down to her chest, rubbing against her oversized breasts, speechless.

215. To this day, some parts of the Berlin Wall are still standing.

216. *Coolie*: a derogatory term for Chinese people dating back from mid-1800's California, when European settlers considered the Chinese settlers "too cool for school." By "school," they meant the systematic denigration and subjugation of the Chinese people.

"Good morning, Jessica," Fredward said, politely not commenting on how fat she was being in front of him. It wasn't really his fault that he was so thin, or so beautiful.

"Er... hi." She shifted her wide eyes to me, trying to gather her jumbled thoughts. "I guess I'll see you in Trig." She gave me a meaningful look, and I suppressed a laugh. What on earth made her think I needed to hang out with people like her anymore?

"Yeah, I'll see you then."

She waddled away, pausing twice to peek back over her shoulder at us.

"What are you going to tell her?" Fredward murmured.

"Hey, I thought you couldn't read my mind!" I hissed hysterically.

"I can't," he said, startled. Then understanding brightened his gold-black eyes. "However, I can read hers—she'll be waiting to ambush you in class."

I groaned as I pulled off his $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeve jacket and handed it to him, replacing it with my own. He folded it over his arm.

"So what are you going to tell her?"

"A little help?" I pleaded. "What does she want to know?"

He shook his head, grinning wickedly. "That's not fair."

"No, you not sharing what you know about that loser's private life—now *that's* not fair."

He deliberated for a moment as we walked. We stepped outside the door to my first class.

"She wants to know if we're secretly dating. And she wants to know how you feel about me," he finally said.

"Yikes!"²¹⁷ What should I say?" I tried to keep my expression very innocent. People were passing us on their way to class, probably staring, but I was hardly aware of anything that lay outside his golden-black aura.

"Hmmm." He paused to catch a stray lock of hair that was escaping the twist on my neck²¹⁸ and wound it back into place. My heart spluttered hyperactively. "I suppose you could say yes to the first... if you don't mind—it's easier than any other explanation."

Was he ashamed of our impending marriage? "I don't mind," I said in a faint voice.

"And as for her other question... well, I'll be listening to hear the answer to that one myself." One side of his mouth pulled up into my favorite uneven smile.²¹⁹ I couldn't catch my breath soon enough to respond to that remark, as he'd already turned to walk away.

"I'll see you at lunch," he called over his shoulder, down the hallway. Everyone stopped to stare at me and I felt a blush coming on, but for once I didn't mind.

I hurried into class, still flushed but now mildly irritated. He was SUCH a cheater. Now I was even more worried about what I was going to say to Jessica. I sat in my usual seat, slamming my bag down in aggravation.

"Morning, Bella," Mike said from the seat next to me. I looked to see an odd, almost resigned look on his face. "How was Fort Angles?"

"It was..." There was no honest way to sum it up, or spare his feelings. "Great," I finished lamely. "Jessica got a really cute dress."

"Did she say anything about Monday night?" he asked, his eyes brightening. I smiled at the turn the conversation had taken.

"She said she had a really good time," I assured him.

"She did?" he said eagerly.

217. Zoiks, Scoob!

218. See thought question #7.

219. As opposed to all the other uneven smiles he has, she prefers the one that is uneven.

"Most definitely."²²⁰

Mr. Mason called the class to order then, asking us to turn in our papers. English and then Government passed in a daze, while I worried about how to explain things to Jessica and agonized over whether Fredward would really be listening to what I said through the medium of Jess's thoughts. How very inconvenient his little talent could be—when it wasn't saving my life!

The fog had almost dissolved by the end of the second hour, but the day was still dark with low, oppressive black clouds. I smiled up at the sky in a moment of emotional irony, as even it seemed to conspire against my happiness.

Fredward was right, of course. When I walked into Trigganomics, Jessica was sitting in the back row, nearly bouncing off her seat in agitation. I reluctantly went to sit by her, trying to convince myself it would be better to get it over with as soon as possible.

"Tell me everything!" she commanded before I was in my seat.

"What do you want to know?" I hedged.

"What happened last night?"

"He bought me dinner, and then he drove me home."

She glared at me, her expression stiff with skepticism. As if I would even *bother* lying to her. "How did you get home so fast?"

"He drives like a maniac. It was terrifying." I hoped he heard that.

"Was it like a date—did you tell him to meet you there?"

I hadn't thought of that. "No—I was *very* surprised to see him there."

"Wait, you don't think... that he *meant* to meet you there, do you?"

"Well, he said that he had just gone to Fort Angles to pick something up for his sister, but I dunno... maybe!"

At that, Jessica squealed. "But he picked you up for school today?"

"Yes—*that* was a surprise, too. He noticed I didn't have a jacket last night," I explained.

"So are you going out again?" Her eyes were starting to bug out again.

"He offered to drive me to Seattle Saturday²²¹ because he thinks my truck isn't up to it—does that count?"

"Yes." She nodded, eyes protruding from her skull.

"Well, then, yes."

"W-O-W." She spelled the word emphatically, letting her eyes recede back into their sockets before continuing. "Fredward Cullen."

"I know," I agreed. "Wow" didn't even cover it.

"Wait!" Her hands flew up, palms toward me like she was stopping traffic. "Has he held your hand yet?"

"No," I mumbled, thinking of last night's failure at the table. "It's not *like* that."

She looked disappointed, and maybe I was too.

"Do you think Saturday...?" She raised her eyebrows suggestively.

"I really doubt it." The discontent in my voice was poorly disguised.

"What did you talk about?" She pushed for more information in a whisper. Class had started but Mr. Varner wasn't paying close attention and we weren't the only ones still talking.

"I don't know, Jess, lots of stuff," I whispered back. "I mean, what do you and Mike even talk about?"

220. A reference to the musician "Mos Def." Hailing from Brooklyn, New York, he is known for agreeing to most statements and questions with the phrase 'most definitely!'

221. Every decade, Seattle celebrates its native cultures and traditions by holding a year-long, 52-day program of Seattle Saturdays. The theme for 1995's Seattle Saturdays was "Seattle on the Rise!"

She almost took the bait and opened her mouth to start telling me all about Mike's horse-dreams, but caught herself and said, "Oh no you don't. Please, Bella," she begged. "Give me some details."

"Well... okay, I've got one. You should have seen the waitress flirting with him—it was over the top. But he didn't pay any attention to her at all." Let him make what he could of that.

"That's a good sign," she nodded. "Was she pretty?"

"*Very* pretty—and probably like thirty or thirty-five."

"In her prime," Jessica concluded with a nod. "Even better. He must *like* you."

"I *think* so, but it's hard to tell. He's always so cryptic." I threw in for his benefit, sighing.

"I don't know how you're brave enough to be alone with him," she breathed.

"Why?" I was shocked, but she didn't understand my reaction. How could she have known? Maybe Jessica was more on the ball than I'd thought.

"He's so... *intimidating*."²²² She said. "I wouldn't know what to say to him." I laughed. She was so pathetic! She made a face, probably remembering this morning or last night, when he'd turned the overwhelming force of his gold-black eyes on her.

"I do have some trouble with incoherency when I'm around him," I admitted modestly, as though I wasn't above being razzle-dazzled by the best razzle-dazzler in the whole Forks High School.

"Oh well. He *is* unbelievably gorgeous."²²³ Jessica shrugged as if this excused any flaws. Ugly people always think beautiful people have it *so* easy.

"There's a lot more to him than that," I defended. I didn't want him to hear me talking about how he was just my man candy. He might beat me— or worse, break up with me.

"Really? Like what?" It looked like she was on the edge of her seat, almost falling off it in excitement. I could only imagine how many people she was getting ready to tell this to. I wished I had let it go. Almost as much as I was hoping he'd been kidding about listening in...

"I can't explain it right... but he's even more unbelievable *behind* the face." The vampire who wanted to be good—who ran around saving so many lives so he wouldn't be a monster... I stared toward the front of the room, where I imagined us slow-dancing in the moonlight. Soon enough, Bella. Soon enough...

"Is that *possible*?" She giggled.

I ignored her, trying to look like I was paying attention to Mr. Varner.

"So you like him, then?" She wasn't about to give it up.

"...Yes."

"I mean, do you *really* like him?" she urged.

"Yes."

"I mean, do you really *really* like him?" she yelled, loudly enough for Mr. Varner to turn around.

"Why is it that you insist on yelling at least once every day in my class, Ms. Pearson?"

Jessica looked confused. "My last name is Miller, Mr. Varner."

Mr. Varner sighed "Oh, gee. You're right, I got your name wrong. I'm sorry, Jessica. I guess I probably wasn't talking to you then anyways." He sighed and went back to writing on the board. Jessica turned to me and smiled, as though she had accomplished something.

"So how *much* do you like him?" she probed.

"Too much," I whispered back. "More than he likes me. But I don't see how I can help that." I sighed, one blush blending into the next...

Then, thankfully, Mr. Varner called on Jessica for an answer and it kept her talking for the

222. And a vampire.

223. And a vampire!

remainder of the period.

She didn't get a chance to start on the subject again during class, and as soon as the bell rang, I took Evasive Action.

"In English, Mike asked me if you said anything about Monday night," I told her. Surely, the only thing in the world more interesting than my sex life would have to be *her* sex life.

"You're kidding! What did you say?!" she gasped, completely sidetracked.

"I told him you said you had a lot of fun. I mean, you did say that. Anyway, he looked pleased. *Very* pleased..." I trailed off into infinity.

"Tell me exactly what he said, and your exact answer!" She squealed. "This is my *life*, Bella! You, and my crush on Mike, and the possibility of being his girlfriend... Oh, Bella, tell me now!"

I sighed. We spent the rest of the walk dissecting sentence structures and most of Spanish on a minute description of Mike's facial expressions. I offered to draw a picture of Mike's face for her, worried that the subject would turn back to me. Fortunately, Jessica ate it up. By the end of Spanish, I'd drawn a poster-sized version of Mike smiling and guessed that Jess was feeling more wanted and validated than she ever had in her entire life.

And then the bell rang for lunch. As I jumped up out of my seat, shoving my book-documents roughly into my book-bag, my uplifted expression must have tipped Jessica off.

"You're not sitting with us today, *are* you?" she said while wiggling her eyebrows. Normally, this would have really upset Jessica, but I think she was feeling so validated by the idea of Mike liking her and the hour-long process I went through to describe that to her, that she didn't even care where I sat today. In fact, I think she wanted me gone so she could have some privacy with Mike. It was like my dream come true.

"I don't think so." I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't disappear inconveniently again. But then I remembered the promise he had delivered to me, and remembered how much I trusted him to fill it...

But outside the door to our Spanish class, leaning against the wall—looking more like a Greek god than anyone had a right to²²⁴—Fredward was waiting for me. Jessica took one look, rolled her eyes, and darted off towards the lunch room, probably to find her gay-horse boyfriend.

"See you later, Bella," she said, after she was already halfway down the hallway. Her voice was thick with implications.

"Hello," His voice was amused, irritated, and thick at the same time. He had been listening; it was obvious.

"Hi."

I couldn't think of *anything* else to say, and he didn't speak—biding his time, I presumed—so it was a quiet walk to the cafeteria. Walking with Fredward through the crowded lunchtime rush was a lot like my first day here: everyone stared.

"You walk really fast, Fredward." I observed. It came out more like a criticism than I had intended it.

"Sorry." He replied, firmly. "But relationships are all about compromise." He reminded me. I shut my mouth.

He led the way all the way to the food line, still not speaking, though his eyes returned to my face like birds fly South every winter, their expression speculative. It seemed to me that irritation was winning out over amusement as the dominant emotion in his face.²²⁵ I fidgeted nervously with the zipper on my jacket.

He stepped up the counter and filled a tray with food.

"What are you doing?" I objected. "You're not getting all that for me?" I asked, remembering

224. Fredward probably isn't even Greek.

225. Fredward's face is an emotional boxing ring.

that Fredward *doesn't eat food*. I leaned forward towards him, craning my neck into an uncomfortable position.

"Fredward!" I whispered into his ear. "You *don't eat food*." I reminded him.

He shook his head at me condescendingly, stepping forward to buy the food.

"I'm a *gentleman*." He clarified.

I raised one of my average eyebrows.

He led the way to the same place we'd sat that one time before. From the other end of the table, a group of seniors gazed at us in amazement as we sat across from each other. Fredward seemed oblivious.

"Take whatever you want," he said, pushing the tray toward me. "I don't... *eat*." He winked at me.

"I'm curious," I said as I picked up a Red Delicious apple, turning it around in my hands, "what would you do if someone dared you to eat food?"

"You're always curious." He grimaced, shaking his head violently and throwing his hands up in the air. All the seniors stared again, and I looked down. Fredward glared at me, holding my eyes in one hand as he lifted the slice of pizza off the tray with the other, and deliberately bit off a mouthful,²²⁶ chewed quickly, and then swallowed. I watched, eyes wide.

"If a curious little girl dared you to eat dirt, you could, couldn't you?" he asked condescendingly.

I wrinkled my nose. "I did once... on a dare." I admitted, reminiscing. "It wasn't so bad."

He laughed hysterically and so loudly that almost everyone in the cafeteria, including the lunch ladies, looked over and stared. "I suppose I'm not surprised." Something over my shoulder seemed to catch his attention.

"Jessica's analyzing everything I do—she'll break it down for you later." He pushed the rest of the pizza toward me in disgust. The mention of Jessica brought a hint of his former irritation back to his flawless face features.

I put down the Red Delicious and took a bite of the pizza, looking away, knowing he was about to start.

"So the waitress was pretty, was she?" he asked casually, as though he didn't know I thought this because he had been *reading the minds of people I was talking to*.

"You didn't really notice?" I asked innocently, as though I wasn't really mad that he had been *reading the minds of people I was talking to*.

"No. I wasn't paying attention. I had a lot on my mind."

"Poor girl." I could afford to be generous now.²²⁷

"Something you said to Jessica... well, it bothers me." He refused to be distracted by my generosity. His voice was husky with refusal, and he glanced up from under his lashes with troubled eyes.

"I'm not surprised you heard something you didn't like. You know what they say about eavesdroppers," I reminded him.²²⁸

"I warned you I would be listening."²²⁹

226. He intended to do it.

227. (Matthew 13:6) "One can only be generous when one has exactly what one needs, and then some."

228. From an earlier, undocumented conversation:

"You know, Fredward, they say that eavesdropping gives you cancer." I said under my breath.

"What?" Fredward asked, looking up.

"Oh, nothing. Nevermind." I sighed.

229. It is abusive behavior to think that something wrong is acceptable just because you warned the person you were going to do it.

"And I warned you that you didn't want to know everything I was thinking."

"You did," he agreed, but his voice was still rough. "You aren't precisely right, though. I do want to know what you're thinking—everything. I just wish... that you wouldn't be thinking *some* things."

"Yeah, well, love is about compromise." I informed him.

"But that's not really the point at the moment."

"Then what is?" We were inclined toward each other across the table now. He had his large white hands folded under his chin, left above right; I leaned forward, my right small white hand cupped around my neck. I had to remind myself that we were in a crowded, public lunchroom, with probably many curious eyes on us. It was too easy to get wrapped up in our own private, tense little love bubble.

"Do you truly believe that you care more for me than I do for you?" His heart murmured, leaning closer to me as I spoke, his dark and gold eyes piercing through my skull, down my nasal passages, through my lungs and into my heart.

I tried to remember how to exhale. I had to look away before it came back to me.

"You're doing it again," I muttered, once I was finally able to breathe.

His eyes opened wide with surprise. "...what!?"

"Razzle-dazzling," I admitted, trying to concentrate as I looked back at his face, at the perfect angle of his nose.

"Oh." He frowned.

"It's not your fault," I sighed. "You can't help it. You're just so—"

"Look, are you going to answer the question or what?"

I looked down. "Yes."

"Yes, you are going to answer my question, or yes, you really think that?" He was irritated again. I made a vow to be less vague in the future, and sealed it with a kiss on my heart...

"Yes, I really think that." I kept my eyes down on the table, my eyes tracing the pattern of the faux wood grains printed on the laminate. The silence dragged on. I stubbornly refused to be the first to break it this time, fighting hard against the temptation to peek at his expression.²³⁰

Finally he spoke, voice velvet-soft. "You're wrong."

I glanced up to see that his eyes were firey and gentle, like a fireside chat.

"You can't know that," I disagreed in a whisper. I shook my head in doubt, though my heart throbbed at his words and I wanted so badly to believe them.

"What makes you think so?" His liquid-topaz eyes were penetrating—trying futilely, I assumed, to lift the truth straight from my mind.

I stared back, struggling to think clearly in spite of his big face, to find some way to explain. As I searched for the words to explain, I could see him getting impatient; frustrated by my silence, he started to scowl. I lifted my hand from my neck, and held up one finger, and it wasn't the one you're imagining.

"Let me think," I insisted. His expression cleared, now that he was satisfied that I was thinking. I dropped my hand to the table, moving my left hand so that my palms were pressed together. I stared at my hands, thinking about how much this hand motion resembled a gesture of prayer, a practice done by those who were looking for hope in this dark world; and why not be praying? What I needed right now, all I had, was hope... I finally spoke.

"Well, aside from the obvious, sometimes..." I hesitated. "I can't be sure—I don't know how to read minds—but sometimes it seems like you're trying to say goodbye when you're saying something else." That was the best I could sum up the sensation of anguish that his words triggered in me at times.

230. Jesus of Nazareth spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert of Israel, fighting off temptations left and right while seeking a closer union with his father, God.

"Perceptive; very few people can decipher my enigmas... very few people can perceive me..." he whispered. And there was the anguish again, surfacing as he confirmed my fear. "That's exactly why you're wrong though," he began to explain, but then his eyes narrowed and it seemed as if a hush fell over the entire cafeteria. "What do you mean, 'the obvious'?"

"Well, look at me," I said, unnecessarily as he was already doing it. "I'm absolutely ordinary—well, except for bad things like all the near-death experiences and being so clumsy that I'm almost disabled. And look at you." I waved my hand toward him and all his bewildering perfection.

His brow creased angrily for a moment, then smoothed as his eyes took a knowing look.²³¹ "You don't see yourself very clearly, you know. I'll admit you're dead-on about the bad things," he chuckled blackly, "but you didn't hear what every human male in this school was thinking on your first day."²³²

I blinked, astonished. "I don't believe it..." ...I'm hot! I continued in my head.

"Trust me just this once—you are the apposite of ordinary. Err," he shook his head and laughed casually, pointing to the Red Delicious in my hand. "Apple," he said. "What I meant to say is that you are the *opposite* of ordinary.

My embarrassment was much stronger than my pleasure at the look that came into his eyes when he said this. I quickly reminded him that we were arguing.

"But I'm not saying goodbye," I pointed out.

"Don't you see? That's what proves me right. I care the most; because if I can do it"—he shook his head, seeming to struggle with the thought—"if leaving is the right thing to do, then I'll hurt myself to keep from hurting you, to keep you safe."

I glared. "And you don't think I would do the same?"

"You'd never have to make the choice."

Abruptly, his unpredictable mood shifted again; a mischievous, devastating smile rearranged his features, devastating them into a new shape. "Of course, keeping you safe is beginning to feel like a full-time occupation that requires my constant presence."

"No one has tried to do away with me today," I reminded him tersely, grateful for the lighter subject. I didn't want him to talk about goodbyes anymore. If I had to, I supposed I could purposefully put myself in danger to keep him close... I banished the thought before his quick eyes read it on my face. That idea would definitely get me in trouble, in more ways than one.

"Yet," he added.

"Yet," I agreed; I would have argued, but now I wanted him to be expecting disasters, all the time.²³³

"I have another question for you." His face was still casual.

"Shoot."

"Do you really need to go to Seattle Saturday, or was that just an excuse to get out of saying no to all your admirers?"

I made a face at the memory of all my admirers. "You know, I haven't forgiven you for the Tyler thing yet," I warned him. "It's your fault that he wants to lick my ass, and doubly your fault for him thinking that I'm going to prom with him."

"Oh, he would have found a chance to ask you without me—I really just wanted to watch your face," he chuckled. I would have been angrier if his laughter wasn't so amazing. "If I'd asked you, would you have turned *me* down?" he asked, still laughing to himself.

"Probably not," I admitted. "But I would have canceled later—faked an illness or sprained an

231. At first Fredward is angry because someone is insulting his beloved Bella, which is followed by his eyes realizing that it was Bella who had made the insult.

232. Presumably something along the lines of, "I must impregnate this pureblood."

233. Bella goes to the mall? More like Bella goes to the morgue.

ankle."

He was puzzled. "Why would you do that?"

I shook my head sadly. "You've never seen me in Gym, I guess, but I would have thought you would understand."

"Are you referring to the fact that you can't walk across a flat, stable surface without finding something to trip over and smack that face against?"

"Obviously."

"That wouldn't be a problem." He was very confident. "It's all in the leading." He threw some light punches in the air and duck and wove. I wasn't sure what he thought he was doing, but he cut me off before I could protest.

"But you never told me—are you resolved on going to Seattle, or do you mind if we do something...*different*."

As long as the "we" part was in, I didn't care about *anything* else.

"I'm open to alternatives," I allowed. "But I do have a favor to ask."

He looked wary, as he always did when I asked an open-ended favor. "What?"

"Can I drive?"

He frowned. "Why? You know how much I love to drive."

"Well, mostly because when I told Charlie I was going to Seattle, he specifically asked if I was going alone and, at the time, I was. If he asked again, I probably wouldn't lie, at least not to his face, but I don't think he *will* ask again, and leaving my truck at home would just bring up the subject unnecessarily. And also, because your driving frightens me."

He rolled his eyes. "Of all the things about me that could frighten you, you worry about my driving?" He shook his head in abject disgust, but then his eyes rolled back and were serious again. "Won't you want to tell your father that you're spending the day with me?" There was an undercurrent to his question that I didn't understand.

"With Charlie, less is always more." I thought about the pink flower box that his arm had arrived in and was sure about that. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"The weather will be nice, so I'll be staying out of the public eye... and you can stay with me, if you'd like to." Again, he was leaving the choice up to me.

"And you'll show me what you meant, about the sun?" I asked, excited by the idea of unraveling another secret of the sun.²³⁴

"Yes." He smiled, and then paused. "But if you don't want to be... alone with me, I'd still rather you didn't go to Seattle Saturday by yourself. I shudder to think of the trouble you could find in a city that size."

Why wouldn't I want to be alone with him? Was he gay? I then remembered that he was still worried about eating me alive. Pshaw, but I was still miffed. "Phoenix, Kentucky is three times bigger than Seattle—just in population. In *physical* size—"

"Shut up," he interrupted me. "Your number wasn't up in Phoenix and I won't have you running around a Seattle Saturday alone, exposed to every Joe Rapist in the state. I'd rather you stayed near me." His eyes did that unfair smoldering thing again, wisps of smoke radiating from the pupils.

I couldn't argue with his eyes or with his motivation, and it was a moot point anyway. "As it happens, I don't really mind being alone with you... I mean, I *really* don't mind being alone with you."

"I know," he sighed, brooding. "You should tell Charlie, though."

"That I don't mind being alone with you?"

"No, that we're hanging out this Saturday."

234. The Aztecs knew many of the sun's secrets.

"Oh. Why in the world would I do that?"

His eyes were suddenly fierce. "To give me some small incentive to bring you back."

I gulped a very big gulp. But, after a moment of thought, I was sure. "I think I'll take my chances on you, Fredward."

He exhaled angrily, and looked away.

"Let's talk about something else," I suggested, running from the problem like I always did.

"What do you want to talk about?" he asked. He was still annoyed.

I glanced around us, making sure we were well out of anyone's hearing. It was kind of exciting to have actual secrets to talk about in public. It made me feel real special; *really* special. As I cast my eyes into the sea that was the cafeteria, they caught the eyes of his sister, Alice, staring at me. The others²³⁵ were looking at Fredward. I looked away swiftly, back to him, and I asked the first thing that came to mind.

"What do you think of Bill Clinton?"

"What?"

"Oh, sorry. That was the first thing I thought of saying to you. Anyway, what I really meant to ask you is, why did you go to that Goat Rocks place last weekend... to hunt? Charlie said it wasn't a good place to hike, because of... bears." I wasn't sure if he'd been referring to actual bears, or some kind of metaphorical bears.

He stared at me as if I was missing something very obvious.

"Bears?" I gasped, and he smirked. "You know, bears are not in season," I added sternly, inspired by but afraid of the fact that this piece of knowledge had just popped into my head.

"If you read carefully, the laws only cover hunting with weapons," he informed me.

He watched my face with enjoyment as that slowly sank in.²³⁶

"Bears?" I repeated with difficulty.

"Grizzly is Emmett's favorite." His voice was still offhand, but his eyes were scrutinizing my reaction.

"Mm—Hm—Uh—hMMMmmm," I said, taking another bite of pizza and pretending I wasn't disturbed. I chewed slowly, and then took a long drink of Coca-Cola without looking up at him.

"So," I said after a moment of looking down, finally meeting his anxious gaze. "What's your favorite?" I asked timidly.

He raised an alabaster eyebrow and the corners of his mouth turned down in crooked disapproval. He said something completely unintelligible while coughing.

"What was that?" I asked.

He did it again. Was he trying to say something without me actually being able to understand it?

"Mountain lion?" he finally answered. I shuddered. It sounded nothing like what he had been saying earlier through the coughs. What was he hiding from me?

"Ah," I said in a politely casual tone.

"Of course," he said, and his tone mirrored mine. "we have to be careful not to impact the environment with injudicious hunting, because we are good vampires. We try to focus on areas with an over-population of predators—ranging as far away as we need. We spend at least every other weekend just researching different ecosystems and studying populations of different species. I've learned a lot of really interesting things, actually, and I'd be glad to tell you about them. In fact, I've enjoyed learning about ecosystems so much that I think I might study biology, might even become a doctor like my

235. Everyone else in the entire cafeteria.

236. Bella is horrified to realize that Fredward and his family hunt bears with their hands, implying a certain level of brutal savagery that makes her uncomfortable, but also kind of turns her on a bit.

father. How about that?" He took a small pause to recollect his thoughts. "As for food, there's always plenty of deer and elk here, and they'll do, but where's the fun in that?" He smiled teasingly.

"Where indeed," I murmured around another bite of pizza.²³⁷ "So... you like the chase?"

"Yes, Bella. I like the chase. Sometimes it's less fun when it just falls right into your lap and all you have to do is bite its neck off, turn it upside down, and suck. Where's the fun in that?"

"Where indeed," I repeated, agreeing.

"Early spring is Emmett's favorite bear season—they're just coming out of hibernation, so they're more irritable." He smiled at some remembered joke, I presumed; a joke that I *wasn't* in on. I frowned.

"Nothing more fun than an irritated grizzly bear," I said pleasantly, hoping he'd stop tormenting me.

He snickered,²³⁸ shaking his head. "Tell me what you're really thinking, please."

"I'm trying to picture it—but I can't," I admitted. "How do you hunt a bear without weapons?" I was still stuck a few minutes back in the conversation, and though it embarrassed me, my curiosity to know the truth overpowered my embarrassment.

"Oh, we have weapons." He flashed his bright teeth in a brief, threatening, crooked smile. I fought back the shiver before it could expose me.²³⁹ "Just not the kind they consider when writing laws. If you've ever seen a bear attack on television, you should be able to visualize Emmett-hunting." He continued.

I couldn't stop the next shiver that flashed down my spine. It was probably the most violent shiver that had *ever* flashed down my spine, and it made my entire upper-body spasm; my shirt ripped instantly, right down the middle, exposing my entire chest and stomach. I peeked across the cafeteria toward Emmett, who was already staring at me, probably because my shirt had just ripped down the middle and my chest was exposed; his bison eyes widened as though they were going to explode off his face. I couldn't take my eyes off him, just envisioning him ripping apart an animal three times his size. The thick bands of muscle that wrapped his arms and torso were somehow even more menacing now, beaming at me through his t-shirt. I immediately thought of Fredward. Did Fredward rip bears apart too? Did he sneak up behind them, jump onto them, and rip his teeth into their fat necks? The real question was... would he do this to *me*? I almost wanted to run. I almost wanted to faint. But then I remembered what I really wanted: to spend as much time as possible with Fredward. Running away or being unconscious would really cut in on our time together. Fredward interrupted my thoughts.

"Bella, do you want to borrow one of my shirts?" Fredward asked with concern.

"Um, sure," I agreed, my eyes turning from his bison brother to Fredward's own bulging muscles.

"I always carry around some extra shirts in case... something like this happens," he said, bringing his book-bag up to the table, and opening it between us so that I could see what he had to offer. He pulled out three items. The first was an eggplant-purple canvas vest with a bit of fringe at the bottom. He shook his head. "You'd never pull it off." The next item was a practically see-through white t-shirt with a dramatically large and low V. His eyes widened just *thinking* of me wearing it. "No way," he said. The third item was a rainbow-colored argyle scarf. It was extremely thin; so thin; it probably wouldn't even have covered my nipples.²⁴⁰

Fredward sighed. "I guess I'm just going to have to give you *my* shirt and spend the rest of the

237. Her mouth was literally around the bite of pizza when she said it.

238. "Hungry? Why Wait?"; a trademark of Mars, Inc.

239. Occasionally, Bella shivers so violently that all of her clothes come off. For example, her t-shirt would just rip right down the center, exposing her nipples.

240. Bella's nipples are *enormous*.

day wearing a combination of these three items.”

I giggled at the thought of him wearing these three items together, and then fainted at the thought of the sweet gesture he was making.

When I woke up, I was wearing his $\frac{3}{4}$ length gray shirt, and he was wearing the white V-neck shirt with the vest over it; the scarf was lying gracefully atop his shoulders. Even in these mismatched items, he looked like a million bucks.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

"Yes."

I was eager to resume the conversation. "Are you like a bear too? When you fight?" I asked in a low voice.

"More like a lion, or so they tell me," he said lightly. "Perhaps our preferences are indicative."

I tried to smile.²⁴¹ "Perhaps." I repeated. But my mind was filled with opposing images that I couldn't merge together. "Is that something I might get to see?"

"Absolutely not!" His face turned even whiter than usual, and his eyes were suddenly furious. I leaned back, stunned and—though I'd never admit it to him—a little put off by his reaction, his reluctance to include me in this horrifying yet integral part of his life. He leaned back as well, folding his arms across his chest.

"Too scary for little, clumsy, human little me?" I asked, when I could control my voice again.

"If that were it, I'd take you out tonight," he said, his voice cutting me so, so bad. "You need a healthy dose of fear. Nothing could be more beneficial for you."

"Then why?" I pressed myself against myself, trying to ignore his angry expression.

He glared at me for a Forks minute.²⁴²

"Later," he finally said. He was on his feet in one little movement. "We're going to be late."

I glanced around, startled to see that he was right and the cafeteria was nearly vacant. When I was with him, the time and the place were such a muddled blur that I completely lost track of both. I jumped up, grabbing my book-bag from the back of my chair.

"Later, then," I agreed. I wouldn't forget, I couldn't forget, and I didn't forget.²⁴³

241. When Bella fainted, she hit her head on the table, damaging her motor strip and severely hindering her ability to smile.

242. It is said that a New York minute is very fast, while a Forks minute is extremely slow.

243. Please see thought question #8.

11.

CUMPLICATIONS

EVERYONE WATCHED AS WE WALKED TOGETHER TO OUR LAB TABLE, HE in his new ensemble, and me in the shirt that he had obviously been wearing earlier. Anyone that hadn't seen us changing shirts in the lunchroom—and I admit that that was probably a fairly small percentage—probably thought that we'd had *sex*! I noticed that he no longer angled the chair to sit as far back from me as the desk would allow. Instead, he sat quite close, our arms almost touching. Why was he suddenly so affectionate? I wondered. For a brief second, I considered the possibility that we actually did have sex during that time I was passed out in the lunchroom, but shook the thought. After all, wouldn't Jessica have started asking me questions about it already?

Mr. Banner backed into the room then, pulling a tall metal frame on wheels that held an enormous oak TV with a VCR perched on top. A movie day—the lift in the class atmosphere was almost tangible. Mr. Banner shoved the tape, hard, into the reluctant VCR and walked to the wall to turn off all the lights.

And then, as the room went black, I was suddenly hyper-aware that Fredward was sitting less than an inch from my body. I was stunned by the unexpected electricity that flowed through me, amazed that it was possible to be even *more hyper-aware* of him than I already was. A crazy impulse to reach over and touch him, to stroke his absolutely perfect face just once in the darkness, nearly overwhelmed me. I crossed my arms tightly across my chest, hands balled into fists. I was losing my mind.

The opening credits began, lighting the room by a token amount. My eyes, of their own accord, flickered to him. Traitors! I smiled sheepishly as I realized his posture was identical to mine, fists clenched under his arms, eyes peering sideways at me. He grinned back, his eyes somehow managing to smolder even in the dark, and the sides of his lips rising, one more than the other, in his trademark crooked smile. I managed to look away before I started hyperventilating.

The hour seemed very long. I couldn't concentrate on the movie—I didn't even know what subject it was on. I tried to relax, but the electric current that kept arcing between us seemed to be originating from somewhere in his body. Occasionally I would permit myself a quick glance in his direction, but he never seemed to relax, either. The overpowering craving to touch him also refused to fade, and I crushed my fists safely against my ribs until my fingers were aching with the effort.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Mr. Banner flicked the lights back on at the end of class, and stretched my arms out in front of me, flexing my stiff fingers. Fredward chuckled beside me.

"Well, *that* was interesting," He murmured. His voice was dark and his eyes were cautious. Nervousness struck me. I had no idea what we'd just watched, and hoped he wasn't going to try and strike up a conversation about it.

"Umm," was all I was able to respond.

"Shall we?" he asked, rising fluidly.

I almost groaned. Time for Gym.²⁴⁴ I stood with care, worried my balance might have been compromised by the strange new intensity between us.

He walked me to my next class in silence and paused at the door; I turned to say goodbye. His face startled me—his expression was torn, almost ripped, and so fiercely beautiful that the ache to touch him in his weakness flared as strong as before. I resisted, my hands trembling at my sides, a goodbye stuck in my throat.

He raised his hand, hesitant, conflict raging beneath his eyes, and then swiftly brushed the length of my cheekbone with his fingertips. His skin was as icy as ever, but the trail his fingers left on my skin burned with passion—like I'd been burned with hot ice.

He turned without a word and strode quickly away from me.

I walked into the gym, lightheaded and wobbly. In my trancelike state I changed, and was only vaguely aware that there were other people surrounding me, giggling. Reality didn't fully set in until I was handed a racquet and realized I'd put my shorts on as a shirt and my shirt on as a shorts. Before I could tell Coach Capp I needed to change, he blew his whistle and ordered us to pair up into teams.

Mercifully, some vestiges of Mike's fat crush still survived; he came to stand beside me. "Do you want to be a team?"

"Thanks, Mike—you don't have to do this, you know." I grimaced at the thought of owing Mike anything. "Don't worry, I'll keep out of your way." He grinned a mouthful of galloping horseteeth. Sometimes it was so easy to like Mike.

Badminton didn't go smoothly. I somehow managed to hit myself in the head with my racquet and clip Mike's shoulder on the same swing. I spent the rest of the period in the back corner of the court, with the racquet held safely behind my back. Despite being handicapped by me, Mike was pretty good; he won three games out of four single-handedly. I guess you learn that kind of thing, being the son of a paralympics outfitter. He gave me an unearned high five when the coach finally blew the whistle ending class.

"So," he said as we walked off the court.

"So good game, Mike!" I clapped him on the shoulder, hoping he would shut up.

No luck. "You and Cullen, huh?" he asked, his tone rebellious of the psychic stranglehold I somehow maintained without actually trying. My previous feeling of affection disappeared.

"That's none of your fucking business, *Mike*," I warned, internally cursing Jessica straight to the fiery pits of Hades.

"I don't like it," he muttered.

"You don't have to, *fag*."

"He looks at you like... like you're something to eat," he continued, ignoring me.

I chortled at that; I got right in his stupid equine face and chortled. He glowered at me. I gave him the finger and fled to the locker room, afraid he might fly into a rage.

I dressed quickly, something stronger than butterflies battering recklessly against the walls of my stomach,²⁴⁵ my argument with Mike already a distant memory. I was wondering if Fredward would be waiting, or if I should meet him at his car. What if his family was there? I felt a wave of real terror. Did they know that I knew? Was I supposed to know that they knew that I knew, or not? Who was supposed to know what? I shoved my arms into the borrowed 3/4 sleeves, head and guts in a tangle over who or what was waiting for me on the other side of the gym doors.

244. *Time for Gym* (1973 - 1976) was a critically acclaimed sitcom about a group of uncoordinated teens as they endure the trials and tribulations encountered in a high school gym class.

245. The issue of whether Bella is on her period or suffering from diarrhea has created a significant rift in the *Fredward Bound* critical community, as it has come to be symbolic of her approach to love; does she experience it as a periodic but surging ache, or an intense and persistent exhalation?

By the time I walked out of the gym, I had just about decided to walk straight home without even looking toward the parking lot, but my worries were unnecessary. Fredward was waiting, leaning casually against the side of the gym, his breathtaking face untroubled now. As I walked to his side, I felt a peculiar sense of release.

"Hi," I breathed, smiling hugely.²⁴⁶

"Hello." His answering smile was brilliant, like a million megawatts floating over New York City. "How was Gym?"

My face fell a tiny bit. "Fine," I lied.

"Really?" He was unconvinced. His eyes shifted their focus slightly, looking over my shoulder and tightening. I glanced behind me to see Mike's back as he walked away. "What?" I demanded.

His eyes slid back to mine, still tight, and he cracked his beautiful, spindly knuckles. "Newton's getting on my nerves."

"You were listening again?" I was horror-struck. All traces of my sudden good humor²⁴⁷ vanished.

"How's your head?" he asked innocently.

"You're unbelievable!" I turned, clomping away in the general direction of the parking lot.

He kept up with me easily, due to his vampiric celerity.

"You were the one who mentioned how I'd never seen you in Gym—it made me curious." He didn't sound repentant, so I ignored him.

We walked in silence—a furious and hotly embarrassed silence on my part—to his car. But I had to stop a few steps away—a crowd of people, all boys, were surrounding it. Then I realized they weren't surrounding our Volvo, they were actually circled around Rosalie's red convertible, unmistakable lust in their eyes. None of them even looked up as Fredward slid between them to open his door. I climbed quickly in the passenger side, also unnoticed.

"Ostentatious," he muttered.

"What kind of car is that?" I asked.

"An M3."

"I don't speak *Car and Driver*," I said testily.

"That's doesn't make an M3 not a car..." he rolled his eyes, not looking at me, trying to back out without running over the car enthusiasts, adding, "It's a BMW model."

I nodded—I'd heard of that one.

"Are you still angry?" he asked as he carefully maneuvered his way around the growing crowd of car enthusiasts.

"Definitely."

He sighed. "Will you forgive me if I apologize?"

"Maybe... if you mean it. *And* if you promise not to do it again," I insisted.

His eyes were suddenly shrewd, calculating. "How about if I mean it, *and* I agree to let you drive Saturday?"

I considered, and decided it was probably the best deal I would ever get. "Deal," I agreed.

"Then I'm very sorry I upset you." His eyes burned with sincerity for a protracted moment—or maybe they smoldered? Smoked? I can't remember, their European rhythm playing havoc with my heart's own vibrations—before turning playful. "And I'll be on your doorstep bright and early Saturday morning."

"Um, it doesn't help with the Charlie situation if an unexplained Volvo is left in the driveway."

"I wasn't intending to bring the car."

246. In the manner that a huge person would.

247. Good Humor, manufacturers of fine frozen novelties and big smiles.

"How —"

He cut me off with a wink. "Don't worry about it, dummy. I'll be there, no car."

I let it go. I had a more pressing question.

"Is it later yet?" I asked significantly, doing a little winking of my own.

He frowned. "I suppose it is later."

I kept my expression polite as I waited.

He stopped the car. I looked up, surprised—of course we were already at Charlie's house, parking behind the truck. It was easier to ride his way, by his rules, if I only looked when it was over. When I looked back at him, he was staring at me, measuring my face with his eyes.²⁴⁸

"And you still want to know why you can't see me hunt?" He seemed solemn, but I thought I saw a well of humor deep in his eyes. A place, I was beginning to learn, that all levity came from.

"Well," I clarified, "I was mostly wondering about your reaction."

"Did I frighten you?" Yes, there was definitely humor there.

"No," I lied significantly. He didn't buy it. "I apologize for scaring you," he persisted with a slight smile, but then all evidence of teasing disappeared. "It was just the very thought of you being there... while we hunted." His jaw clenched, ratcheting itself tighter with every passing moment.

"That would be bad?" I guessed.

He spoke from between clenched teeth. "Totally. For sure."

"Because... ?"

He took a deep breath and stared through the windshield at the thick, rolling clouds that seemed to press down, almost within reach.

"When we hunt," he spoke slowly, unwillingly, "we give ourselves over to our senses... govern less with our minds. Especially our sense of smell. If you were anywhere near me when I lost control that way..." He shook his head, still gazing morosely at the heavy clouds.

"... So you're saying you would probably eat me?"

Fredward put his head down, his face in his hands. He looked sad. "It's like... say it's someone's birthday, like Jessica's. So you buy her a little box of gourmet chocolates and you put them in your purse. And even though they look so delicious, you never dream of eating them. So then, you get home, and Charlie wants to take you to... er, a Chinese buffet or something. And you're really hungry, so you're pretty excited. You get there, and you have the Egg Drop soup, and you eat some BBQ pork, and then you have some Chow Mein... some General Tso's chicken... a Wonton... some rice... and since it's a buffet, you probably want to try a bit of everything, and so that's what you end up doing.

"So you eat all that, and you're sitting there chatting with Charlie and you're pretty satisfied. Everything you ate was pretty standard, exactly what you thought it was going to be, pretty average but okay. And then, all of the sudden, you remember the gourmet chocolates in your purse, you know, the ones you brought along but vowed not to eat, because they're for Jessica. But then you realize that the only thing in the world that you want, the only thing that can satisfy you at that moment, is to eat the chocolates in your purse that are for Jessica."

I shook my head to ward off the yawns. "I think I get what you're trying to say," I said.

But our eyes held, and the silence deepened—and changed. Flickers of the electricity²⁴⁹ I'd felt this afternoon began to charge the atmosphere as he gazed unrelentingly into my eyes. It wasn't until my head started to swim that I realized I wasn't breathing.²⁵⁰ When I drew in a jagged breath, breathing in the stillness, he closed his beautiful eyelids.

"Bella, I think you should go inside now." I think *you* should go inside now, I joked in my head.

248. Bella's face is approximately fifteen times the height of Fredward's eyes.

249. Sex hormones.

250. Metaphorically, Bella is drowning in sex hormones.

His low voice was rough, and his eyes were on the clouds again.²⁵¹

I opened the door, and the arctic draft²⁵² that burst into the car helped clear my head. Afraid I might stumble in my woozy state,²⁵³ I stepped carefully out of the car and shut the door behind me without looking back. The whir of the automatic window unrolling made me turn.

"Oh, Bella?" he called after me, his voice more even.²⁵⁴ He leaned toward the open window with a faint smile on his lips.

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow it's my turn to W."

"Your turn to... what?"

He smiled wider, flashing his gleaming teeth. "*Exactly.*"

And then he was gone, the car speeding down the street and disappearing around the corner before I could even say "wait!" or "I'll miss you!" or "keep in touch!" or "don't ever change!" I smiled as I walked to the house. It was clear he was planning to see me tomorrow, if nothing else.

That night Fredward-porn starred in my dreams, as usual. However, the climate of my unconsciousness had changed. It thrilled with the electricity that had been charged in the afternoon, and I tossed and turned restlessly, grabbing at the air which, in my dreams, was filled with Fredward. I woke often, surprised to find myself yelling his name. It was only in the early hours of the morning that I finally sank into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

When I woke I was still tired, but edgy as well. I pulled on my brown turtleneck and the inescapable jeans, sighing as I daydreamed of spaghetti straps and shorts. Breakfast was the usual, quiet event I expected. Charlie fried eggs for himself; I had my bowl of cereal. I wondered if he had forgotten about our Seattle Saturday. He answered my unspoken question as he stood up to take his plate to the sink.

"About this Saturday...", he began, walking across the kitchen and turning on the faucet.

I cringed. "Yes, Dad?"

"Are you still set on going to Seattle?" he asked.

"That was the plan."

He squeezed some dish soap onto his plate and swirled it around with the brush, in obvious delight of the bubbles that he produced. "And you're sure you can't make it back in time for the dance?" ...Was Charlie trying to ask me to the dance?

"I'm not going to the dance, Dad." I glared. "Not with *anyone*." I added, to make the situation as clear as possible.

"Didn't anyone ask you?" he asked, trying to hide his concern by focusing on rinsing the plate.

I sidestepped that minefield. "It's a girl's choice."

"Oh." He frowned as he dried his plate.

I sympathized with him. It must be a hard thing to be a father, living in fear that your daughter would meet a boy she liked, but also living in fear that she wouldn't. How ghastly it would be, I thought, shuddering, if Charlie had even the slightest inkling of exactly what I *did* like...

Having finished washing his plate, pan, and fork, Charlie left with a goodbye wave, and I went upstairs to brush my teeth, and masturbate. I had gotten a little hot and bothered when I started worrying about Charlie figuring out my sexual preference. When I heard the cruiser pull away, I could only wait a few seconds before I had to peek out of my window again to make sure. The silver Volvo car was already there, waiting in Charlie's spot on the driveway. I bounded down the stairs and out the

251. Fredward's eyes are riding high. This is a drug reference.

252. This is an exaggeration.

253. This is a drug reference.

254. A little less *odd* than usual. This footnote is a play on the multiple meanings of the word 'even.'

front door, wondering how long this bizarre routine would continue. I never wanted it to end.

He waited in the car, not appearing to watch as I shut the door behind me without bothering to lock the house's deadbolt. I walked to the car, pausing shyly before opening the door and stepping in. He was smiling, relaxed—and, as usual, perfectly beautiful to an excruciating degree.

"Good morning." His voice was so silky I wanted to wear it, or at least roll around in it. "How are you today?" His eyes roamed over my face, as if his question was something more than simple courtesy. He *really* wanted to know how I was doing today.

His gaze lingered on the circles under my eyes. "You look tired."

I immediately overreacted. "I can get surgery!" I yelped.

He glared at me for suggesting such nonsense.

"I... couldn't sleep," I confessed, automatically swinging my hair around my shoulder to provide some measure of cover.

"Neither could I," he teased as he started his engine. I was becoming used to the quiet purr of his engine. In fact, I wasn't sure how I'd ever be able to go back to the rumbling of my own growler...

I chortled. "I guess that's right. I suppose I slept just a little bit more than you did."

He chuckled. "I'd wager you did."

"Five bucks?" I joked, referencing an earlier inside joke we had shared. "So, what did you do last night?" I demanded.

He chuckled. "Not a chance. It's my day to ask questions."

"Oh, that's right. I have a lot of trouble remembering what day it is," I admitted. "What do you want to know?" My forehead increased. I couldn't imagine anything about me that could be in any way interesting to him. I was just a middle-class almost-disabled white girl that everyone seemed to like.

"What's your favorite color?" he asked, his face grave.

I rolled my eyes. Is *this* what he thought people talked about in their spare time? "It changes from day to day."

"What's your favorite color today?" He was still solemn.

"Probably brown. I tend to dress according to my mood."

He snorted, dropping his serious expression. "Brown?" he asked skeptically, as though that wasn't an okay color to be my favorite color.

"Sure. Brown is warm. Brown is safe. I *miss* brown. Everything that's *supposed* to be brown—tree trunks, rocks, dirt—is all covered up with squashy green... *life* here. It's disgusting," I complained.

He acted as if he were fascinated by my little rant. He considered it for a moment, staring into my eyes, presumably trying to figure out more about the mystery that was *moi*, Bella Duck.

"You're right," he decided, serious again. "Brown is superior to green. I never really... thought about it before, but now that I do... think about it that is, I think you're right. Brown is... warm." He reached over, swiftly, but somehow hesitantly, to sweep my hair back behind my shoulder. I felt a little tingling in my lady parts, and when I moved to get out of the car, noticed that my panties were a little damp.²⁵⁵

We arrived at the parking lot. He turned back to me as he pulled into a parking space.

"What music is in your Compact Disc player right now?" He asked, his face as somber as if he'd asked for a murder confession.

I realized I'd never removed the Compact Disc Phil had given me. "Well, I have this Compact Disc that my mom's ball-playing husband Phil gave me..." I told him. When I said that, he smiled crookedly, a peculiar expression in his eyes. He flipped open a compartment under his car's Compact Disc player, pulled out one of three hundred or so Compact Discs that were jammed into the small

255. What her panties were damp with is left to the reader's own personal imagination.

space, and handed it to me.

"Debussy to this?" He raised an eyebrow.

It was Phil's Compact Disc! I examined the familiar cover art, the picture of a man dressed up as a hot dog handing a flyer to an elderly woman. Keeping my eyes down, I saw the words, the Compact Disc's title "Hard Ballin'" written across the top of the image in dark blue script over the light-colored sky and clouds. This was *definitely* Phil's Compact Disc. How did Fredward even *know* about this band? How does it even know about *Phil*? Fredward popped the Compact Disc in and the rowdy sounds of Hard Ballin' resonated through my ears. Fredward began to jam, shaking his head back and forth, his perfect hair shaking into a humorous fluff when he shook right, and shaking back into a perfect formation when he shook left. Fredward continues to amaze me, I realized, dreamily...

It continued like that for the rest of the day, Fredward asking me stupid questions and then somehow managing to amaze me by the end of the conversation. While he walked me to English in a Daze, when he met me after Spanish, all through the lunch hour, he questioned me relentlessly about every insignificant detail of my completely average existence. Movies I'd liked and hated, the few places I'd been and the many places I wanted to go, and books and music—endlessly books and music.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd talked so much. More often than not, I felt self-conscious, certain I must be boring him. But the absolute absorption of his face,²⁵⁶ and his never-ending stream of questions, compelled me to continue. Mostly his questions were easy, only a very few triggering my easy blushes—for example, he asked me how many boys I had held hands with. Man, did I blush! And when I blushed, it brought on a whole new round of questions.

Such as the time he asked about my favorite gemstone, and I blurted out topaz before thinking. He'd been flinging questions at me with such speed that I didn't even *know* which gemstone was my favorite; I felt like I was taking one of those psychiatric tests where you answer with the first word that comes to mind. I was sure he would have continued down whatever mental list he was following, except for the deep crimson blush that set my cheeks ablaze. I turned to look at his eyes and saw a fire kindling there, too. I scooted to the edge of my bucket seat and waited for the coming firestorm.

To understand what was occurring between us, I need to back up the story a bit. Since the time I had moved from Forks to Phoenix, my favorite gemstone had been red garnet. Red to symbolize how my heart felt, bloody, and garnet because I wanted to keep the dwindling fire in my heart alive. I had garnet earrings, bracelets, necklaces, garnet-studded sneakers and shirts. But now...

Now it was impossible, staring into his topaz eyes, not to remember the reason for the switch. And, naturally, he wouldn't rest until I'd admitted why I was embarrassed.

"Tell me," he finally commanded after persuasion failed—failed only because I kept my eyes safely away from his face.²⁵⁷

"It's the color of your eyes today," I sighed, surrendering, staring down at my hands as I fiddled with a clump of my hair that had fallen into my lap. "I suppose if you asked me in two weeks, I'd say onyx." I'd given more information than necessary, again, and I worried it would provoke the strange anger that flared whenever I slipped and revealed how deep my love ran.

But his pause was very short.

"What kinds of flowers to you prefer?" he fired off.

I sighed in relief, and continued to pretend that I didn't like the attention.

Biology IV was a complication again. Fredward had continued with his quizzing up until Mr. Banner entered the room, dragging the TV cart in. As the teacher approached the light switch, I noticed Fredward slide his chair slightly farther away from mine and the slight sound of a zipper coming undone. Whatever he was doing, it didn't help. As soon as the room was dark, there was the same

256. Similar to a shammy cloth.

257. Fredward's normal method of persuasion involves a combination of hypnosis and intimidation.

electric spark arcing between us, the same restless craving to stretch my hand across the short space and touch his cold skin, as yesterday.

I leaned forward on the table, resting my breasts on my folded arms, my hidden fingers gripping the table's edge as I fought to ignore the irrational urges that were working on me. I didn't look at him, afraid that if he was looking, it would only make self-control that much harder. I sincerely tried to watch the movie—it was about dolphins and as far as I knew, and I *loved* dolphins—but at the end of the hour I had no idea what I'd just seen. I sighed in relief again when Mr. Banner turned the lights on, finally glancing at Fredward; he was staring at me, his eyes smoldering in their ambivalence.

He rose in silence and then stood still, waiting for me to catch up. We walked toward the gym in silence, like yesterday. And, also like yesterday, he touched my face wordlessly—this time with the back of his cool hand, stroking once from my temple to my jaw—before he turned and ran away.

Jim on Gym passed quickly as I watched Mike's one-man badminton show. He didn't speak to me today, either in response to my vacant expression or because he was still angry about our little squabble yesterday. Somewhere, in a corner of my mind, I felt bad about it. After all, he couldn't help it if he looked like a horse, was in denial about his sexuality and had a dad who ran a paralympics outfitters store in a town whose only actual cripple was my dad.

I hurried to change afterward, ill at ease, knowing the faster I moved, the sooner I would be with Fredward. The pressure made me more clumsy than usual, but eventually I made it out the door, feeling the same release when I saw him standing there, a wide smile automatically stretching across my face.²⁵⁸ He smiled in reaction before launching into more cross-examination.

His questions were different now, though, not as easily answered. He wanted to know what I missed about home, insisting on descriptions of anything he wasn't familiar with. We sat in front of Charlie's house for hours, as the sky darkened and rain plummeted around us in a deluge.

I tried to describe impossible things about my past life, like what it would feel like to have phantom limbs—they would be there, but they wouldn't—or whether atoms contain fractions of something that could be called a universal or hereditary memory, if angels on the head of a pin had their own pins with angels on them, if God's beard gave Him His authority or if it was a higher power. The hardest thing to explain was why these things were so beautiful to me—to justify a beauty that didn't depend on the sparse, spiny imagination I was cursed with, a beauty that had more to do with the fact that I was thinking about such things than if I cared for them. I found myself using my hands as I tried to describe it to him.

His quiet, probing questions kept me talking freely, forgetting, in the dim light of the storm, to be embarrassed for monopolizing the conversation. Finally, when I had finished telling him about the time I'd detailed my room at home, he paused instead of responding with another question.

"Are you finished?" I asked in disappointment.

"Not even close—but your father will be home soon."

"Charlie!" I suddenly recalled his existence, and sighed. I looked out at the rain-darkened sky, but it gave nothing away. "How late is it?" I wondered out loud as I glanced at the clock. I was surprised by the time—6:69—Charlie would be driving home now.

"It's twilight," Fredward murmured significantly, looking at the western horizon, obscured as it was by the layered pile of already-read pages. His voice was thoughtful, as if his mind were somewhere far away. "We're a little under halfway through the book by now and I haven't quite admitted that I'm a vampire yet. Oh, it's been implied, if not directly stated on the back cover, but the words haven't really left my mouth. And that's okay, it's fine. If I remember correctly, it's going to happen within the next few chapters, after a bit more smoldering and sighing." He sighed and continued, "Since we're at about

258. Technology-assisted smiles.

the halfway mark, now would be a good time to take a break and stretch your legs, maybe help yourself to a cup of coffee or a snack. Don't worry, just put us face-down or fold a page corner. We'll be here when you get back."

I was still staring when his eyes shifted back to mine and he continued.

"It's the safest time of day for us," he said with a tone which, I'll bet, razzle-dazzled even *himself*. "The easiest time. But also the saddest, in a way... the end of another living-dead day, the return of the anonymous night. Darkness is so predictable, don't you think?" He smiled wistfully.

I shrugged.

"I think the night is the very essence of beauty, of artifice, a mask to all things mundane and some things hideous. In my eyes, the night is..." he continued.

"Actually, I like the night." I interrupted. "You know why?"

"Mm, why?" He asked, readjusting in the car.

"I used to go to Girl Scout camp all the time." I answered.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Sometimes," I allowed my voice to get a little dreamy, "we would have campfires at night. It would be so cold—it is cold out there in the desert, you know—and I would have to put on two sweatshirts, or even three!"

"Mmhm?" He asked. His face looked slightly pained. I assumed he was itching for more details about my childhood.

"Yeah," I chortled just thinking about it, "and we would sing all these really great songs and go on late-night canoe rides across the lake. Once, we played this prank on the cabin next to us where we silly-stringed their whole cabin. And then this other time, we played a prank on the cabin on the other side—wait, no, I think it was actually two cabins down. Anyway, we took one of the chickens from the farm area and put it in their cabin. It was flapping its wings everywhere and running around, and when they got home, *everything* in their cabin was covered with, well, you know."

"Feathers?" He asked lightly.

I smirked. "No, poop!"

Fredward smiled half-heartedly. I wondered if I had been talking too much, or too excitedly. I vaguely remembered what he had been saying before I offered all the details from my childhood. He had been saying some poetic things about night. What could I add?

I decided to say something poetic about the stars. "Without the dark, we'd never see the stars." I frowned, thinking of the thought of not seeing the stars. "Not that you see them here much anyways."

He laughed, but his eyes remained dark as the night sky— and like the big, bountiful night skies of Phoenix his eyes were full of tiny little stars, burning holes in my heart.

"Charlie will be here in a few minutes. So, unless you want to tell him you'll be with me on Saturday..." He raised one of his two eyebrows.

"Thanks, but no thanks." I said. "Charlie would probably want to chaperone us if he knew we were planning a day for just the two of us."

"Suit yourself!" Fredward said as I gathered my book-documents, stiff from sitting so long.

"So is it my turn tomorrow, then?"

"Certainly not!" His face was teasingly outraged. "I told you I wasn't done, didn't I?"

"What more is there?" I wondered. After all, I'd already talked about my favorite color, gemstone, and my days at Girl Scout camp.

"You'll find out tomorrow." Was he implying that I was going to learn things about myself? Perhaps things that he was implying *he* already knew? He reached across to open the door for me, and his sudden proximity sent my heart into frenzied palpitations.

But his hand froze on the handle.

"Not good," he muttered. I looked down at his arm brushing against my chest.

"I... I can get surgery..." I was surprised to see that his jaw was clenched, his eyes disturbed. I thought he knew...

He glanced at me for a brief second. "No, not that. Another complication."

He flung the door open in one swift movement, and then moved, almost cringed, swiftly away from me.

The flash of headlights through the rain caught my attention as a dark car covered in dream catcher decals pulled up to the curb just a few feet away, facing us.

"Charlie's around the corner," he warned, staring through the downpour at the other vehicle.

I hopped out at once, despite my confusion and curiosity. The rain was louder as it glanced off my jacket.

I tried to make out the shapes in the front seat of the other car, but it was too dark. All I could see was the license plate, DRMKCHR. Fredward was illuminated by the glare of the new car's headlights; he was still staring ahead, his gaze locked on something or someone that I couldn't see, but who appeared to be in the new car. His expression was a strange mix of frustration and defiance.

Then he revved the engine and peeled out. The Volvo was out of sight in seconds.

"Hey, Bella," called a familiar, husky voice from the driver's side of the Dream Catcher.

"Squaw?" I asked, squinting through the rain. Just then, Charlie's cruiser cruised around the corner, his lights shining on the occupants of the mystery car in front of me.

Squaw was already climbing out, his wide grin visible even through the darkness. In the passenger seat was a much older man, a heavyset man with a memorable face—a face that overflowed with fat, the cheeks resting against his shoulders, with creases running through the russet skin like a beat-up catcher's mitt. And the surprisingly familiar eyes, black eyes that seemed at the same time both too old and too crinkly for the broad face they were set in. Squaw's father, Billy Ray Black. I knew him immediately. He was staring at me and breathing hard, so I smiled tentatively at him. His eyes were wide, as if in shock or fear, his fat nostrils flared. I tried not to be grossed out but my smile faded.

Another complication, Fredward had said. Why does everyone want *me*?

Billy Ray still stared at me with intense, black eyes. I groaned internally. Although he'd seen Fredward, he clearly didn't seem intimidated by him, at least not enough to stop thinking about raping me. Did he have some sort of earth magic against vampires?

The answer was clear in Billy's eyes. Yes. Yes, he did.

12.

BALANCING ACT

"BILLY!" CHARLIE CALLED AS SOON AS HE GOT OUT OF THE CAR.

Glad my father had distracted him from his Rape Glare, I turned toward the house, beckoning to Squaw as I ducked under the porch overhang. I heard Charlie greeting them loudly behind me.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't see you behind the wheel, Squaw," he said disapprovingly.²⁵⁹

"We get permits early on the rez,"²⁶⁰ Squaw said while I unlocked the door and flicked on the porch light.

"Sure you do," Charlie laughed tersely.

"I have to get around somehow." I recognized Billy Ray's resonant voice easily, despite the years. The sound of it made me feel suddenly younger, helpless, like a child.

I went inside, leaving the door open behind me and hung my jacket on the jacket hook. Then I stood in the door, watching anxiously as Charlie tried to help Squaw help Billy Ray out of the car and into his wheelchair. I shuddered and stepped back behind the coat-rack, hiding.

"This is a surprise," Charlie was saying.

"It's been too long," Billy answered, turning to look at me where I was standing amongst the jackets. "I hope it's not a bad time." His dark eyes flashed up to me again, their expression inscrutable.

"No, it's totally a great time." Charlie said, twiddling his thumb and darting his eyes around the room, puzzled by the tension. "I hope you can stay for the game."

Squaw grinned. "I think that's the plan—our TV broke last week."

Billy Ray made a face at his son. "And, of course, Squaw was anxious to see Bella again," he said, adding, "if you know what I'm saying." Squaw leaned his head back and howled briefly while I fought back a surge of remorse. Maybe I'd been too convincing on the beach. How could he have not known I was using him for information?

"Are you hungry?" I asked, emerging from the coats and turning toward the kitchen. I was eager to escape Billy Ray's searching gaze.

"Naw, we ate just before we came," Squaw answered.

"How about you, Charlie?" I called over my shoulder as I fled around the corner.

"Sure," he replied, his voice moving in the direction of the front room and the TV. I could hear Billy Ray's wheelchair follow.

The grilled cheese sandwiches were in the frying pan and I was slicing up a tomato when I sensed someone behind me.

"So, how are things?" Squaw asked.

"Pretty good." I smiled. Sometimes it was so easy to like Squaw. "How about you? Did you finish your car?"

"No." he frowned. "I still need car parts. I can't afford them. We had to jerk off one of the elders to borrow that one," He pointed with his thumb in the direction of the front yard.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I haven't seen any... what was it you were looking for?"

"Master cylinder." He grinned. "Hey, is something wrong with the truck?"

259. Charlie's idea of a friendly greeting is to threaten someone with legal action.

260. *The Rez* (2003), a reality-based drama that centers around four affluent teenagers who live on a Native American reservation.

"No."

"Oh. I just wondered why you weren't driving it. Not like, to butt-in or anything. I mean, haven't been watching you or anything. I live like ten miles away hahahaha. How would I watch you from ten miles away? Hahahaha."

I tried to smile but somewhere on the uplift, my lips got caught on the fear that I'd somehow broken Squaw.

His face glowed red. "But like, the last two times I've seen you, you haven't been driving it."

I stared down at the pan, pulling up the edge of a sandwich to check the bottom side. "I got a ride with a friend."

"Wow, nice ride. Nice, nice ride." He stammered. "I didn't recognize the driver, though. I thought I knew most of the kids around the white part of town."

I nodded noncommittally, keeping my eyes down as I flipped sandwiches.

"My dad seemed to know him from somewhere."

"Squaw, could you hand me some plates? They're in the cupboard over the sink."

"Sure." He said, walking over. "Are these them?" He asked.

I reluctantly looked up, and squinted to see if they were the exact plates I had wanted to use to serve the grilled cheese sandwiches to myself and my father. "No, those aren't them. The ones I'm looking for are kind of greenish blue, and have a grey-ish ribbon around the end."

Squaw rustled about in the cabinet for a minute or two as the grilled cheese sandwiches began to burn. "Have you found them yet?" I asked. I looked up at Squaw just seconds before he dropped a huge stack of ceramic plates on the floor.

"Oh, shit!" he exclaimed, throwing himself on the floor to begin cleaning up his mess. "Oh man, I've never broken so many plates in my life. Where will I even begin?" He said desperately.

I turned off the burner, rolled my eyes, moved the pan to one of the back burners, and walked to the cabinet where we kept the bowls. I walked back to the stove and put each sandwich in a bowl, sighing.

Squaw continued picking up the plate-shards as I prepared beverages for myself and my father. Unfortunately he also continued the conversation we were having before he broke all of my father's dinner plates.

"So who was it?" he asked.

I sighed in defeat. He was a master tactician. "Fredward Cullen."

To my surprise, he laughed. I glanced up at him, ready to sock him one. He looked a little terrified.

"Guess that explains it then," he said softly, backing up a bit towards the opposite wall, clearly preparing for me to hit him. "I-I-I just wondered why my dad was acting so strange."

"That's right." I faked an expression that expressed that I had no idea my boyfriend was a vampire. "He doesn't like the Cullens."

"Superstitious old man," Squaw muttered under his breath.

"Excuse me?!" I yelled before realizing he was talking about his father and not my boyfriend. I shook my head to make it seem like my outburst had never happened. "You don't think he'd say anything to Charlie, do you?"

Squaw stared at me for a moment, and I couldn't read the expression in his dark eyes. "I doubt it," he finally answered. "I think Charlie ripped him a new one last time he mentioned that he doesn't like the Cullens because they're vampires. They haven't spoken much since—tonight is sort of a reunion, I think. I don't think he'd bring it up again."

"Oh," I said, trying to sound indifferent. "Cool."

I stayed in the front room after I carried the food out to Charlie, pretending to watch the game

while Squaw chattered at me. I was really listening to the men's conversation, watching for any sign that Billy Ray was about to rat me out, trying to think of ways to stop him if he started to.

It was a long night. I had a lot of homework that was going undone, but was afraid to leave Billy Ray alone with my father. Finally, the game ended.

"Are you and your friends coming back to the beach soon?" Squaw asked as he pushed his father over the lip of the threshold.

"I'm not sure," I hedged.

"That was fun, Charlie." Billy Ray said.

"Come up for the next game, Billy Ray," Charlie encouraged. "Oh, we'll be here. As long as our TV doesn't get fixed." His eyes shifted to mine, and his smile took on a crooked bent instantaneously.

"And you take care, *Bella*," he added lasciviously.

"Thank you for your concern," I said, looking away.

I headed for the stairs while Charlie waved from the doorway.

"Wait, *Bella*," he said.

I cringed. Had Billy Ray gotten something in before I'd joined them in the living room? Was I busted?

But Charlie was relaxed, still grinning from the unexpected visit.

"I didn't get a chance to talk to you tonight. How was your... uh... day?" He struggled to make conversation.

"Good." I hesitated with one foot on the first stair, searching for details I could safely share.

"My badminton team won all four games."

"Wow, I didn't know you could play badminton."

"That's four out of four games, dad."

"Wow, *Bella*. Is your partner Mikey Newton?"

"My partner is Mike Newton." I told him reluctantly.

"Oh yeah—you said you were friends with Mikey Newton." He perked up. "Nice family. *Great* kid... *real* great kid." His eyes seemed distant, starry, as if remembering some halcyon memory. It was the first time I had ever seen him happy about anything since my mother had left him. "Why don't you ask Mikey Newton to the dance this weekend? It's a girl's choice, you said it yourself."

"Dad!" I groaned. "He's *kind* of dating my friend Jessica. Obviously if I asked him, he'd dump her in an instant, but he's *annoying*, dad. And he looks like a *horse*. Besides, you know I can't dance."

"Oh yeah!" He chuckled. "Come to think of it, the only time I ever saw you dance, you kind of looked like this." He began humming a very crude version of the Macarena and doing some signature moves from the 'Thriller' video. "So I guess it's good you'll be gone Saturday..." He said, the words getting mixed in with the bout of laughter that had overtaken him while he was mocking me. "I've made plans to go fishing with the guys from the station. The weather's supposed to be real warm. But if you wanted to put your trip off 'til someone could go with you, I--"

"Dad, you're doing a great job." I smiled, hoping my relief didn't show. "I've never minded being alone—I'm too much like you." I winked at him and his eyes welled up in tears, even as he tried to force out one of his signature crinkly-eyed smiles.

I slept better that night because things were better. When I woke to the pearl-gray morning,²⁶¹ my mood was blissful. Everything was going to be all right. The tense evening with Billy Ray and Squaw seemed harmless enough now; I decided to forget it completely. I caught myself whistling the Macarena while I was pulling the front part of my hair back into a barrette, and later as I skipped down the stairs. Unfortunately, Charlie noticed. Even worse, he commented on it.

261. *The Hour of the Pearl* by John Steinbeck (1995). A novella-length meditation on the benefits of waking up early.

"You're cheerful this morning, buttercup!" he commented over breakfast.

I shrugged and tried to keep from gagging. "It's Friday."

I hurried so I would be ready to go the second Charlie left. I had my book-bag ready, my running shoes on, my perfect teeth brushed, but even though I rushed to the door as soon as I was sure Charlie would be out of sight, Fredward was faster. He was waiting in his shiny Volvo car, windows down, engine off.²⁶²

I didn't hesitate for a second this time, climbing into the passenger seat quickly, the sooner to see his face. It was like a drug now, and I could hardly go ten hours without a hit. He grinned his crooked smile at me and my heart skipped.

"How did you sleep, buttercup?"

"Fine. How was your night?"

"Pleasant." His smile was amused; I felt like I was missing out on an inside joke that Fredward had with himself. The isolation began to close in again, and my high began to fizzle.

"Can I ask what you did?" I asked.

"No." He grinned. "Today is still MINE!"

What was he hiding? I tried to keep my panic under control, letting it get buried under a barrage of questions. He wanted to know about people today: more about Reneé, her hobbies, what we'd done in our free time together. And then the one grandmother I'd known, my few school friends—embarrassing me when he asked about boys I'd dated. I was relieved that I'd never really dated anyone, not anyone worth mentioning at least, so that particular conversation couldn't last long. He seemed as surprised as Jessica and Angela by my lack of romantic history.

"So you never met anyone you wanted?" he asked in a serious tone that made me wonder if he was thinking about how much of a virgin I was. I pinched myself all over the arm, angry that I'd let myself get this far without *any* sexual experience.

I was grudgingly honest. "Not in Phoenix."

His lips pressed together into a hard line, like two pieces of liver.

We were in the cafeteria at that point. I took advantage of his brief pause to rapidly take a bite of my bagel.

"I should have let you drive yourself today," he announced, shaking his head.

"Why??" I ejected, forcing the words around the bagel in my mouth.

"I'm leaving with Alice after lunch."

"Oh." I blinked. "That's okay, I understand. She should get it taken care of before..."

"What?"

"You're taking her to get a... um." I was getting scared again, on account of the growing tightness in his face. "An... a-a-abor—"

He frowned at me impatiently while rolling his eyes and throwing his hands up in disgust. "No. And I'm not going to make you walk home. We'll go get your truck and leave it here for you."

Through my tomato-red blush, I managed to speak. "I don't have my key with me. I really don't mind walking home." I shook my head, trying to clear the blood from my cheeks. Why did this always happen to me?

He shook his head. "Your truck will be here, and the key will be in the ignition—unless you're afraid someone might steal it." He laughed at the thought of someone wanting to steal The Growler. He seemed to be in better spirits already.

"All right," I agreed, pursing my lips. I was pretty sure my key was in the pocket of a pair of jeans I wore Wednesday, under a pile of clothes in the laundry room. Even if he broke into my house,

262. Just the way Bella likes it.

or whatever he was planning, he'd never find it without touching *at least* one pair of my²⁶³ panties. He seemed to feel the electricity in my consent and smirked.

"So where are you going?" I asked as casually as I could manage.

"Hunting," he answered grimly. "If I'm going to be alone with you tomorrow..." His eyes took on a distant look as he trailed off, tunneling through the folds of time and space into a distant universe which held the ripening tomorrow that we would soon share. "Bella," he muttered.

"Yes?"

"Bella, if I don't hunt now, then tomorrow..." And I saw clouds pass over his goldy-blacks, and then spots of crimson well up underneath them. I wondered what Fredward was seeing. "... so... so I'm going to take whatever precautions I can." His face grew morose, pleading forgiveness for something I did not know could happen yet. "You can always cancel, you know."

I looked down, afraid of the persuasive power of his eyes. I refused to be convinced to fear him, no matter how real the danger might be. *It doesn't matter that he wants to eat my blood*, I repeated in my head. *I don't need it as much as I need him...*

"No," I whispered, glancing back at his face. "I can't."

"Perhaps you're right," he murmured bleakly. The clouds in his eyes seemed to darken.

I changed the subject to something more sunny. "What time will I see you tomorrow?" I asked, already depressed by the thought of leaving him now.

"That depends... it's a Saturday. The traffic from my place to yours will be nil, but it might be a nice day out, which would create a beach-rush and turn the highway into sludge. I could drive partway and meet you there—"

"I told you about your car and Charlie, Fredward."

"—don't interrupt me. As I was saying, I *could* drive partway and walk the rest, but where I park depends entirely on which lots are and aren't vacant. This brings up a whole other question, which is: will I run to your place from the car or take a leisurely stroll? There isn't really..."

I stopped listening and spaced out, feeling the lunchroom slowly begin to empty around us. I looked over at the other table, my old table, and watched my old friends. Lauren was spoon-feeding Tyler estrogen-laced yogurt while Jessica babbled about something to Mike, who simply stared down at his mashed corn and potatoes, a blank look on his face. We were so much better than them.

"... of course, that isn't even considering whether you'd want to sleep in."

"I don't," I answered too fast, not sure what he'd said but ready to argue with him about it. He restrained a smile.

"The same time as usual, then," he decided. "Will Charlie be there?"

"No, he's... 'fishing' tomorrow."²⁶⁴ I beamed at the thought of how things could just work out. His voice turned sharp. "And if you don't come home, what will he think?"

"I have no idea," I answered, cool as a cucumber. "He knows I've been meaning to do the laundry. Maybe he'll think I fell in the washer."

He scowled at me and I scowled back. His anger was much more impressive than mine.²⁶⁵

"What are you hunting tonight?" I asked when I was sure I had lost the scowling contest.

"Whatever we find in the park. We aren't going too far." He seemed bemused by my casual reference to his secret realities.

"Wait, so then why are you going with Alice?" I wondered out loud.

"Alice is the most... supportive." He frowned as he spoke.

This didn't really answer my question but I didn't want to set him off again. "And the others?" I

263. dirty

264. "Fishing" is Charlie's euphemism for cruising.

265. Like 10". Does Bella even *have* an anger?

asked timidly. "What are they?"

His brow puckered, for the most part. "Incredulous."

I peeked quickly behind me at his family. They sat staring off in different directions, like a pile of googly eyes.

"They don't like me," I guessed.

"That's not it," he disagreed, but his eyes were beginning to get a little googly themselves.

"They don't understand why I can't leave you alone."

Is that another vampire superpower? Natural resistance to the wiles of love? I grimaced.

"Neither do I, for that matter."

Fredward shook his head slowly, rolling his eyes this way and that before he met my gaze again. "I told you—you don't see yourself clearly at all. You're not like the others, or anyone else for that matter. You fascinate me."

I glared at him, sure he was teasing me.

He smiled as he slowly deciphered my expression. "Having the... advantages that I do... " he murmured, touching his forehead discreetly, "makes me able to read people's minds. When I do that, people are predictable. But you... " He touched his forehead again, "you are not like anyone I've ever known. You fascinate me. You always take me by surprise."

I looked away, my eyes wandering back to his family, embarrassed and dissatisfied. His words made me feel like a science experiment. I wanted to laugh at myself for ever thinking that he loved me for who I was.

"That part is easy enough to explain," he continued. I felt his eyes touching my face but I couldn't look at him yet, afraid he might read the chagrin in my eyes. "But there's more... and it's not so easy to put into words—"

I was still staring at the Cullens while he walked over to the cafeteria piano. Suddenly Rosalie, his blond and buxom sister, turned to look at me. No, it wasn't a look—it was a glare, a dark and penetrating glare that she made with cold-eyes. I wanted to look away, but her gaze held me until Fredward broke off his sonata mid-note and made an angry noise under his breath. It was almost a hiss, but closer to a bark.

Rosalie turned her head, and I was relieved to be free. I looked back at Fredward—and I knew he could see the confusion and fear that smoldered in my eyes.

His face was a tight one as he explained. "I'm sorry about that. She's just such a... a... you see, there was a time when we were... I mean, what I mean to say is that it's dangerous for more than just me if, after spending so much time with you publicly, if..." He looked down.

"If?"

"If this ends... badly." He dropped his head into his lap, as he had that night in Fort Angles. His anguish was plain; I yearned to comfort him, but I wasn't sure what he meant by 'badly.'

"Like, if you break up with me?"

"No, no, if I..." He sighed and moved back from the piano. "If you stub your toe and I try to kiss it better, but I kiss too hard, so hard that some blood comes out and I..." He trailed off again. My hand reached toward him involuntarily; quickly, though, I forced it to the table fearing that my rogue hand's yearnings would only make things worse. I slowly realized that not only should his *words* frighten me, but also their meanings, the words he *didn't* say. I waited for that fear to come, but all I could seem to feel was an ache for his pain.

And frustration—frustration that his stupid fake sister Rosalie had interrupted what was probably his marriage proposal. I didn't know how to bring it up again. He still had his head in his lap, hands twisting the hair around his fingers.

I tried to play it cool. "And you have to leave now?"

"Yes, I have to leave now." He raised his face; it was serious for a moment, and then his mood modified and smiled. "It's probably for the best. We still have fifteen minutes of that wretched dolphin movie²⁶⁶ left to endure in Biology IV—I don't really like dolphins."

I started to raise an objection but Alice—her short, spiky black hair telling the world exactly who she was—was suddenly standing behind his shoulder. Her slight frame was willowy, graceful, and much too thin to be attractive.

He greeted her without looking away from me. "Alice."

"Fredward," she answered without looking away from me, golden black eyes locked onto mine, hard, her high soprano voice almost as attractive as his. Wait, I mean—

"Alice, Bella—Bella, Alice," he introduced us, gesturing casually with his huge, beautiful hand, a wry smile on his enchanting face.

"Hallo, Bella." Her brilliant obsidian eyes were unreadable, but her smile was friendly. "It's nice to finally meet you, love."

Fredward flashed a dark-looking look at her.

"Hi, Alice." I murmured, nearly incomprehensibly. I was feeling so intimidated, so shy, living in constant fear that my boyfriend would remember that these beautiful women he lived with, who had more in common with him than I ever would, were not really his sisters. I sighed.

"Hi, Bella," she said.

"Hi, Alice," I said again. I'm so awkward sometimes.

Alice shot Fredward a look; it was unreadable. "Are you ready?" she asked him.

"Nearly," he winked, "I'll meet you at the car when I'm..." he looked around, at me, at her, "when I'm completely... *ready*."

She left without another word or another look; her walk was so fluid, so sinuous that I felt a sharp pang of jealousy. Why couldn't the Lord have blessed me with at least one physically competent limb? Renée had four, Charlie had three. I had zero.

"Should I say 'have fun' or is that the wrong sentiment?" I asked.

"No, 'have fun' works as well as anything." He grinned.

"Then 'have fun.'" I worked hard to sound wholehearted.

"I'll try." He still grinned. "And you try to be safe, please."

"Safe in Forks—what a challenge."

"Bella," he whispered, leaning in close, "you *are* challenged."

I was confused, but decided to take advantage of the opportunity to say something romantic. "That's because you're so challenging," I cooed.

"Just stay out of trouble," he commanded.

"I promise to be safe," I recited. "I'll do the laundry tonight—that ought not be fraught with peril."

Fredward shuddered. "Don't fall in," he said.

"I'll do my best."

"Well, I hope you do."

"Well, I'm sure I will try to."

"Mm."

He stood then, and I rose too.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I sighed.

"It seems like a long time to you, doesn't it?" He teased. Did he know something about the nature of time that I didn't?

266. Actually, they are watching a very long episode of *Flipper*, the dolphin sitcom.

I nodded glumly.

"I'll be there in the morning," he promised, smiling his crooked smile. He reached across the table to touch my face, lightly brushing along the cheekbone again. Then he turned and ran away faster than ever. I stared after him until he was gone.

I was sorely tempted to ditch the rest of the day, at the very least Jim on Gym, but a queer warning instinct stopped me. I knew that if I disappeared now, Mike and his homies would assume I was with Fredward, and Fredward was worried about the time we spent together publicly, worried... if things went wrong. What would he think if I were making people think we were together even more often than we actually were? I refused to dwell on the thought of him killing me and sucking out all my blood until I was as hollow as a pirate leg. I concentrated instead on making things safer for him. After all that's what he would do for me. In fact, that's what he *did* do for me, every day...

I intuitively knew—and intuitively sensed he did, too—that tomorrow would be pivotal. Our relationship couldn't continue to balance, as it did, on the point of a knife. We would fall off one edge or the other. We would slide down the non-blade side like it were a playground slide, waving at our friends on the way down as they played volleyball in an adjacent sector of the knife. Or, and I wasn't sure I even understood what this option would mean for me, or for my future husband, we would tumble down the serrated side of the knife, hitting each swell and crest like bad surfing waves—if oceans were made out of sharpened metal, that is.

My decision was made, made before I'd even made it, and I had made a commitment to seeing it through. Because there was nothing more terrifying to me, more excruciating, than the thought of turning away from him. Even the thought of plummeting down the side of a vertical ocean with waves like knife blades would be better than living without the constant intrigue and attention of *my vampire boyfriend*.

I went to class, feeling dutiful. I couldn't honestly say what happened in Biology IV; it was really beyond words. In Gym, Mike was speaking to me again; he wished me a good time in Seattle. For some reason, I carefully blurted out that I'd canceled my trip, and was worried about The Growler.

"What's The Growler?" Mike asked, with a pathetic attempt at making me laugh by making a growling-esque noise. "Are you going to the dance with Cullen?" he asked, suddenly sulky.

"No, I'm not going to the dance with anyone."

"What're you doing, then?" he asked, toooooo interested.

I had a natural urge to tell him to butt out. Instead, I lied.

"Laundry," I said, "and then I have to study for the Trigganomics or I'mma fail, if you know what I mean!"

Mike looked confused. The only thing he looked absolutely certain about was the fact that he was angry. "Is *Cullen* helping you study?"

"*Fredward*," I emphasized, "is not going to help me study, as a matter of fact. In fact, I'm actually good at Trigganomics, even if you don't want to believe it. I'm probably better than he is, actually." The lies came more naturally than usual, I noted with surprise.

"Oh." He perked up. "You know, you could come to the dance with our group anyway—that would be coooool. We'd *all* dance with you," he promised, biting his lip and holding his hand tightly around his so-called 'package.'

The mental image of Jessica's crying face, which I swear I saw on his crotch, was even more grotesque than usual, and made my tone sharper than necessary.

"Mike, I'm *not* going to the dance, Mike, okay?" I blurted.

"Fine." He sulked again. "I was just offering."

"Offering what?" I replied, before I could even think about what I was saying. "Offering me a bite of your tiny gay dick?"

When that conversation finally ended, I walked to the parking lot. I found that I wasn't feeling very enthusiastic about my inevitable walk home. I wasn't really expecting Fredward to find my keys, and I somehow didn't see him carrying it down the highway into the parking lot. Then again, I was starting believe that nothing was impossible for him, so maybe I wouldn't have to walk home after all...

The latter instinct proved correct—my truck sat in the same space he'd parked his Volvo car this morning. I shook my head, incredulous as I opened the unlocked door and saw the key in the ignition.

There was a piece of white paper folded on my seat. What could this be? I got in the truck, shut the truck doors, and got settled in the truck before I unfolded it.²⁶⁷ Two words were written in his elegant script.

Be safe.

The sound of The Growler growling to life frightened me. I laughed at The Growler; I laughed at myself.

When I got home, the handle of the door was unlocked, just as I'd left it. Inside, I went straight to the laundry room. It too was just the same as I'd left it! I dug for my jeans and, after finally locating them amidst a pile of Charlie's soiled briefs and my oversized t-shirts—*just as I'd left them*—checked the pockets. Empty. I concluded that the key I had used to drive The Growler home was, in fact, The Growler's key. Case closed. I smacked my hands together in a sign of defeat and done-ness.

Following the same instinct that had prompted me to lie to Mike, I called Jessica on the pretense of wishing her luck at the dance.

"Don't let Mike slip his gay dick inside you when you're grinding up on him," I suggested, adding "girl!" for flair. She had always been receptive to my advice, and vowed that she would not let this happen.

When she offered the same wish for my day with Fredward, I told her about the cancellation. She was more disappointed than a third party had any right to be. I said goodbye quickly after that.²⁶⁸

Charlie was absentminded at dinner, worried over something at work. Some smalltown-cop travesty, I guessed; or maybe a basketball game, or maybe he was just really enjoying the lasagna—it was hard to tell with Charlie.

"You know, Dad... I began, breaking into his reverie.

"What's that, Bell?"

"I think you're right about Seattle. I think I'll wait until Jessica or one of my other... " I paused, trying to coax the word out, "... *friends* can go with me."

"Ah, I see, you're waiting for Mikey Newton."

I rolled my eyes.

"Oh, okay. So do you want me to stay home?"

"No, Dad, don't change your... 'fishing' plans. I've got a million things to do... homework,

267. The note, not the truck.

268. "Bella, I'm really disappointed!" Jessica squealed.

"Yeah, well."

"I just realllly hoped that you and—"

"Goodbye!"

laundry, library, grocery store... and several hundred thousand others. I'll be in and out all day... you go and have fun."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, man. Besides, the freezer is getting dangerously low on fish—we're down to a two, maybe three years' supply."

"You're sure easy to live with, Bella," he smiled.

After dinner, I "folded clothes" and "moved another load through the dryer."

Unfortunately it was the kind of job that only kept hands busy... My mind definitely had too much free time, and it was getting out of control. I fluctuated between anticipation so intense that it was nearly pain, and an insidious fear that picked at my resolve. I had to keep reminding myself that I'd made my choice, and I wasn't going back on it. I was Bella. Bella Duck. I could do this.

I pulled his note out of my pocket much more often than necessary to absorb the two small words he'd written in his elegant script. I sighed lovingly. He wants me to be safe, I told myself again and again. I would just hold on to the faith that, in the end, that desire would win out over the others. And what was my other choice—to cut him out of my life? Pssst. Besides, since I'd come to Forks, it really seemed like my life was *about* him...

But something in the back of my mind, if not the back of my mind itself, worried, wondering if it would hurt very much if it ended badly; if he fell victim to one of his other desires...

I was relieved when it was late enough to be acceptable for bedtime. I knew I was far too stressed to sleep, so I did something I'd never even dreamed of doing before, something I had, on many occasions, thought less of other people for doing: I deliberately took unnecessary cold medicine—the kind that knocked me the fuck out for a good eight hours. I normally wouldn't condone that type of behavior in myself, taking cold medicine when I didn't have a cold, but tomorrow would be complicated enough without me being loopy from sleep deprivation on top of everything else. It felt justified, in the end.

While I waited for my illegal use of drugs to kick in, I dried my clean hair 'til it was shimmering under the fluorescent bathroom bulb, each strand a twisting string of light. I walked over to my closet and fussed over what I would wear tomorrow, laying out my favorite paisley top and stretch-tight lycra pants. Fredward would be helpless to my wiles in these.

With everything ready for the morning, I finally lay in my bed. I felt hyper; my body wouldn't stop twitching. I got up and rifled through my shoe box of Compact Discs until I found a collection of Chopin's nocturnes. I put that on very quietly, afraid the noise would frighten Charlie and cause him to bust into my room, where he would discover that I was strung out on illicit substances. Lying down, I concentrated on relaxing individual parts of my body. Somewhere in the middle of that exercise, I fell asleep.

I woke early, having slept soundly and dreamlessly thanks to my gratuitous drug use. Though I was well rested, I slipped right back into the same strung-out frenzy from the night before. I struggled to get my arms into my favorite paisley top, unable to find the right holes, and stretched out my tan sweater until it hung right over my jeans. A swift look out the window told me that Charlie was already gone, cruising. A thin, cottony layer of clouds veiled the sky. They didn't look very lasting.

I ate breakfast without tasting it, hurrying to clean up when I was done. I peeked out the window again, but nothing had changed. I had just finished brushing my teeth when a quiet knock vibrated throughout the house and into my heart, sending it careening against my rib cage.

I flew to the door; I had a little trouble with the simple dead bolt, but yanked the door open at last, revealing Fredward in all of his glory. All the agitation in my frame dissolved as soon as I looked at his face, calm taking its place. I breathed a sigh of relief—along with a fresh whiff of

Fredward-smell.

He wasn't smiling at first—his face was somber. What did I do now? I covertly wiped at the corners of my mouth but his expression stood. He looked me over, eying my paisley pretty hard, and then his expression lightened and he laughed.

"Good morning," he chuckled.

"What's wrong?" I glanced down to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything important, like shoes, or pants.

"We match." He laughed again. I realized he too had a tan granny-sweater on, with a paisley collar and buttons showing, and lycra workout pants. I laughed with him, hiding a secret twinge of regret—why did he have to look like a runway model in these clothes when I just looked like a runaway?

I locked the door behind me while he walked to the truck, remembering yesterday when I didn't and thinking that it was reckless and that maybe I was getting reckless, what with all the drug use and dating a vampire and basically calling Mike a fag to his face; so, I made sure to lock it while Fredward walked out to the truck. He waited by the passenger door with a martyred expression that was easy to understand.

"We have a deal," I reminded him gloatingly, climbing into the driver's seat, and reaching over the bench-seat to unlock his door. "Where to?"

"Can it!—and put your seatbelt on, I'm nervous already."

"I gave him a dirty look as I complied." I said while putting the seatbelt on. "Where to?" I repeated with a sigh.

"Take the one-oh-one north," he commanded.

It was surprisingly difficult to concentrate on the road while feeling his cold, dead gaze rake my face. I compensated by driving more carefully than usual through the still-slumbering town.

"Were you planning to make it out of Forks before nightfall?"

I reached under the seat and brought out a burlap sack. "Here, put it on."

He looked it over and asked, "Why?"

"Your face, it's so..." I blushed, unable to go on. "Nice. You have a nice face."

After a moment, he smirked and donned the sack.

We were soon out of the town limits, despite his negativity. Thick underbrush and green-swathed trunks replaced the lawns and houses.

"Turn right on the one-ten," he instructed, just as I was about to ask.

"How did you know we were...?"

Fredward tapped his bagged head and said, "Built-in radar detector," with what sounded like his trademark uneven smile. "Now we drive until the pavement ends."

"And what's there, at the pavement's end?"

"A trail."

"We're hiking?" Thank the source of all goodness, God, that I'd worn tennis shoes.

"Is that a problem?" He sounded as if he'd expected as much.

"No." I tried to make the lie sound confident.

"Don't worry, it's only a mile, and we're in no hurry."

A mile. I didn't answer so that he wouldn't hear my voice crack in panic. A mile of treacherous roots and loose stones, trying to grope my pale calves, twist my atrophied ankles, or otherwise molest me.

We drove in silence for a while as I contemplated the coming horror.

"What are you thinking?" he asked after a few moments.

I lied again. "Just wondering where we're going."

"It's a place."

We both glanced out the windows at the thinning clouds after he spoke.

"Charlie said it would be warm today."

"I don't give a damn what your father..." he began, but then realized he had something else to say about my father. "Did you tell Charles what you were up to?"

"Nope."

"Nope." He mimicked. "But Jessica thinks we're going to Seattle together?"

"No, I told her you canceled on me—which is sort of true."

"No one knows you're with me?!" The sack shook with rage, and I could only imagine that all of Fredward's blood had gone to his face.

"That depends... I assume you told Alice?"

"That's *very* helpful, Bella," he snappered.

I kippered my lips and pretended I didn't hear that.

"Are you so depressed by Forks that it's made you suicidal?" he demanded when I ignored him.

I unkippered. "You said it might cause trouble for you, us being together publicly," I reminded him.

"So you're worried about the trouble it might cause *me*—if *you* don't come home?"

I nodded, keeping my eyeballs on the road.

He muttered something quietly, angrily.

We were silent for the rest of the drive. I felt waves of infuriated disapproval at my reckless desire to love, rolling off of him in peels of enraged cold-heat, and there was nothing I could do to cool-cool them.

And then the road ended, constricting to a narrow foot trail marked by a small wooden post. I parked on the narrow shoulder and stepped out, afraid of his anger. Now I didn't have driving as an excuse to not look into his burlap-covered eyes. It was warm now, warmer than it had been in Forks since the day I'd arrived, the air muggy under the clouds. I pulled off my sweater and knotted it around my neck, glad that I'd worn the light, paisley shirt—especially if I had one mile of hiking ahead of me.

I heard his door slam, and looked over to see that he'd removed the sack and his sweater, too. He was facing away from me, into the unbroken forest around my truck.

"This way," he said, glancing over his shoulder at me, eyes still annoyed that he could now kill and eat me without arousing any suspicion whatsoever. He started into the dark, mysterious forest—*away* from the trail.

"The trail?" Panic was clear in my voice as I hurried around the truck to catch up with his power-walking.

"I said there was a trail at the end of the road, not that we were taking it," he cackled.

"No trail?"

"I won't let you get lost." He turned then, with a mocking smile, and I stifled a gasp. His paisley shirt was sleeveless, and he wore it unbuttoned, exposing six sets of perfectly-sized nipples that ran down his rippling chest and abs. Feeling outclassed, I pulled my sweater shut, covering my failures. He was too perfect, I realized with a piercing stab of despair. There was no way this godlike creature could have been sent down by God to love me and only me.

He stared at me, bewildered by my tortured expression.

"Do you want to go home?" he said quietly, a different pain than mine saturating his voice.

"Nope." I walked forward 'til I was close beside him, anxious not to waste one second of whatever time I might have left with him.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice gentle.

"I'm not a very good... "

"Hiker?" he guessed with a slight chuckle.

I didn't laugh; didn't even crack a smile. "Walker."

He smiled his crooked smile, this time using it to indicate that he wanted me to continue.

"I can't walk very well."

He smiled a gentle smile. "I can be patient—if I make a great effort."

I tried to crack a smile in response, but the attempt was unconvincing. His eyes scrutinized my face.

"I'll take you home," he promised. I knew he thought it was fear that upset me, as if I suddenly became aware of the danger he presented, and was repulsed.

"If you want me to hack a full mile through the jungle before sundown, you'd better start leading the way. I don't think you have *any* idea how long it takes me to walk a mile," I said acidly. He frowned at me, his smile disappearing, and struggled to understand my tone and expression. He gave up after a moment and led the way into the forest, commencing our one-mile death march...

It wasn't as hard as I had feared. The way was mostly flat, and he held the damp ferns and webs of moss aside for me, standing in the middle of the trail with his arms extended as far as they would go. When his straight path took us over fallen trees or boulders or dead animals, he would lift me by the elbow and then slowly release me instantly when I was clear. His cold skin on my relatively warm skin never failed to make my heart thudder erratically, as well as erotically. Twice, when that happened, I caught a look on his perfect face that made me sure that he somehow knew what I was thinking.

For the most part, we walked in silence, the only sound coming from our stretch-pants-laden legs swishing against each other. Occasionally he would ask a random question that he hadn't gotten to in the past two days of interrogation. He asked about my birthdays, my grade school teachers, my sexual fantasies, my favorite condiments, my favorite plants, my preferred cable provider, my favorite branch of the United States Army, my middle name, my favorite kind of cooking oil, my childhood pets—and I had to admit that after killing three fish in a row, I'd given up on the whole institution of pettetry. He laughed at that, louder than I thought was humanly possible—bell-like, echoes bounding back to us from those empty woods.

The hike took me most of the morning and afternoon, but Fredward never showed any sign of impatience. The forest spread out around us in an eternal labyrinth of ancient trees, and I began to get nervous that we would never find our way out again. He was perfect(ly at ease), comfortable in the green maze, never seeming to feel any doubt about our direction.

After seven hours, the light that filtered through the canopy transformed, the murky olive tone shifting to a brighter grayish jade. The day had turned sunny, just as he'd foretold. For the first time since we'd entered the woods, I felt a thrill of excitement—which quickly turned to impatience.

"Are we there yet?" I teased, pretending to scowl.

"No."

A few minutes passed.

"Are we there yet?" I scowled, pretending to tease.

"Nearly." He smiled at the change in my mood. "You see the brightness ahead?"

"Um, should I?"

He smirked. "Maybe it's a bit too soon for *your* eyes."

"Time to visit the optometrist," I teased myself. His smirk grew more pronounced.

But then, after another ten feet, I could definitely see a lightening in the trees ahead, a glow that was yellow instead of green. I picked up the pace, my eagerness swelling with every step. He let me lead now, following noiselessly.

I reached the edge of the pool of light and stepped through the fringe of ferns into the loveliest place I had ever seen. The meadow was small, perfectly round, and filled with wildflowers—violet, yellow, gray, soft, white. Somewhere nearby I could hear the bubbling of a water-stream, and the sun overhead filled the circle with a haze of buttery sunshine. I walked slowly, sun-struck through the soft grass, swaying flowers, and warm, gilded air. I halfway turned, wanting to share this moment with him, but he wasn't behind me where I thought he would be. I spun around, searching for him and making alarmed noises. Finally I spotted him, still under the dense shade of the canopy at the edge of the hollow, watching me with cautious eyes. Only then did I remember what the beauty of the meadow had driven from my mind—the enigma of Fredward and the sun, which he'd promised to illustrate for me today.

I took a step back toward him, my eyes alight with curiosity. His eyes were wary, reluctant. We both had eyes, and that was something we shared. I put forth the tremendous amount of energy it took to smile encouragingly, and beckoned him with my finger, taking another step back to him. Here, Fredward, Fredward... He held a hand up in warning, and I hesitated, rocking back onto my heels.

Fredward seemed to take a deep breath, inhaling and then exhaling one after the other, and then he stepped out into the bright glow of the midday sun, uncharacteristic to this part of the world...!

13.

CONCESSIONS

FREDWARD IN THE SUNLIGHT²⁶⁹ WAS SHOCKING. I COULDN'T GET USED to it, though I'd been staring at him all afternoon, even thinking about the way he looked when I happened to blink. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, as if thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. I had been watching him for hours: he lay perfect(ly still) in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, scintillating arms bare, sun refracting gracefully off each of his diamond-hard nipples. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, but so lifelike, carved in some unknown stone, smooth as marble, glittering like crystal...

Now and then, his lips would move, so fast it looked like they were trembling. When I asked, he told me he was singing to himself and that it was too low for me to hear.²⁷⁰ Honestly, I think he was just twitching a little and embarrassed about it. The thought of Fredward hiding his unattractive features in order to impress me sent a shiver down my pubescent spine.

I enjoyed the sun as well, though the air wasn't quite enough like Phoenix's air for me to be completely satisfied. I would have liked to lie back, like I used to in Phoenix, and let the sun warm my cold face. But so then I stayed curled up, my chin resting on my knees, unwilling to take my eyes off him. The wind was gentle; it tangled my hair attractively and ruffled the grass that swayed around his motionless form.

The meadow, so spectacular to me at first, paled next to His Magnificence.

Hesitantly, always afraid, even now, even in this meadow-magnificent moment, that he would disappear like a mirage, too beautiful to be real... hesitantly, I reached out one fingle and stroked the back of his shimmering hand, where it lay within my reach. I marveled again at the perfect texture of his body, the way it felt perfectly: satin-smooth and stone-cold. When I looked up again, his eyes were open, watching me like I had been watching him. Butterscotch today, lighter, warmer after hunting. His quick smile turned up the corners of his flawless lips.

"I don't scare you?" he asked playfully, but I could hear the real curiosity in his soft voice.

"No more than usual."

He smiled wider; he flashed me his teeth, which also glistened in the sun. I immediately recalled the time we had a conversation about whether or not he scared me, and giggled lightly at the thought of all the strange things he had done in the car to try to get me to admit that I was scared of him. He seemed to be giggling too.

I inched closer, feeling so close to him in that moment of mutual giggleship at simultaneous memory that I stretched out my whole hand to trace the contours of his forearm with my fingertips. I saw that my fingles trembled beyond my control, and I knew it wouldn't escape his notice.

"Do you mind?" I asked, for he had closed his eyes again.

"No," he said without opening his eyes. "You can't imagine how that feels."

I lightly trailed my hand over the perfect muscles of his arms, trying to imagine how it felt. I followed the faint pattern of bluish, bulging veins inside the crease at his elbow, trying to imagine how it felt. With my other hand, I trailed my own bulging veins, which were more purple than blue, and

269. "Fredward in the Sunlight" is Fredward's 'vampire name,' bestowed to him by his Maker upon completing his very first year as a vampire.

270. Fredward can generate sub-bass frequencies and frequently does so when bored.

more average than perfect. Overall, it felt like I was touching my own arm. With my other hand, I reached to turn his hand over. Realizing what I wished, he flipped his wish-granting palm up in one of those blindingly fast, disconcerting movements of his. It startled me; my fingers froze on this arm for a brief second, which startled me too.

"Sorry," he murmured. "That happens sometimes." I looked up in time to see his golden eyes close again. "It's too easy to be myself with you."

I lifted his hand, turning it this way and that, to and fro, eastward and westward, as I watched the sun from the west and the winds from the east emphasize the glitter on his life-giving palm. I held it as close as I could get it to my face, trying to see the hidden facets in his skin, trying to prove to myself that he was made up of molecules just like everything else in the world.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he demanded in a whisper. My eyes saw his eyes watching them, suddenly intent. "It's still so strange for me, not knowing."

"You know, the rest of us feel that way all the time."

"And?"

"And I just wanted you to know that." There was a silence.

So quickly that I missed the moment, he was half sitting, propped up on his right arm, his left palm still in my hands. His angel's face was only a few inches from mine. I might have—should have—flinched away from his unexpected and inspiring closeness, but I was unable to move. His golden eyes mesmerized me and I lost control of all my limbs.

"What are you really afraid of?" he whispered intently.

I couldn't answer. As I had that other time, I smelled his cool breath in my face. Sweet, delicious, the scent made me salivate and drool down the side of my mouth and onto my fleece vest. It was unlike anything else I had ever salivated over. Instinctively, unthinktively, I leaned closer, inhaling.

Suddenly he was gone, his hand ripped from mine, leaving my appendage flopping in the breeze. In the time it took my eyes to focus, he was three hundred feet away, standing at the edge of the small meadow, in the deep shade of a huge fir tree. He stared at me, his eyes bright in the shadows, his expression unreadable.

I could feel the hurt and shock all over my face, hot and sticky.

"Give me a moment," he called.

"Your moves are so... *raw*." I whispered, quietly enough that he couldn't hear me.

After ten incredibly long seconds, he walked back. He stopped, still several feet away, and sank gracefully to the ground, crossing his legs. His eyes never left mine, even though he was still facing away from me. He took two deep breaths, and then smiled in apology, from behind.

"I am so very sorry." He hesitated. "Would you understand what I meant if I said I was only human?"

"You... what?" I tried to nod and look understanding, but my eyes drifted towards each other. I nodded once, not quite able to smile away my non-understanding of his joke. Adrenaline pushed through my veins as the realization of danger slowly sank in. He could smell that from where he sat. His sad smile turned mocking.

"I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in—my voice, my face, my eyes, my legs, my arms, even my *smell*. As if I needed any of that!" Unexpectedly he was on his feet, bounding away, instantly out of my eyes' reach, only to appear to my eyes beneath the same tree as before, having circled the meadow in half a second—*literally*.

"As if you could outrun me," he laughed hysterically at the thought, proceeding to run in circles, leaning his body sideways into the circle as he ran.

He reached up with one of his hands and, with a deafening crack, effortlessly ripped a two-foot-

thick branch from the trunk of the spruce. He balanced it in that hand for a moment, and then threw it with blinding speed, shattering it against another huge tree, which shook and trembled at the blow...

And then he was in front of me again, right before my eyes, right there, still as a statue made of stone.

"As if you could fight me off," he said gently, twitching, probably stifling the same laughter that had overcome him just moments earlier. He threw a couple of impressive punches in the air to impress me.

I sat without moving, more frightened of him than I had ever been. My nipples were completely retracted and my eyes completely still, no longer dancing with the possibilities he had introduced to my life. I'd never seen him so completely freed of that carefully cultivated facade. He'd never been less human... or more beautiful. Face ashen,²⁷¹ eyes wide, I sat like a bird locked in the most beautiful eyes of the hottest snake...

His lovely eyes seemed to glow with rash excitement. Then, as the seconds passed, they dimmed. His expression slowly folded into a mask of ancient grief.

"Don't be afraid," he murmured, his velvet voice unintentionally seductive. "I promise..." He hesitated. "I *swear* not to hurt you." He seemed more concerned with convincing himself than me. "Do... n't... b... e af... raid..." he whispered again as he stepped closer, with exaggerated slowness. He sat sinuously, with deliberately unhurried moment, 'til our faces were on the same level, just a foot apart.

"Please forgive me," he said formally. "I *can* control my self. You caught me off guard, at a time where I was less able to control my self." He stopped suddenly, paused, and decided to continue. "You know how a woman has her cycle?" he asked embarrassingly. He put his head down and I tried not to grin. It was so endearing. I couldn't wait 'til the day I could net me that big wet love trout. I sighed. "I have a cycle just like you do—I mean, you as in all women... anyway, there are some days I can control my self better—like, the first couple of days of my cycle, I'm basically dormant—not even hungry. A week after that, I become more and more hungry and it's harder to control my self. Do you understand? Sometimes it's harder than others, and it gets really scary sometimes, more than other times. You know?"

He waited, but I still couldn't speak.

"I'm not thirsty today, honestly." He winked his left eye.

At that I had to laugh, though the sound was shaky and breathless.

"Are you all right?" he asked tenderly and reaching out slowly, carefully, intentionally, to place his marbled hand back in mine.

I looked at his smooth, cold marble-hand, and then at his smooth, warm, golden, smoldering eyes. They were soft, repentant. I looked back at his hand, and then deliberately returned to tracing its lines with my fingertips. I looked up and smiled timidly.

His answering smile was dazzling; his dazzling smile was answering.

"So where were we, before I behaved so... rudely?" he winked with his right eye, his words coming out in the gentle cadences of an earlier century.

"I honestly can't remember."

He smiled, but his face was ashamed. "I think we were talking about why you were afraid, besides the obvious reason."

"Oh, right."

"Well?"

I looked down at his hand and doodled aimlessly across his smooth, iridescent palm. The

271. As though it had been incinerated by its own passion.

seconds ticked by.

"How easily frustrated I am!" he proclaimed, jumping onto the picnic table and taking on the vigorous cadence of an earlier outburst. I looked into his eyes, abruptly grasping that this was every bit as new to him as it was to me. I shuddered, intellectually stimulated by the idea of simultaneous orgasm; it was something I'd only read about in the teen magazines I occasionally picked up at the check stand at QFC. Even with as many years of unfathomable experience as he'd had, this was hard for him, too. I couldn't blame him for needing to jump into a crouching position on the table and yell at me. I took courage from that thought.

"I was afraid... because, for, well, obvious reasons, I can't *stay* with you. I *can't* stay with you. I'm afraid that I'd like to stay with you, much more than I should want to stay with you, despite the obvious reasons that I can't." I looked down at the hands as I spoke. It was difficult for me to say this aloud.

"Yes," Fredward agreed slowly—very slowly, bouncing up and down, his perfect behind grazing the table at times. "That is something to be afraid of, indeed. Wanting to be with me. That's really not in your best interest."

But the truth was, he was the best interest I had ever had. Didn't he know that?

I frowned, wondering if I should tell him about my interests. If it was something he didn't know, was it my responsibility to make it known? I looked at him, at that irresistible squat atop the table. He was the absolute image of perfection and I almost couldn't take another minute of it.

"I should have left long ago," he sighed. "I should have left twenty minutes ago. I should have left twenty *seconds* ago. I should leave now...! But I don't know if I can. Sometimes it's hard. To be able to do. What you should do. You know?"

"I don't want you to leave," I mumbled pathetically, staring down again. It was dangerous for me to look at him.

"Which is exactly why I should. But don't worry. I'm essentially a selfish creature. I'm only human. I crave your company too much to do what I should. I'm only human."

"I'm glad."

"Don't be!" He withdrew his hand, more gently this time; his voice harsher than harsh. Harsh for him, but still more beautiful than any human voice. It was hard to keep up—his sudden mood changes left me always a step behind, dazed.²⁷²

"It's not only your company I crave! Never forget that. Never forget I am more dangerous to you than I am to anyone else." He stopped, and I looked to see him gazing unseeingly into the forest.

I thought for a long moment. During this time, Fredward put his hand under his chin and looked off into the distance. It seemed like there wasn't anything he could do with his face or body that wouldn't distract me from trying to sort things out...

"I don't think I understand exactly what you mean—by that last part anyway. I mean, I'm pretty sure I understood most of it besides that part," I said. The truth was that I didn't really understand any of it, but I wasn't about to tell him I didn't understand something without establishing that there was something I *did* understand.

He looked back at me and smiled wickedly, mood shifting yet again.

"How do I explain the unexplainable...?" he mused. "And without frightening you again... hmmm." Without seeming to think about it,²⁷³ he placed his hand back in mine; I held it tightly in both of my own hands. His eyes moved to our hands.

"That's amazing pleasant, the warmth." He sighed.

A moment passed as he assembled his thoughts, vampiric super-brain working overtime to

272. Fredward's antics make Bella feel like she is living in 4D with 3D glasses on.

273. Vampiric speed-thinking.

explain something that had never been explained before to the likes of mere humanity.

"You know how everyone enjoys different flavors?" he began. "Some people love chocolate ice cream, others prefer strawberry?"

"What?"

"Sorry about the food analogy—it's how I think of you."

I smiled. He smiled back.

"You see, every person smells like a different kind of food, is a different essential dish. If you locked a starving man in a room full of hamburgers and hot dogs, he'd gladly partake. But he could resist, if he wished to, if he were a recovering fatty. Now let's say you placed in that room a bowl of fried **miniature** hamburgers and hot dogs—and the room filled with their aromas, scents perfectly complimentary—how do you think he would fare then?"

We sat silently, looking into each other's eyes—me, trying to read his thoughts. I didn't know what he was getting at but was pretty sure he did.

He broke the silence first.

"Maybe that's not the right comparison. Maybe it would be too easy to turn down. Perhaps I should have made our food chap a heroin addict instead."

"So what you're saying is, I'm your brand of heroin?" I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

He smiled swiftly, vampiric super-brain understanding the complexities of my joke immediately. "Yes, you are *exactly* my brand of heroin."²⁷⁴

"Does that happen often?" I asked.

He looked across the treetops.

"I spoke to my brothers about doing heroin." He still stared into the distance. "To Jasper, every one of you is much the same. He's the most recent to join our family. It's a struggle for him to abstain at all. He hasn't had time to grow sensitive to the differences in smell, in flavor." He glanced swiftly at me, his expression a-po-po-pologetic.

"Sorry," he said.

"I don't mind. Please don't worry about offending me, or frightening me, or whatever. You do it all the time without even trying. That's the way you think. I can understand, or I can try to at least. Just explain however you can."

He took a deep breath and gazed at the sky again.

"So Jasper wasn't sure if he'd ever come across someone who was as—" he hesitated, looking for the right word—"*tasty* as you are to me. Which makes me think not. Emmett has been on the wagon longer, so to speak, and he understood what I meant. He says twice, for him, once stronger than the other."

I shook my head, imagining myself as a burrito. "And for you?"

"Never."

The word hung there for a moment in the warm breeze, silent but deadly.

"What did Emmett do?" I asked to break the silence.

It was the wrong question to ask. His face grew dark, angry, his hand clenched into a fist inside mine. He looked awry. At great length, he whispered, "*burrito*."

I jumped in my skin. Yipes!

He lifted his eyes; his expression was wistful, pleading.

"Even the strongest of us fall off the wagon, don't we?"

"What are you asking? My permission?" My voice was sharper than I'd intended, and I felt embarrassed that I was trying to boss him into not eating me. I tried to make my tone honey—you catch

274. Or at least reminiscent of his favorite brand of heroin: "Dick Down," popular in mid-seventies Harlem.

more flies in that way. "I mean, so you don't want to eat me, *do you?*"

"No, no!" He was instantly contrite. "Of course not! I mean, of course I won't..." He left the sentence hanging. His eyes burned into mine. "It's different for us. Emmett... they were strangers he happened across. It was a long time ago-go,²⁷⁵ and he wasn't as... practiced, as careful as he is now."

He fell silent and watched me intently as I thought it through.

"So if we'd met... oh, in a dark alley or something..." I trailed off hopefully.

"It took everything I had not to jump up in the middle of that class full of children—those little bouncing babies—it took everything I had to not jump up and—" He stopped abruptly, looking away. "When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carlisle has built for us, right then and there. If I hadn't been denying my hunger for the last, well, *too* many years, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself." He paused, scowling at the trees for what they done.

He glanced at me grimly, both of us remembering. "You must have thought I was possessed."

"I thought that maybe I *smelled!*" I gave a tinkling little laugh.

"To me, it was like you were some kind of demon-fruit, summoned straight from the depths of my own personal hell to ruin me. The fragrance coming off your skin... I thought it would make me deranged that first day. In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure you from the room with me, to get you... *alone*."

And look at us now, I thought. I got an erection from thinking it.

"And then I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow..."

He looked up then at my expression as I tried to absorb his bitter memories. His golden eyes scorched from beneath his lashes, melting them with deadly and hypnotic rays.

"You would have come," he promised.

I felt like I already had. "Without a doubt," I said breathlessly.

275. Reference to a popular British folk song, "Wake Me Up Before You Go Go," penned by Wham:

Jitterbug

Jitterbug

Jitterbug

Jitterbug

*You put the boom-boom into my heart
You send my soul sky high when your lovin' starts
Jitterbug into my brain
Goes a bang-bang-bang 'til my feet do the same
But something's bugging you
Something ain't right
My best friend told me what you did last night
Left me sleepin' in my bed
I was dreaming, but I should have been with you instead*

*Wake me up before you go-go
Don't leave me hanging on like a yo-yo
Wake me up before you go-go
I don't want to miss it when you hit that high
Wake me up before you go-go
'Cause I'm not plannin' on going solo
Wake me up before you go-go
Take me dancing tonight
I wanna hit that high (yeah, yeah)*

He frowned down at my hands, releasing me from the force of his state. "And then, as I tried to rearrange my schedule in a pointless attempt to avoid you, you were there—in that close, warm little room, the scent was maddening. I so very nearly took you then. There was only one other human there, Ms. Crabnutt—so easily dealt with."

I shivered in the warm sun, seeing my memories anew through his superior eyes, only now grasping that even from the beginning, he'd wanted me.

"But I resisted. I don't know how. I forced myself not to wait for you, *not* to follow you from the Forks High School. It was easier outside, when I could not smell you anymore, to think clearly, to make the right decision. I left the others near home—I was too ashamed to tell them how weak I was, that I lusted for the flesh of a stripling whelp such as yourself; they only knew something was very wrong—and then I went straight to Carlisle, at the hospital, in his office, to tell him I was leaving."

"No!" I gasped in surprise.

"I traded cars with him, stocks and bonds, horse tips—he had a full tank of gas and a ripe portfolio, and I didn't want to stop for either. I didn't dare to go home, to face Esme. She wouldn't have let me go without a scene. She would have tried to convince me that it wasn't necessary..."

"By the next morning I was in Alaska." He sounded ashamed, as if admitting a great cowardice. "I spent two days there, with some old acquaintances... but I was nauseous, homesick. I hated knowing I'd upset poor old Esme, and the rest of them, my adopted family. In the pure air of the mountains of Alaska, it was hard to believe you were so irresistible. I convinced myself it was weak to run away. I'd dealt with temptation before—although not of this magnitude, not even close—but I was strong, not weak. Who were you, an insignificant little girl that gave every rural male a ten-foot erection"—he grinned suddenly—"to chase me from my home? So I suddenly came back..." He stared off into the empty scaffolding of space, his bared soul the bare bones of a ladder to the heavens.

I couldn't speak.

"I took precautions, cautions before further cautions, hunting and feeding more than usual before seeing you again. I was sure that I was strong enough to treat you like any other human. I was arrogant about it.

"It was unquestionably a complication that I couldn't simply read your 'little' thoughts," he cringed at the slight, at how he used to think, but I nodded, urging him to go on. "To know what your reaction was to me. I wasn't used to having to go to such circuitous measures, listening to your words in Jessica's mind... *her* mind isn't very original, and it was annoying to have to stoop to that, to sully your words with her brain. And then I couldn't know if you really meant what you said. It was all extremely agitating." He frowned at the memory of how annoying it all was.

"I wanted you to forget my behavior that first day, if possible, so I tried to talk with you like I would with any other mortal. I was eager actually, hoping to decipher your thoughts, to get... inside." He grinned shyly. "But you were too interesting, Bella. I found myself caught up in your expressions, your movements, the look in your eyes... and every now and then you would stir the air with your hand or your hair, and the scent would stun me again..."

"Of course, then you were nearly crushed to death in front of my eyes."

I thought about Tyler, and wondered if Lauren had made him a eunuch yet.

He continued. "Later I thought of a perfectly good excuse for why I had acted at that moment—because if I hadn't saved you, if your blood had been spilled there in front of me, I don't think I could have stopped myself leaping onto the ground and lapping it up like a house cat." He shivered at the thought, and I shuddered. "But I only thought of that excuse later. At the time, all I could think was, 'Not her, Lord. Not her.'"

He closed his eyes, lost in his agonized expression. I listened, more eager than rational. Common sense told me I should be terrified, but instead I was relieved to finally understand, and was

then filled with compassion for his suffering, even now, as he confessed his craving to take my life...

I finally was able to speak, though my voice was on the verge of fainting. "In the hospital?" I managed.

His eyes flashed up to mine. "I was appalled. I couldn't believe I had put my adopted family in danger after all, put myself in your power—you and all of your people. As if I needed another motive to kill you." We both flinched; I was picturing an annotated, illustrated catalog of his motives. "But it had the opposite effect," he continued quickly. "I fought with Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper when they suggested that now was the time... the worst family fight we'd ever had. Carlisle sided with me, and Alice." He grimaced when he said her name. I couldn't imagine why, but had a feeling I soon might... "Esme told me to do whatever I had to do in order to stay." He wagged his head indulgently.

"All that next day I eavesdropped on the minds of everyone you spoke to, shocked that you kept your word. I didn't understand you at all. Your moral fiber was the strongest, most extravagant I'd ever seen. But I knew that I couldn't become more involved with you. It tortured me. Every day the perfume of your skin, your breath, your hair... it tortured me as hard as the very first day."

He met my eyes again, and they were surprisingly tender.

"And for all that," he continued, "I'd have fared better if I *had* exposed my family secrets at that first moment, than now, here—with no witness and nothing to stop me if I were to hurt you."

I was human enough to have to ask. "Why?"

"Isabella." He surprised me by pronouncing my full name and then playfully ruffling my hair with his free hand.²⁷⁶ A shock ran through my body at his casual touch. "Bella, I couldn't live with myself if I ever hurt you. I don't think *anyone* would live with me if I hurt you, especially you. You don't know how it's tortured me." He looked down, seeming tortured. "The thought of you, still, white, cold... to never see you blush scarlet again, to never see that flash of intuition in your eyes when you see through my pretenses, to never hear you cough or feel your sneeze... it would be unendurable."

I tried my best to wrap my head around the grave nature of his problem; *my* problem. It didn't seem like there was any way out for either of us. He lifted his glorious, agonized eyes to mine.

I'm not sure which one of us spoke next. "You are the most important thing to me now. The most important thing to me *ever*."

My head was spinning at the rapid change in direction that our conversation had taken. From the cheerful topic of my impending demise, we were suddenly declaring ourselves. He waited, and even though my eyes looked down to study our hands between us, I knew his golden eyes were on me alone.

"You already know how I feel, of course," one of us said. "I'm here... which, roughly translated, means I would rather die than stay away from you."

"I'm an idiot." We said at the same time.

"You *are* an idiot," he agreed with a laugh. Our eyes met, and I laughed too. We laughed together at the sheer idiocy and impossibility of such a moment. He was the best man I ever loved.

"And so the lion fell in love with the lamb..." he narrated. I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the word.

"What a stupid lamb," I sighed.

"What a sick, masochistic lion." He stared into the shadowy forest for a long dark moment.

"Why...?" I began, and then paused, not sure how to continue.

He looked at me and smiled; sunlight glinted off his face, his teeth.

"Yes?"

"Tell me why you ran from me before."

276. What's his other hand so busy with?

His smile faded into the background. "You know why."

"No, I mean *exactly* what did I do wrong? I'll have to be on my guard, you see, so I better start learning what I shouldn't do. This, for example"—I stroked the back of his hand with the fingers of my own hand—"seems to be all right." I paused.

"What did I do wrong?" I repeated more loudly when he didn't respond.

He smiled agitatedly. "Please stop asking me what you did wrong, Bella. It makes you seem really insecure."

I flinched, feeling self-aware.

"But I want to help, if I can, to not make this harder for you." I tried to make it seem like I was concerned primarily with his comfort and not my own.

"Well..." He contemplated for a moment. "It was just how close you were. Most girl-humans instinctively shy away from us boy-vamps, repelled by our alienness... I just wasn't expecting you to come so close. And the smell of your *throat!*"

Immediately, I brought my finger to my throat and rubbed it vigorously, ruthlessly, bringing it then to my nose.

Fredward stifled a chuckle and nodded his head wildly, reaching out to me with his eyes. "Bella, don't you see? Your throat smells *wonderful*. You smell wonderful. You are so appetizing, I can hardly stand it." He chuckled freely now and so did I.

"Okay, then." I said flippantly I tucked my chin. "No throat exposure."

He laughed. "No, really, it was more the surprise than anything else. Sometimes when I'm surprised, I just sprint in the other direction and hide for a long time. It's not you, it's... it's me."

He raised his free hand and placed it gently on the side of my neck. My throat shuddered. I sat very still, the chill of his touch a natural warning—a warning telling me to be terrified. But there was no feeling of fear in me. There were, however, other, more loinal feelings...

"You see," he said. "Perfectly fine."

I sighed, relieved, and my eyes met his. He seemed to be twitching and gritting his teeth. I admit, I felt the first sharp pangs of fear, but reminded myself that I loved and trusted him; if he said he was okay, I had to believe that he was okay.

My blood was racing, and I wished I could slow it, sensing that this must make everything so much more difficult—the thudding of my pulse in my veins. Surely it must sound like chum sloshing around in a shark's thermos...

"The blush on your cheeks is lovely," he murmured, probably to get his mind off things. He gently freed his other hand. My hands fell limply into my lap. Softly he brushed my cheek, then held my face between his marble hands.

"Be still," he instructed, as if I wasn't already frozen in the moment.

Slowly, never moving his eyes from mine, he leaned toward me. Then abruptly, but very gently, he rested his cold cheek against the hollow at the base of my throat. I was quite unable to move, even if I'd wanted to. I listened to the even sound of his breathing, watching the sun and wind play in his bronze hair, wondering why he was breathing.

With deliberate slowness, his hands slid down the sides of my neck. I shivered, and I heard him catch his breath. But his hands didn't pause as they softly moved to my shoulders, and then stopped.

His face drifted to the side, nose skimming across my collarbone. He came to rest with the side of his face pressed tenderly against my chest.

Listening to my heart.

"Ah," he sighed.

"Ah," I sighed, finally realizing what was happening. I felt a bit self-conscious. What if my heart was beating irregularly, or murmuring? What would he think of me then?

I don't know how long we sat without moving, but it was longer than I had ever sat, probably without moving. It could have been *hours*. Eventually the throb of my pulse quickened, but he didn't move or speak again as he held me. I knew at any moment it could be too much, and my life could end—so quickly that I might not even notice. And I couldn't make myself be afraid. I couldn't think of anything, except that he was touching me.

And then, too soon—but how could it have not been—he released me.

His eyes were peaceful.

"It won't be so hard again," he said with satisfaction.

"Was that very... *hard* for you?" I asked, trying to picture myself in his situation, picturing me as a burrito.

"Not nearly as bad as I imagined it would be," he said, interrupting my thoughts. I guess I would have to wait 'til I was alone to fully explore that thought. "And you?"

"What?"

"Was it... bad for you?"

"Why would it be bad for me?" I asked.

He paused. He smiled. "You know what I mean."

It was my turn to smile.

"Here." He took my hand and placed it against his cheeks. "Do you feel how warm these are?"

My knees quaked; and it was almost warm, his usually icy skin. But I barely noticed, for I was touching his cheeks, something I'd dreamed of constantly since the first day I'd seen them run away from me.

"Don't move," I whispered.

No one could be still like Fredward. He closed his eyes and became as immobile as stone, a David under my hand.

I moved even more slowly than he had, careful not to make one unexpected move. I caressed one cheek, delicately stroked the other, and cupped the small but pert hollow beneath them. I traced the shape of his perfect cleavage, letting my fingers run like gazelles in his basin. I could feel his loaves loosen and part, and I wanted nothing more than to lean in and inhale the scent of him. So I dropped my hand and leaned away, not wanting to push him too far.

He opened his eyes, and they were hungry. My muscles tightened, stomach in knots and my pulse hammered; I wasn't afraid.

"I wish," he whispered. "I wish you could understand the... complexity... the confusion... I feel. I wish that you were capable of... understanding."

He raised one hand to my hair, then carefully brushed it across my face.

"Tell me," I breathed.

"I don't think I can. I've told you, on the one hand, the hunger—the thirst—that, deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you. And I think you can understand that, at least sort of. Though,"—he half-smiled, half-frowned—"as you are not addicted to any illegal or illicit substances, I doubt you could empathize."

I bit my lip, stifling my urge to recount last night's adventure with cough syrup.

"But..." His fingers touched my lips lightly, making me shiver again. "There are other hungers. Hungers I don't even understand, that are foreign to me."²⁷⁷

"I may understand *that* better than you think," I winked at him.

"I'm not used to feeling so human. Is it always like this?"

"Like what?"

277. Not only has Fredward never popped his cork, he wasn't aware he even had one.

"Like—" Fredward waved his hands in the air, gesturing at us, the trees, and everything else, "like this!"

"For me?" I paused, not sure what he was asking. I decided to play it safe. "No, never. Never before this."

"Probably not for anyone else, ever. We are the first ones..." He held my hands between his. They felt so feeble in his iron strength. "I don't know how to be close to you," he admitted. "I don't know if I can."

I leaned forward very slowly, cautioning him with my eyebrows, and placed my cheek against his chest. I could hear his inexplicable breath, and nothing else.

"This is enough," I sighed, closing my eyes.

In a very human gesture, he put his arms around me and pressed his face against my hair.

"You're better at this than you give yourself credit for."

"I have human instincts—they may be buried deep under pounds of flesh, but they're there."

We sat like that for another immeasurable moment; how can we value our moments? By what yardstick or rubric can we say one is better than another? As time passes from one moment to the next, we have no choice but to say that each moment is a moment, and that thus all are equal. All are moments.

But I could see the light was fading, the shadows of the forest beginning to touch us, and I sighed.

"You have to go."

"No, *you* have to go," I teased.

"No, really, your father will be home soon."

"Oh." I wished Charlie would go cruising at night sometimes.

Fredward took my shoulders and I looked into his face.

"Can I show you something?" he asked, sudden excitement flaring in his eyes.

"Ummm, show me what?"

"I'll show you how *I* travel in the forest." He saw my expression fizzle. "Don't worry, you'll be very safe, and we'll get to your truck much faster." His mouth twitched up into a crooked smile so beautiful that my heart nearly forgot to go on.

"Will you turn into a bat?" I asked.

He laughed, louder than I'd ever heard anyone laugh. "Ho ho ho! Like I haven't heard *that* one before!" He guffawed again.

"Right, I'm sure you get that all the time."

"Come on, little coward, climb on papa's back."

I waited to see if he was kidding, but apparently he was not.

He smiled as he read my hesitation, and reached for me. My heart reacted; even though he couldn't hear my thoughts, my pulse always gave me away. He then proceeded to sling me onto his back, with very little effort on my part.

"I'm a bit heavier than your average paperback," I warned.

"Hah!" he snorted. I could almost hear his eyes rolling around in their sockets. I'd never seen them in such high spirits before.

He startled me, suddenly grabbing my hand, pressing my damp palm into his face and inhaling deeply.

"Easier all the time," he howled.

And then he was running.

If I'd ever feared death before in his presence, it was nothing compared to how I felt now.

He streaked through the dark, thick underbrush of the forest like a bullet, like a ghost, like a

ghost bullet. There was no sound, no evidence that his feet touched the earth. But the trees flew by at deadly speeds, speeds that would kill me if I happened to be doing this on my own.

I was too terrified to close my eyes, completely forgetting that it was even an option. I felt like I was sticking my head out of the window of an airplane mid-flight. Why was I doing it? And, for the first time in my life, I felt the faint dizziness of motion sickness.

Then it was over. We'd hiked hours this morning to reach Fredward's meadow, and now, in a matter of minutes, all of that work had been undone.

"Exhilaration, isn't it?" His voice was high and excited.

He stood motionless, waiting for me to clamber down. I tried, but my muscles wouldn't respond. My arms and legs stayed locked around his body while my head spun in circles.

"Bella?" He asked, anxious now. "What's wrong with your head?"

"It... it does this when I get dizzy. I think I need to lie down," I gasped.

"Oh, sorry." He waited for me, but I still couldn't move.

"I think I need help," I admitted.

He barked a laugh and gently loosened my strangle-hold on his neck. There was no resisting the iron strength of his moves. Then he pulled me around to face him, cradling my entire body in his arms like a small child. He held me for a moment, then carefully placed me in the springy ferns.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

I couldn't be sure how I felt when my head was spinning so crazily. "I think I'm still dizzy."

"Put your head between your knees."

To my surprise, it helped a little. I breathed in and out slowly, keeping my head very still. I felt him sitting beside me and the moments passed, one after another. Eventually I found that I could raise my head. There was a hollow ringing sound in my ears.

"I guess that wasn't the best idea," he mused.

I tried to be positive, but still felt nauseous. "No, it was *very* interesting."

"Hah! You're as white as a ghost—no, you're as white as *me*!" He chortled.

"I think I should have closed my eyes."

"Remember that next time."

"Next time?!" I groaned.

He laughed, his mood still radiant.

"Show-off," I muttered.

"Open your eyes, Bella," he said quietly.

And he was right there, his face inches from mine. His beauty stunned my mind—it was to touch too much, an excess that I would never be able to process.

"I was thinking, while I was running..." He paused.

"You can think while you run?"

"Silly Bella," he chuckled. "Running is second nature to me, it's not something I have to think about."

"Show-off."

He smiled.

"No," he continued, "I was thinking there was something I wanted to try." And he took my whole face in his hands.

I couldn't breathe.

He hesitated—not in the normal way, the human way.

Not the way a human man might hesitate before he kissed a human woman, to gauge her reaction to the forthcoming intimacy, to see how he would be... received. Perhaps he would hesitate to prolong the moment, that ideal moment of will-he won't-he, those five to ten seconds of how-will-it-

taste, sometimes better than the kiss itself.

Instead, Fredward hesitated to test himself, to see if this was safe, to see if his desire to love me as a woman was greater than his desire to love me as a meal.

And then, without warning, his cold, marble lips pressed very softly against mine.

What neither of us was prepared for was my response.

Blood boiled under my skin and into my lips. My breath came as a savage, wild gasp. My eyes closed immediately and then shot wide open. My fingers parted as I breathed in his heady scent. My lips knotted in his hair, clutching him to me. I felt like I was exploding, like I was dying. I had never felt anything like it.

Immediately I felt him turn to unresponsive stone beneath my lips. His hands gently, but with irresistible force, pushed my face back into its rightful place on my head. I opened my eyes and saw his guarded expression.

"Oops," I breathed, wondering if I'd ever feel a climax like that again.

"That's an understatement," he said, responding to my statement. It was as if he could read my mind.²⁷⁸

His eyes were wild in a different way than mine, his jaw clenched in acute restraint, yet he didn't lapse from his perfect articulation. He held my face just inches from his.

He dazzled my eyes.

"Should I...?" As painful as it was, I tried to disengage myself, to give him some room.

His hands refused to let me move so much as an inch. I thanked God.

"No, it's tolerable. Wait, please." His voice was polite, controlled, and distinctly un-romantic. I sighed.

I kept my eyes on his, watched as the excitement in them faded and gentled.

And then I knew he was dead.

He smiled a surprisingly impish grin.

"There," he said, obviously pleased with himself.

"There?" I asked.

"I *didn't* eat you," he said, an irritatingly smug smile on his perfect face. He laughed aloud. "I'm so very strong. It's nice to know."

"I wish I could say the same," I said, for lack of anything better to say. "I'm sorry."

"You *are* only human, after all."

"Thanks so much."

He was on his feet in one of his lithe movements and held out his hand to me, an unexpected romantic gesture. I was so used to our standard of non-contact. I took his cold hard hand, needing the support more than I thought.

"Are you still faint from the run? Or was it my kissing expertise?" How lighthearted, how human he seemed as he laughed now, his seraphic face untroubled. I blushed, remembering how we had kissed just a few short moments ago. He was a different Fredward than the one I had known. And I felt all the more besotted by this new one. It would cause me physical pain to be physically separated from either man.

"I can't be sure, I'm still woozy," I managed to respond. "I think it's some of both though," I said, trying to chuckle and appear as lighthearted as he appeared.

"Maybe you should let me drive."

"Are you insane?"

"I can drive better than you on your best day," he teased, totally serious. "You have much

278. Vampiric mind-reading.

slower reflexes."

Fredward sure could suck a dick sometimes! "I'm sure that's true, but I don't think my nerves, or my truck, could take it."

"Some trust, please, Bella. If you can't trust the guy you're going to first base with... who *can* you trust?"

He had a point.

"Nope. Not a chance," I said, surprised at myself.

He raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

"What, don't believe that I would deny you something?"

I started to step around him, heading for the driver's side. He might have let me pass if I hadn't wobbled slightly. Then again, he might not have. His arm created an inescapable snare around my waist and he continued to squeeze me, tighter and tighter.

"Give me the keys, or I'll never let go," he said in a tone that was half-playful and half-serious. "Bella, I've already expended a great deal of personal effort at this point to keep you alive. Do you really think I'm just going to drive you off a cliff?"

I tried to respond, but he was squishing my lungs so hard that I couldn't even breathe.

"Do you really think I'm going to let you behind the wheel of a vehicle when you can't even walk straight?"

If he thought he was going to get away with calling me a cripple, he had another thing coming... as soon as he stopped squeezing the life out of me.

"Besides, 'friends don't let friends drive drunk,'" he quoted with a chuckle, letting go of my waist to the point where I could breathe with serious effort. I could smell the unbearably sweet fragrance coming off his chest.

"Drunk?" I choked.

"You're intoxicated by my very presence!" He was grinning that playful smirk again.

"As if!" I squeaked. There was a pause. "Actually, I guess you're right," I sighed a small sigh, conserving my air.

He let go of me a little more with every bit of truth I revealed. There really was no way around it; I couldn't resist him in anything. I held the key high and dropped it, watching his hand flash like lightening to catch it soundlessly. Completely free of his clutches, I coughed violently and then, eventually, began to breathe normally.

"Take it easy," I warned, "my truck is a senior citizen."

He shook his head, not entertained by my joke.

"And are you not affected at all?" I asked, irked. "By my... presence?"

Again his mobile features transformed, his expression slipping into something soft and warm. He didn't answer at first but simply bent his face to mine, and brushed his lips slowly along my jaw, from my ear to my chin, back and forth, to and fro. I trembled violently.

"Regardless," he finally murmured into my other ear, "I have better reflexes."

14.

MIND OVER HIS MATTER

HE COULD DRIVE WELL WHEN HE KEPT THE SPEED REASONABLE, I HAD to admit. Like so many things, it seemed to be effortless to him. He barely looked at the road and he drove single-handedly, with the other hand resting on my thigh. Sometimes he gazed into the setting sun, sometimes he glanced at me, my face, my hair blowing out the open window, and would smile.

He had turned the radio to an oldies station, and he sang along with a song I'd never heard. He knew every line, like he had heard the song many times before.

"You like fifties music?" I asked, trying to use music to figure out how many decades he had been alive, and use that information to figure out how old he was.

"Music in the fifties was good. Much better than the sixties. Or the seventies, ugh!" he shuddered. "The eighties were bearable."

"Are you ever going to tell me how old you are?!" I yelled.

"Does it matter much?" His smile, to my relief, remained unclouded.

"No, but I still wonder..." I grimaced. "Besides, it's kind of.. I don't know... it's kind of cool to be with an older man."

"I wonder if it will upset you," he reflected to himself, "to be with a man... this old..." He gazed into the sun. The minutes passed until he sighed and looked into my eyes, seeming to forget the road completely for a time. Whatever he saw there must have encouraged him. He looked into the sun again—the light of the setting orb glittered off his skin in ruby-tinged sparkles, refracting back into my eyes which smoldered only for him—and spoke.

"I was born in Chicago in 1893," he said, with a slight Midwestern twinge. He paused and glanced at me from the corner of his eye. My face was carefully unsurprised, patient for the rest. He smiled a tiny, encouraged smile and continued. "Carlisle found me in a hospital in the summer of 1910. I was seventeen, and dying of Tuberculosis."

He heard my intake of breath, though it was barely audible to my own ears. He looked down into my eyes again.

"I don't remember it well—it was very long time ago, and human memories fade." He got lost in his own thoughts before he went on. "I do remember how it felt, when Carlisle saved me. It's not an easy thing, not something you can forget."

"You mean your parents?"

"No, I—" he waved his hand. "They had already died from the disease. I was all alone. That was why he chose me. In all the chaos of the epidemic, no one would ever realize I was gone..."

"How... how did he... *save* you?"

A few seconds passed before he answered. He seemed to choose his words carefully.

"It was difficult. Not many of us have the restraint to accomplish it. But Carlisle has always been the most humane and compassionate of us... I don't think you could find a vampire his equal in any of the history books."²⁷⁹ He paused. "For me, it was merely very, very painful."

279. It is unclear whether Fredward is saying that Carlisle is the only vampire unsavage enough to create more vampires, thus implying that he is the father of *all* vampires, or if he is indicating that the vampires who make it into academic histories are vicious brutes who are chosen solely to meet publishers' demands for elements of prurient interest. The field of

I could tell from the set of his lips, he would say no more on this subject. I suppressed my curiosity, though it was far from idle. There were many things I needed to think through on this particular issue, things that were only beginning to occur to me.²⁸⁰

His velvet voice interrupted my thoughts. "He acted from loneliness. That's usually the reason behind the choice. I was the first in Carlisle's family, though he found Esme soon after. She fell from a cliff. They brought her straight to the hospital morgue, though somehow her heart was still beating."²⁸¹

"So you must be dying, then, to become a..." I couldn't say the word.

"No, that's just Carlisle. He would never, ever do that to someone who had another choice." The respect in his voice was profound whenever he spoke of his surrogate father. "It is easier he says, though," he said, "if the blood is weak." He looked at the now-dark road, letting the conversation stop there. But I wondered... am I... is my blood... weak?

"And Emmett and Rosalie?"

"Carlisle brought Rosalie to our family next. I didn't realize 'til much later that he was hoping she would be to me as Esme was to him—a field I could till for the rest of eternity." He rolled his eyes. "But she was never more than a sister. It was only two years later that she found Emmett. She was hunting—we were in Appalachia at the time—and found a bear about to finish him off. She carried him back to Carlisle, more than a hundred miles, afraid she wouldn't be able to do it herself. I'm only beginning to guess how difficult that journey was for her." He threw an accusatory glance in my direction. God, what was his problem?

"But she made it," I encouraged, looking away from the unbearable embers of beauty and accusation that smoldered in his eye sockets.

"Yes," he murmured. "She saw something in his face that made her strong enough. And they've been together ever since she saw that face. Sometimes they live separately from us, as a married couple, doing married things. But the younger we pretend to be, the longer we can stay in any given place. Forks seemed perfect, so we all enrolled in the Forks High School." He laughed. "I suppose we'll have to go to their wedding in a few years... again!" He barked a second laugh, vibrating the windows with his enthusiasm.

"Alice and Jasper?"

Fredward's head swung towards me and locked onto mine. "No." His face was hard, stern. "No, Bella. Rosalie and Emmett. Were you listening?"

"Yes, I, I just wanted to know about them, too," I whimpered.

"Ah," he released me and relaxed. "Alice and Jasper are two very rare creatures. They both developed a 'conscience,' as we refer to it,²⁸² with no outside guidance. Jasper belonged to another... family, a *very* different kind of family. He became depressed, and he wandered on his own. Alice found him. Like me, she has certain gifts above and beyond the norm for our kind."

"Really?" I interrupted. "But you said you were the only one. Why did you say that if it wasn't true?"

"I said I was the only one who could hear people's thoughts. She can see things—*other* things, things that might happen, things that might not happen. But it's very subjective. The future isn't set in stone. Things change, turn into other things."

vampire academia is too rarefied a field to determine which is the ultimate truth that Fredward is alluding to, and so it is ultimately frustrating to have Bella as both our sole narrative link to his thoughts and deeds, as well as the prime investigator into this matter. Would that Bella had not been his mistress but a true-blue investigator who'd been cast in the foundry of academia, I assure you that it would have been another story. Please see thought question #9 for more.

280. Should I not mention the city Chicago in conversation? Tuberculosis? What would constitute an insensitive comment?

281. As punishment for attempting to commit suicide, Carlisle made Esme immortal.

282. The Cullens aren't alone in using the word "conscience" when referring to inner moral guidance. Several billion English speakers in the world today share their preference in word choice.

His jaw set when he said that, and his eyes darted at my face and away so quickly that I wasn't sure if I only imagined it.

"What kinds of things does she see?"

"She saw a wall of blood one time. Sometimes she'll know who will win the baseball game. She even saw Carlisle and our family, and she and Jasper came together to find us. She's most sensitive to non-humans. She always sees, for example, when another group of our kind is coming near and any threat they may pose."

"Are there a lot of va— your kind?" I was surprised. How many vampires could be walking around without people knowing?

"You'd be surprised. But most won't settle in any one place. Only those like us, who've developed what we call a 'conscience'"—a sly glance in my direction—"can live together with humans for any length of time. We've only found one other family like ours, in a small village in *Alaska*.²⁸³ We lived together for a time, but there were so many of us that we became too noticeable. Those of us who live differently tend to kick it more."

"And the others?"

"Nomads, for the most part. We've all lived that way at times. It gets tedious, like anything else. You wake up, you grab a bite to eat, wander around for a few hours..." He trailed off, seemingly lost in the past. I watched his eyes closely, thought I could see things flitting through them; a bed of pine needles, a tree swaying in the wind, two human-shapes running, screaming. He sighed and continued. "But it's not for everyone. We run across the others now and then, because most of us prefer the North."

"Why is that?"

We were parked in front of my house now, and he'd turned off the truck. It was very quiet and dark; there was no moon. The porch light was off so I knew my father wasn't home yet.

"Did you have your eyes open this afternoon? Are you blind or are you stupid?" He teased. "Do you think I could walk down the street in the sunlight without causing traffic accidents? There's a reason why we chose the Olympic Peninsula: it's one of the most sunless places in the world. It's nice to be able to go outside in the day. You wouldn't believe how tired a person can get of the nighttime after seventy-five years."

"So that's where the legends come from?"

"What legends?"

"Oh *you* know, silly! About vam— um, about your people."

"Probably."

"And so then Alice came from another family, like Jasper?"

"No, and that *is* a mystery. Alice doesn't remember her human life at all. And she doesn't know who created her. She awoke alone, unwanted. Whoever made her just walked away, and none of us understand why. If she hadn't had that other sense, if she hadn't seen Jasper and Carlisle and known that she would someday become one of us, she probably would have turned into a total savage, devoid of culture, philosophy, language, manners and etiquette."

There was *so* much to think about, so much I still wanted to ask. But, to my great embarrassment, my stomach growled. I'd been so intrigued, I hadn't even noticed I was hungry. I realized now that I was.

"I'm hungry," I announced.

"I'm sorry, I'm keeping you from dinner."

"Hey, that's my line!" I winked.

He frowned. "I've never spent much time around anyone who eats food."

283. The northern-most United State. Alaskan winters receive so little sunlight, *two* families of vampires could probably live there undetected.

"Oh. Um. I could show you how, if you wanted..." It was easier to say in the darkness, knowing as I spoke how my voice would betray me, my hopeless heroin-like addiction to him.

"Can't I come in?" he asked.

"Would you like to?" I couldn't picture it, this godlike creature sitting in my father's shabby kitchen chair, maybe speaking to my shabby father. Would his contact be like Midas' touch? Would the chair become attractive, my father handsome? Would I?

"Yes, if it's all right." I heard the door close quietly, and almost simultaneously he was outside my door, opening it for me to get out of.

"Very human," I complimented him.

"I believe it's called etiquette, Bella."

"Whatever!" I giggled. He walked beside me in the night, so quietly I had to peek at him constantly to be sure he was still there and that I hadn't imagined the last six weeks. In the darkness he looked much more normal. Still pale, still dreamy in his beauty, but no longer the fantastic sparkling animal of our sunlit afternoon in the meadow.

He reached the door ahead of me and opened it. I paused halfway through the frame.

"The door was unlocked?"

"No, I used the key from under the eave."

I stepped inside, flicked on the porch light, and turned to look at him with both of my eyebrows raised. I was sure I'd never used that key in front of him.

"I was curious about you."

"You *spied* on me?" But somehow I couldn't infuse my voice with the proper outrage. Nobody had ever spied on me before <3.

He was unrepentant. "What *else* is there to do at night?"

I felt irrevocably flattered and went down the hall to the kitchen. Fredward was standing there before me, needing no guide. He sat in the very chair I'd tried to picture him in, his beauty lighting up the kitchen like never before. It was a moment before I could look away.

I concentrated on getting my dinner, taking last night's bacon lasagna from the fridge, placing a square piece on a round plate, carrying the plate to the microwave, selecting the correct microwave, and pushing Start. It revolved, filling the kitchen with the smells of tomatoes, oreganos, and bacons. I didn't take my eyes from the plate of food as I spoke. I wondered if that was why Fredward was always looking at *me*.

"How often?" I asked casually.

"Hmmm?" He sounded as if I had pulled him from some other train of thought, as if I had derailed him from his own piece of lasagna.

I still didn't turn around. "How often did you come here?"

"I come almost every night. At least once, maybe twice."

I whirled, stunned. "Why?"

"You're interesting when you sleep." He spoke matter-of-factly. "*That's* why I come."

"You're interesting?"

"No, *you* are interesting. When you sleep, anyway. You talk."

"No!" I gasped, refusing the idea, heat flooding my face up to my hairline. I gripped the kitchen counter for support. I knew I talked in my sleep, of course; my mother teased me about it. I hadn't thought it was something I needed to worry about here, in Forks, Idaho, though!

His expression shifted instantly to chagrin. "Are you very angry with me?"

I thought about it. "You mean, am I *really* angry with you?"

He frowned. "Are you correcting my use of the word *very*?" He asked hesitantly.

I thought about it. "No," I said, immediately. I felt and sounded like I'd had the breath knocked

out of me. Was it really my fault that I had better grammar than him even though he was over one hundred years old?

He waited.

"What?" he urged.

"What you heard!!" I wailed.

Instantly, silently, he was at my side, holding my hands in his hands and my eyes in his eyes.

"Don't be upset!" he pleaded. He dropped to his knees, shoving his head into my stomach. I could feel his wet tears dripping down my torso. I was embarrassed. I tried to look away.

"You miss your mother," he whispered. "You worry about her. And when it rains, the sound makes you restless. And when it's windy, the wind makes you nostalgic. And when it's perfectly sound, when not a single grasshopper is grasshopping, you whisper my name, over and over..."

I sighed in defeat. "Are there a lot of times... like that?"

"How many do you mean by 'a lot', exactly?"

"Oh no!" I hung my head.

Instantly, he took his head out of my stomach and stood up tall, pulling me against his chest, softly, naturally.

"Don't be self-conscious," he whispered. "If I could sleep at all, I'd say your name all the time, no matter what the weather was like." He began massaging my head. "And I'm not ashamed of it."

Then we both heard the sound of tires on the brick driveway, saw the headlights flash through the front window, down the hall. We stiffened in each others' arms. The lights got closer, and the dull sound of tires became the screech of brakes. Before we knew it, Charlie's cruiser was flying through the kitchen window at ten miles per hour.

We freaked out. "Does your father know I'm here?" Fredward asked.

"I'm not sure..." I tried to think it through quickly. I didn't have much time.

"Another time then..."

And I was alone.

"Fredward!" I hissed.

I heard a ghostly chuckle and nothing else until Charlie managed to get the cruiser door open. He leaned out the car window, shaking his head.

"Rough day?" I asked.

"Bella?" he called.

"I'm right here, dad." I hoped he wouldn't hear the hysterical edge to my voice. I grabbed my dinner from the microwave and sat at the table as he climbed out of the car. His grunts sounded so noisy after my day with Fredward.

"Can you get me some of that? I'm bushed." He stepped on the heels of his boots to take them off, holding the back of Fredward's chair for support.

I took my food with me, scarfing it down as I got his dinner. It burned my tongue; I really was hungry. I filled two glasses with milk while his bacon lasagna was heating, and gulped mine down to put out the fire. As I set the glass down, I noticed my hand trembling. Charlie sat in the chair, and the contrast between him and its former occupant was comical. I wondered if Charlie was ever even ten percent as hot as Fredward, and felt a little sad for my mom.

"Thanks," he said as I placed his food on the table.

"How was your day?" I asked. The words were rushed; I was dying to escape to my room.

With a flick of the wrist, he motioned to the cruiser next to him. Just then, I noticed all the broken glass and enormous chunks of wall all over the floor. I giggled a little.

Charlie looked over, surprised that I was giggling, but as an even greater surprise to both of us, he started laughing too. I was so surprised that I started laughing too. Our laughter resonated through

the kitchen; and for the first time, I felt truly at home in Forks, Oregon.

"Today wasn't all that bad," Charlie said, still chuckling a bit. "The fish were biting... "

I knew what he meant.

"How about you?" He continued. "Did you get everything done that you wanted to?"

"Not really—it was too nice to stay indoors." I took another big bite.

"It was a nice day," he agreed. What an understatement, we secretly thought to ourselves.

Finished with the last bite of bacon lasagna, I lifted my glass to his.

"Cheers, Charlie." I said. He smiled and tapped his glass to mine and I chugged the remains of my milk.

Charlie surprised me by being observant. "In a hurry?"

"Yeah, I'm tired. I can't wait to go to my bed."

"You look kinda keyed up," he noted. I had no idea what he meant, but why, oh why, did this have to be his night to pay attention?

"Do I?" was all I could manage in response. I quickly scrubbed my dishes clean in the sink and placed them upside-down on a blue dish towel to air-dry.

"It's Saturday," he mused.

"Is it?"

"No plans tonight?" he asked.

"No, Dad, I just want to get some sleep."

"None of the boys in town your type, eh?" If he was suspicious that I was having underage sex with a vampire, he was playing it cool.

"Dad. There isn't a single *boy* in this town with a dick big enough for me." I was careful not to over-emphasize the word *boy* in my quest to be truthful with Charlie.

"I thought that maybe Mikey Newton's... you said he was horsey."

"He's *just* a friend, Dad." I thought about it, then added, "Besides, I'm pretty sure he doesn't even have one."

"Well, maybe you're right about that... but wait 'til you get to college. They... you know, they keep... growing." Every father's dream, that his daughter will be strong enough to wait for someone big enough for her. Parents always want their kids to have what they never had.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," I had to agree as I headed up the stairs.

"Night, honey. Nice chat," he called after me.

"See you in the morning, Dad."

I worked to make my tread sound slow and unexcited as I walked up the stairs to my room. I shut the door loud enough for him to hear, and then sprinted on my tiptoes to the window, unable to keep in my excitement any longer. I threw it open and leaned out into the night. My eyes scanned the darkness, the impenetrable shadow of the trees...

"Fredward?" I whispered, feeling completely idiotic.

"Yes?" The quiet, shadowed response came from behind me.

I whirled, one hand flying to my throat in surprise, as though it were a turkey neck.

He lay, smiling hugely across my bed, his hands behind his head, his tongue hanging out of his mouth; a picture of perfect ease.

"Oh!" I breathed. He pressed his lips together, trying to hide his amusement.

"Just give me a moment to restart my heart." I stumbled over to my dresser, pulled open the second drawer, and took out the ladies' defibrillator I had purchased last week. Where was the instruction manual?

He sat up slowly, so as not to restartle me. Then he leaned forward and reached out with his long arms to pick me up, gripping me under my armpits like I was a toddler. He sat me on the bed

beside him.

"Allow me to be here for you," he suggested, putting a cold hand on mine. "How's your heart?"

And then I realized I had completely forgotten about my heart.

We sat there for a moment in silence, both thinking about my heart.

"Can I have a minute to be human?" I asked.

"Certainly." He gestured with one hand that I should proceed.

"Stay."

"Yes, ma'am." And he made a show of becoming hard, statue-like on the edge of my bed.

I hopped up, grabbing my pajamas from off the floor, my bag of toiletries out of the dark. I left the light off and slipped out, closing the door.

I could hear the sound of the TV rising up the stairs. I banged against the bathroom door loudly, so Charlie wouldn't accidentally walk in on me.

I meant to hurry. I brushed my teeth fiercely, going Speedy Gonzales on the remaining traces of bacon lasagna. But the hot water of the shower couldn't be rushed. It unknotted the muscles in my back, calmed my pulse. The familiar smell of my shampoo made me feel like I might be the same person I had been this morning, although I wasn't. I tried not to think of the day, of our hike, his skin, my lips... I shook my head, trying not to think of where it was all leading up to, of Fredward sitting on my bed, waiting, because then I had to start all over with the calming process.

Finally, I couldn't delay anymore. I shut off the water, toweling hastily, rushing again. Fredward wouldn't mind if I was a little wet. I pulled on my holey t-shirt²⁸⁴ and gray sweatpants. Too late to regret not packing the Victoria's Secret silk pajamas, the ones my mother had bought me for my first day of high school. I wondered if I'd even need them anymore.

I rubbed the towel through my hair again, taking care with each strand, and then yanked the brush through it quickly. I threw the towel in the hamper, flung my brush and toothpaste into the trash. Then I dashed down the stairs so Chucky Charles could see that I was in my pajamas, with wet hair.

"Night, Dad."

"Night, Bella." He did look startled by my appearance. Maybe that would keep him from checking on me tonight.

I took the stairs two at a time, trying to be quiet, and flew into my room, closing the door tightly behind me.

Fredward hadn't moved a fraction of an inch, a carving of Adonis perched on my faded quilt. I smiled, and his lips twitched in opposite directions, the statue coming to life.

His eyes appraised me, taking in the damp hair, the tattered shirt. He raised one eyebrow.

"Nice."

I grimaced.

"No, what I mean to say is *niiiiiiice*."

"Thanks," I whispered. I went back to his side, sitting cross-legged beside him on my bed. I looked at the lines in the wooden floor.

"What was all that for?"

"Charlie thinks I'm sneaking out."

"Oh." He contemplated that. "Why?" As if he couldn't know my own father's mind much more clearly than I ever would.

"Apparently, I look a little *overexcited*."

He lifted my chin, examining my face.

"You look very warm, actually."

284. The one with holes over the nipples. Conversely, the one that has holes everywhere except the nipples.

"Shut up!" I giggled, and fell back on the bed, rolling around. "Maybe compared to you!"

He bent his face slowly to mine, laying his cool cheek against my skin. I held perfectly still, not sure what he was doing.

"Mmmmmmm... " he breathed. "Mmmm... .mmm."

It was very difficult, while he was touching my face with his, to frame a coherent question. It took me a minute of scattered concentration to begin.

"It seems to be... much easier for you, now, to be close to me... "

"Does it seem that way to you?" he murmured, his nose gliding up and down my jaw. I felt his hand, lighter than an angel on a pin, brushing my damp hair back so that his lips could engulf my earlobe.

"Much, much easier," I said, trying to exhale.

"Hmm... .mmm."

"So I was wondering... "

"Hmm?" He paused with my earlobe between two incisors, nibbling gently. His fingers that had been tracing my collarbone stopped.

"Why is that," my voice shook, embarrassing me, "do you think?"

As if erupting from a pocket universe of silence, he guffawed lightly into my ear. "Mind over matter."

I pulled back; as I moved, he froze—and I could no longer hear his pretend breathing.

We stared cautiously at each other for a moment, face to face, and then, as his clenched jaw gradually relaxed, his expression became puzzled.²⁸⁵

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No—the opposite. You're driving me crazy," I explained.

He considered that briefly, and when he spoke, he sounded pleased. "Really?" A triumphant smile spread slowly over his face.

"Would you like a round of applause?" I asked sarcastically.

He considered that briefly but said, "No, no. I'm just pleasantly surprised," he said, pausing. "Surprisingly pleased," he clarified. "In the last hundred years of so," his voice was teasing, "I never imagined anything like this. I didn't believe I would ever find someone I wanted to be with... in another way than my brothers and sisters. And then to find, even though it's all new to me, that I'm good at it... at being with you..."

"Okay, okay, I get it. You're good at everything," I said.

He shrugged, allowing that, and we both chortled in whispers.

"But how can it be so easy now?" I pressed. "This afternoon... "

"It's not *easy*," he sighed. "But this afternoon, I was still... undecided. About eating you."

"Mmm... " I nodded, pursing my lips, trying not to drool. Right now I was having a hard time not gobbling him up myself.

"I am sorry about that, it was unforgivable for me to behave so."

"Not unforgivable," I disagreed.

"Thank you." He smiled. "You see," he continued, touching my eyes, looking me up and down, "I wasn't sure if I was strong enough... " His hand drifted from my eyeball to my hand and brought it to his face, nuzzling my palm. "And while there was still that possibility that I might be... overcome"—breathed in the scent of my fingertips—"I was... susceptible. Until I made up my mind that I *was* strong enough, that there was no possibility at all that I would... that I ever could... "

I'd never seen him struggle so hard for words. I wished that I could lend him some of mine.

285. Presumably bearing likeness to "Balloon Crazy", a jigsaw puzzle drawn by Royce McClune that depicts a sky filled with all manner of hot-air balloons.

"So there's no possibility now?"

"Mind over matter," he repeated, smiling, his teeth bright in the darkness.

"Wow, that was easy," I said.

He threw back his head and laughed, quietly as a whisper, but still exuberantly.²⁸⁶

"Easy for *you*!" he amended, touching my nose with his fingertip a bit too hard.

And then his face abruptly took on a grave seriousness.

"I'm trying," he whispered. "If it gets to be... too much, I'm fairly sure I'll be able to leave."

I scowled, right then and there. I didn't like the talk of leaving.

"And it will be harder tomorrow," he continued. "I've had the scent of you in my head all day," he said, pointing to his head. "I've grown amazingly desensitized. If I'm away from you for any length of time, I'll have to start over again. Not quite from scratch, though, I think."

"Don't go away, then," I responded, unable to hide the longing in my voice. "Don't... do that, don't start over, not quite from scratch."

"That suits me," he replied, his face relaxing into a gentle smile. "Bring on the shackles, baby; I'm your slave." But his long hands formed manacles²⁸⁷ around *my* wrists as though *I* were the slave. He laughed his quiet, baroque laugh. He'd laughed tonight more than I'd ever heard anyone laugh in all the time I had lived. It was musical, like the tinkling of chimes.

"You seem more... optimistic than usual," I observed. "I haven't seen you like this before... so sure that things will be okay... "

"Isn't it supposed to be like this?" He smiled. "The glory of first and only love, the glory of *God*... and all that? Isn't it incredible, isn't it? It's glorious, isn't it? The difference between reading about something, seeing it in the moving pictures, and experiencing it? You're experiencing it too, aren't you?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"For example"—his words flowed swiftly now, I had to concentrate to catch it all—"the emotion of jealousy. I've read about it a hundred thousand times, seen actors portray it in a thousand different positions. I believed I understood *that* one pretty clearly." He chuckled. "But it shocked me..." He grimaced. "Do you even *remember* the day that Mike asked you to the Forks High School Spring Fling Dance-themed Event?"

"I nodded," I said, though I remembered that day for a different reason... "The day you started talking to me again."

"I was surprised by the flare of resentment, the ferocious fury, that I felt—I didn't recognize what it was at first. I was even more aggravated than usual that I couldn't know what you were thinking, why you refused him. I mean, I knew that you didn't know, at that point, about his... you know... So was it simply for your friend's sake? Was there someone else? How could I know? All I knew I had no right to care either way. I *tried* not to care.

"And then the line started forming," he chuckled. "The line of men waiting for their turn to wipe your ass."

I scowled in the darkness.

"I waited, unreasonably anxious to hear what you would say to them, to watch your expressions. I couldn't deny the relief I felt, watching the annoyance on your face. At that moment, I felt like we were one. But I couldn't be sure. Not yet, at least.

"That was the first night I came here. I wanted to know if there was any chance you could ever

286. In a speaking engagement with the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the author was questioned about why she went with the adverb "quietly" instead of the adjective "quiet." She responded that while she considered it, she felt that adjectives were rarely as dramatic as their adverbial equivalent, citing examples like red vs. redly, kosher vs. kosherly, and hard vs. hardly.
287. Male barnacles.

want me the way I wanted you. I wrestled with myself all night, while watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was *right*, moral, ethical, and what I *wanted*.²⁸⁸ I knew that if I continued to ignore you as I should, or if I left for a few years, 'til you were gone, that someday you would say yes to Mike or someone like him. It made me angry. And at that moment, I knew that life was going to be so much different than a movie.

"And *then*," he whispered, "as you were sleeping, you said my name. You spoke so clearly, at first I thought you'd woken. And at that moment, I knew you loved me. You rolled over restlessly and mumbled my name once more, and sighed loudly. The feeling that coursed through me was unnerving, staggering.²⁸⁹ And I knew, then, that I couldn't ignore you any longer." He was silent for a moment, probably listening to my heart beat.

"But jealousy... it's a strange thing. So much more powerful than I would have thought. Much more powerful than I *did* think. And irrational! Every time you look at anyone. Every time anyone looks at you. All the time! Just now, when Charlie asked you about that vile, pedestrian Mike Newton..." He shook his head angrily.

"I should have known you'd be listening," I moaned.

"Of course!" He giggled.

I rolled my eyes. What was Fredward even talking about?

"I'm new at this; you're resurrecting the human in me, and it's getting messy."

"But honestly," I teased, "for that to bother you, after I have to hear that Rosalie—Rosalie, the incarnation of pure beauty, your *sister*—was meant for you. Emmett or no Emmett, how can I compete with raw beauty? Even if she *is* dating your brother, how can I compete with your sister?" I sighed, slumping onto the bed and feeling unpretty.

"There's no competition." He drew my trapped hands around his back, holding me so tight and pressing my face against his chest. I kept as still as I could, struggling to breathe.

"I *know* there's no competition," I mumbled into his cold skin, feeling sorry for myself. "That's the problem."

"Of course Rosalie *is* beautiful in her way, but even if she wasn't my sister, even if Emmett didn't belong with her, even if she is objectively more attractive, well-dressed and interesting than you are, she could never have one tenth, no, one hundredth of the attraction you hold for me." He was serious now, thoughtful. He scooted my head closer to his neck and face, putting his lips in my ear. "The truth is, I have absolutely no interest in eating her. For almost ninety years I've walked among my kind, and yours... all the time thinking I was complete in myself, not realizing how incomplete I was. And not finding anything, because *you* weren't even alive yet."

"It hardly seems fair," I whispered, my face still resting on his neck, listening to his breath come and go like the winter winds. "I haven't had to wait at all. Why should I get off so easily?"

"You're right," he agreed. "I should make this harder for you, definitely." He freed me with one of his free hands, only to gather me carefully into his other hand. He stroked my wet head softly, from the top of my head to my waist. "You only have to risk your life every second you spend with me. It's the same thing I'm risking, but I think it might mean more to you."

I didn't understand what he was saying, but I knew he was saying it. "I don't feel deprived of anything."

"Not yet." And his voice was abruptly full of an ancient grief.²⁹⁰

I tried to pull back, to look in his face, but his hand locked my wrists in an unbreakable hold. I tried to shake my face to get his lips out of my ear, but he had a fairly good grip on that too.

288. Please see discussion question #10.

289. It was a late-breaking, immortal puberty

290. A rare kind of grief that has been being felt since Mayan times.

"What—" I started to ask, when his body became rigid. I froze, but he suddenly released my hands, and disappeared. I narrowly avoided falling on my face.

"Lie down!" he hissed. I couldn't tell where he spoke from in the darkness.

I rolled under my quilt obediently, balling up on my side, the way I usually slept.

"No, face down!" he scowled.

I stretched out my body on the bed and tore the quilt off me, throwing it to the floor.

I heard the door crack open, as Charlie peeked in to make sure I was where I was supposed to be. I breathed evenly, exaggerating the movement. A long minute passed. I listened, not sure if he'd left. Then Fredward's cool arm was around me, under my shirt, his lips at my ear, flirting.

"You are a terrible actress—I'd say that career path is out for you."

"Darn it," I muttered. My heart was crashing around in my chest, knocking things over.

He hummed a melody I didn't recognize; it sounded like lullaby. "Should I sing you to sleep?"

"With a lullaby?"

He paused. "Yes. A lullaby. Singing you to sleep."

"Right," I laughed. "Like I would sleep with you."

He chortled. "You do it all the time."

"No, I got that mixed up," I chortled back. I had meant to say that I *would* like to sleep with him.

"So if you don't want to sleep... " he suggested. My breath caught, hot.

"If I don't want to sleep... ?"

He chuckled. "What do you want to do then?"

I couldn't answer at first. I knew what I wanted to do, but was *that* what I wanted to want to do?

"I'm not sure," I finally said.

"Tell me when you decide."

I could feel his cool breath on my ear, feel his nose sliding along my jaw, inhaling.

"I thought you were desensitized?"

"Just because I'm resisting the wine doesn't mean I can't appreciate the bouquet," he whispered, sensually. "You have a very floral smell, like lavender... or freesia," he noted. "It's mouthwatering."

"Yeah, it's an off day when I don't get somebody telling me how edible I smell."

"*Somebody?*" He raged, chest puffing out.

"Oh you!" I giggled. "I've decided what I want to do. I want to hear more about you."

He deflated. "Ask me anything."

I sifted through my questions for the most vital. "Why do you do it?" I said. "*How* do you do it. I still don't understand how you... do it. How you can work so hard to resist what you...*are*. Please don't misunderstand, it's great that you do it, I just don't see why you would bother in the first place."

He hesitated before answering, trying hard not to roll his eyes. "That is a very good question, and you are not the first one to ask it. The others—the majority of our kind who are quite content with our destiny—they, too, wonder at how we live. But you see, just because we've been dealt a certain hard... well, it doesn't mean that we can't choose to rise above—to conquer the boundaries of a destiny that none of us wanted, that none of us chose to want. To try to retain whatever essential humanity we can."

I lay unmoving, locked in awed silence. I had never heard someone lay it out there so... so raw like that.

"Did you fall asleep?" He whispered after a few minutes.

"No... "

Is that all you were curious about?"

I rolled my eyes. "Not in the slightest." I had to resist the urge to pounce on him, and sat on my

hands.

"What else do you want to know?"

"Why can you read minds—why only you? And Alice, seeing the future... that's really weird."

I felt him shrug in the darkness, displacing its ink. "We don't really know. Carlisle has a theory... he believes that we all bring something of our strongest human traits with us into the next life, where they are multiplied, intensified—like our minds, and our senses. He thinks that I must have already been very sensitive to those around me. And that Alice knew some things, at one point."

"What did he bring into the next life, and the others?"

"Carlisle brought how nice he is. Esme brought her ability to love, passionately. Emmett brought how much he hates bears, Rosalie her..." Fredward blushed.

"Her what?" I urged him on.

Well, she's sort of... a bit of a... kind of a bit—" he gasped at himself. "Kind of strong-minded," he finished. "Jasper is very interesting. He was quite cool in his first life, able to influence those around him to see things his way. Now he's *really* cool, and actually able to manipulate the emotions of those around him—calm down a room of angry people, for example, or excite a lethargic crowd, conversely, on the other hand. It's a very subtle gift."

I considered the impossibilities he described, trying to fathom it all. He waited patiently while I thought.

"So where did it all start? I mean, Carlisle changed you, and then someone must have changed him, and on, and on, and on..."

"Well, where did *you* come from? Evolutionism? Creationism? Couldn't we have evolved in the same way as other species, predator and prey? Or, if you don't believe that all this miraculous and beautiful world could have just happened on its own,²⁹¹ which is hard for me to accept myself, is it so hard to believe that the same force that created the delicate angelfish with the shark, the baby seal and the whale clubber, could create both our kinds together?"

"Let me get this right—I'm the baby seal, right?"

"Right." He laughed, and something touched my hair—my lips?

I wanted to turn toward him, to see if I could make it *his* lips on my hair. But I had to be good; I didn't want to make this any harder for him than it already was.

"Are you ready to sleep?" he asked, interrupting the short silence. "Or do you have any more questions?"

"Only a bazillion more or two."

"We have tomorrow, and the next day, and the next..." he reminded me. I smiled, euphoric at the thought of our infinite futures.

"Are you sure you won't vanish in the morning?" I wanted this to be certain, as I was still unclear. "You are mythical, after all."

"I won't leave you." His voice had the seal of a promise on it.

"One more, then, tonight..." And I blushed. The darkness was no help—I'm sure he could feel the sudden warmth under my hand-skin.

"What was it?"

"No, forget it. I Changed My Mind."

"Bella, you can ask me *anything*."

I didn't answer, and he groaned.

"I keep thinking it will get less frustrating not hearing your thoughts. But it just gets worse and worse and *worse*."

291. Q. Why is the banana so ergonomically designed for the monkey's hand?

A. Because God has a Masters in product design.

"I'm glad you can't read my thoughts. It's bad enough that you eavesdrop on my sleep-talking."

"Please?" His voice was so persuasive, so impossible to resist.

I shook my head.

"If you don't tell me, I'll just assume you don't love me," he threatened darkly. "You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"Well," I began, glad that he couldn't see my face.

"Yes?"

"You said that Rosalie and Emmett will get married soon... Is that... marriage... the same as it is for humans?"

He laughed in earnest, practically barking his quiet laughter. "Is *that* what you're getting at?"

I fidgeted, unable to answer.

"Yes, I suppose it is much the same," he said. "I told them I was thinking about it, and they said I'd probably break your pelvis, among other things." He chuckled nervously.

"Oh," was all I could say.

"Was there a purpose behind your query?"

"Well, I did wonder... about you and me... someday..."

He was instantly serious, I could tell by the sudden stillness of his body. I froze, too.

"I don't think that... *that*... would be possible for us."²⁹²

"Because it would be too hard for you, if I were that... close?"

"That's certainly a problem. But that's not what I was thinking of. It's just that you are so soft, so fragile. I have to mind my actions every moment that we're together so that I don't hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by pounding too hard, for too long." His voice had become just a soft murmur. He moved his icy palm to rest it against my cheek. "If I was too hasty... if for one second I wasn't paying enough attention, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake. You don't realize how incredibly *breakable* you are. I can never, never afford to lose any kind of control when I'm with you."²⁹³

He waited for me to respond, growing anxious when I didn't. "Are you scared of me yet?" he asked.

I waited for a minute to answer, so the words would be true. "No. I'm fine."

He seemed to deliberate a moment. "I'm curious now, though," he said, his voice light again. "Have *you* ever...?" He trailed off suggestively.

"Of course not!" I flushed. "I told you I've never felt like this about anyone before, not even close."

"I know, I know. It's just that I know other people's thoughts. I know love and lust don't always keep the same company."

"Well they do for me, mister. I'm *human*." I crossed my arms. "Now I am, anyways." I sighed.

"That's nice. We have that one thing in common, at least." He sounded satisfied.

"Your human instincts..." I began. He waited. "Well, do you find me attractive, in *that* way, at all??"

He laughed and lightly ruffled my nearly dry hair.

"I may not be human, but I am a man," he assured me. "I've answered your questions, now you should sleep."

"I'm not sure I can..."

"Do you want me to leave?"

292. As part of the transition to their second life, male vampires develop a heavily barbed penis, which is only compatible with the female vampire's jelly vagina.

293. Please see discussion question #10.

"No!" I said too loudly.

He laughed, and then began to hum that same, unfamiliar lullaby; the voice of an archangel, soft in my ear.

More tired than I realized, exhausted from the long day of mental and emotional stress unlike any I'd never felt before, I drifted to sleep in his cold, dead arms.

15.

MY NEW BOYFRIEND

or

TELL ME ABOUT THE CULLENS

THE MUTED LIGHT OF YET ANOTHER CLOUDY DAY EVENTUALLY WOKE me. I lay with my arm across my eyes, groggy and dazed. Something, a dream trying to be remembered, struggled to break into my consciousness. I moaned and rolled on my one side, hoping more sleep would come. And then memories of the previous day flooded back into my awareness.

"Oh!" I sat up so fast it made my head spin.

"Your hair looks like a haystack... but I like haystacks." His unruffled voice came at me from a rocking chair in the corner.

"Fredward! You stayed!!" I rejoiced and thoughtlessly threw myself across the room and into his lap. In the instant that my thoughts caught up with my actions, I froze, shocked by my out-of-control enthusiasm. I stared up at him, afraid that I had crossed his line.

But he laughed.

"Of course," he answered, startled, but seemingly pleased by my reaction. His hands rubbed my neck.

I laid my head cautiously against his left shoulder, breathing in the smell of the left side of his neck.

"I was sure it was a dream," I admitted.

"You're not that creative," he scoffed dreamily.

"Charlie!" I remembered, thoughtlessly jumping up again and heading to the door.

"He left an hour ago—after detaching your battery cables, I might add. I have to admit I was disappointed. Is that really all it would take to stop you from a Seattle Saturday, if you were determined to go?"

I deliberated where I stood, wondering what Charlie knew. Did he know?

"You're not usually this confused in the morning," he noted. He held his arms open for me to return. His arms were irresistible.

"I need another human minute," I admitted.

"I'll wait," he groaned, wrapping his arms around himself.

I skipped to the bathroom, my emotions unrecognizable. I didn't know myself, inside or out. Was I here? Was I there? I was *changing*. The man in the mirror was practically a stranger—eyes too bright, hot spots of red across his cheekbones. After I brushed my teeth, I worked to straighten out the tangled chaos that was my hair. I splashed my face with cold water and tried to breathe normally, without success. I half-ran back to my room, barely managing to stay upright against my momentum. It seemed like a miracle that he was still there, arms still waiting for me. They uncurled from his torso and reached out, and my heart thumped unsteadily.

"Welcome back," he murmured, his arms taking me in.

They rocked me for a while in silence, until I noticed that his clothes were changed, his hair smooth.

"You left?" I accused, devastated, touching the collar of his fresh shirt and imagining all the things he could've been doing all night instead of watching me sleep.

"I could hardly leave in the clothes I came in—what would the neighbors think?"

I pouted. "I don't *have* any neighbors," I said.

"I didn't—"

"Plus, Fredward, you can, like, fly. Even if I had neighbors..."

"Bella," he said softly. "That's not the point. You were very deeply asleep; I didn't miss anything." His eyes gleamed. "I'd already heard everything I needed to hear."

I groaned. I couldn't believe he had been listening to me talk again. "What did you hear?"

His gold eyes grew very soft. "You said you loved me still."

"You knew that already," I reminded him.

"It was still nice to hear."

I hid my face against his shoulder, hoping he would never find it.

"I love you still," I whispered.

"You are my life now," he answered elegantly.

There was nothing more to say for the moment. He rocked us back and forth in the rocking chair as the room grew lighter.

"And now?" I asked playfully, once we had been silent for almost two minutes.

"You are still my life," he assured me, almost without words.

Another few minutes passed.

"Breakfast time," he said eventually, casually—to prove, I'm sure, that he remembered all my human frailties.

So I clutched my throat with both hands and stared at him with wide eyes. Shock crossed his face.

"Kidding!" I snickered. "And you said I couldn't act. Well, I just proved I *can* act."

He frowned in disgust. "That wasn't funny."

I shrugged. "It was very funny, and you know it. Besides, you're not funny either."

He looked as though he had been hit across the face. "I am *too* funny," he assured me, contorting his body into the shape of a waffle in an attempt to outdo me.

"Oh, okay," I said, getting his drift.

He threw my body over one of his stone shoulders gently, but with a swiftness that pummeled my abdomen and knocked the wind out of me. I protested silently as he carried me down the stairs but he ignored me, sitting me right-side-up on a chair when we got to the kitchen.

"What's for breakfast?" I asked.

That threw him for a minute.

"Er, I'm not sure. What would you like?" His marble brow puckered.

I grinned wildly, hopping up.

"That's all right, I fend for myself pretty well. I'm actually a pretty good cook," I admitted. It was time he knew about more of my hidden skills.

I found a bowl and a box of Lunky Charms. I could feel his eyes on me as I poured the milk slowly and perfectly into the bowl with one hand and grabbed a spoon out of the drawer with my free one. I sat my bowl on the table with a little bit of spin and then flipped the spoon into the bowl.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked, feeling his eyes on me.

He rolled his eyes. "There's nothing in this room I want to eat, Bella. Besides you."

I laughed and sat at the table, watching him as I took a bite. He was gazing at me, studying my every movement, no doubt impressed. It made me self-conscious. I cleared my mouth to speak, to distract him.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" I asked.

"HMMMMMM... mmm?" I watched him frame his answer carefully. "What would you say to meeting the Cullens?"

I gulped a big one and spooned another delicious marshmallow into my mouth.

He paused when I didn't respond. "What would you say to meeting... *my vampire family*?"

I coughed, sputtering chewed oat and marshmallow across the table. My eyes widened out of control and I couldn't get my lips to say anything.

"Are you afraid of me... now?" He sounded hopeful.

"Yes," I admitted; how could I deny it—my eyes were like two twin oceans of truth.

"Don't worry," he smirked. "I'll protect you."

"I'm not afraid of *them*," I explained. "I'm afraid they won't like me the way... you do. Won't they be, well, surprised that you would bring someone... *human*... home to meet...*them*? Do they know that I know about them? Do they know about me?"

"Oh, they already know everything. They'd taken bets yesterday, you know, five dollars"—he smiled, but his voice was harsh—"on whether I'd bring you back, though why anyone would bet against Alice, I can't imagine. After all, she *is* a psychic. Anyway, they clearly have no idea how deeply I love you but I'm thinking maybe, if you come over, and they see how much we love each other, it will be clear how much we love each other. No one believes me when I say it, no one understands how much I love you and that I will never hurt you. I just want to show them. I just want to feel understood." He looked down. "At any rate, we don't have secrets in the family. It's not really feasible, what with my mind reading and Alice seeing the future and all that."

"And Jasper making you feel all warm and fuzzy about spilling your guts, don't forget that." I smiled, thinking of his guts.

"You paid attention when I talked to you," he smiled approvingly, feeling understood.

"I've been known to pay attention to you every now and then," I grimaced. "So did Alice see me coming?"

His reaction was strange. "Something like that," he said uncomfortably, turning away so I couldn't see whatever was happening when he turned away. I stared at him curiously.

"Is that any good?" he asked, turning back to me abruptly and making eyes at my breakfast cereal with an agonized, ravenous look on his face. "Honestly, it doesn't look very appetizing."

"Well, I understand that it's not my ripped open, half-dead body..." I joked, ignoring him when he glowered. I was still wondering why he responded that way when I mentioned Alice. I hurried through my meal, speculating for more marshmallows.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen, the statue of Adonis again, staring abstractedly out the back windows.

Then his eyes were back on me, and his lips smiled his heartbreaking smile.

"And you should introduce me to your father, too, I think."

"He already knows you," I reminded him.

"As your boyfriend, I mean."

I stared at him with suspicion. "Why would I do that?"

"Isn't that customary?" he asked innocently.

"I don't know," I admitted. It was time he knew that there were some things I didn't know. My dating history gave me few reference points to work with. Not that any normal rules of dating applied now that I was dating someone that didn't originate from Creationism. "That's not necessary, you know. I don't expect you to... I mean, you don't have to pretend for me."

His smile was patented.²⁹⁴ "I'm not pretending."

I pushed the remains of my cereal around the edges of bowl, biting my lip and looking for answers!

"Are you going to tell Charlie I'm your boyfriend or not?" he demanded, throwing his fist onto the table and making my cereal jump.

"Is that what you are?" I suppressed my internal cringing at the thought of the questions Charlie might ask me if he knew I had a boyfriend.

"It's a loose interpretation of the word 'boy,' I'll admit."

"I was under the impression that you were something more, actually," I confessed, looking under the table.

"Well, I don't know if we need to give him all the gory details." He reached across the table to lift my chin with a cold, hard finger. "But he will need some explanation for why I'm around here so much, why I never go home, what I'm doing in your room while you sleep. I don't want Chief Duck getting a restraining order put on me."

"Will you be?" I asked, suddenly anxious. "Will you really be here all the time?"

"As long as you want me to be," he said in a hushed tone.

"I'll always want you," I said, the blood rushing to my head. "Forever."

He stood from his chair and slowly walked around the table, and, pausing a few feet away, reached out to touch his fingertips to my cheek. His expression was unimaginable.

"Does that make you sad?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He stared into my eyes for an eternity, falling into and getting lost in my depths.

"Are you finished?" he finally asked.

"I could ask you the same thing!" I chortled.

He stared at me, still fond of my jawline.

I laughed nervously and jumped up. "Yes!"

It was hard to decide what to wear. I doubted there were any etiquette books detailing how to dress when your vampire sweetheart takes you home to meet his vampire family.

I ended up in my only skirt—long, khaki-colored, still casual. I put on the dark blue blouse he'd once, and only once, complimented. A quick glance in the mirror told me my hair was entirely impossible, let alone implausible, so I pulled it back into a ponytail.

"Okay." I bounced down the stairs. "I'm decent."

He was waiting at the foot of the stairs, closer than I'd thought, and I bounced right into him. He steadied me and then leaned in.

"Wrong again," he murmured in my ear. "You are *utterly* indecent—no one should look so tempting, it's not fair."

"T-t-tempting how?" I asked. "I can change... "

He sighed, shaking his head. "You are *so* absurd. We don't even eat people anymore." He pressed his cool lips delicately to my forehead, and the room spun. The smell of his breath made it impossible to think.²⁹⁵

"Shall I explain how you are tempting me?" he said. It was clearly a rhetorical question.²⁹⁶ His fingers traced slowly down my spine, his breath coming more quickly all over my skin. My hands were limp on his chest, like fish, and I felt light-headed again. He tilted his head slowly and touched his cool

294. Patent pending.

295. The combination of Fredward's vampiric scent, crimson diet and poor dental hygienics have left his mouth smelling like a perfumed abattoir.

296. Fredward has no desire for Bella's permission.

lips to mine for the second time, very carefully, parting them slightly. It felt like...

...a kiss?

And then I collapsed.

"Bella? Bella?" His voice was alarmed as he caught me and shook me back into consciousness.

"You... made... me... faint!" I accused him dizzily.

"*What am I going to do with you?*" He groaned in all italics. "Yesterday I kiss you, and you attack me! Today you pass out on me!"

I laughed weakly,²⁹⁷ letting his arms support me while my head spun.

"So much for being good at everything," he sighed.

"That's the problem," I was still dizzy. "You're *too* good at everything. Far, far too good."

"Do you feel sick?" he asked; he'd seen me like this before, earlier, at the Forks High School.

"No—that wasn't the same kind of fainting at all. I don't know what happened." I shook my head apologetically. "I think I forgot to breathe."

"I can't take you anywhere like this."

"It's not like I'm dizzy *all* the time, Fredward." I rolled my eyes, but it only made me more dizzy. "Your family is going to think I'm insane anyway, what's the difference?"

He measured my expression for a moment. "I'm very partial to that color with your skin," he offered unexpectedly, complimenting my blouse yet again. I flushed with pleasure, and looked away.

"Look, I'm trying really hard not to think about what I'm about to do, so can we go already?" I asked.

"And you're worried, not because you're headed to meet a houseful of vampires, but because you think those vampires won't approve of you, is that correct?"

"That's right," I answered immediately, hiding my surprise at his casual use of the word.

He shook his head. "You're incredible. I've never met anyone like you."

I realized, as he drove out of the main part of town, that I had no idea where he lived. He'd always just driven up or droven away in that sleek, stylish, dependable Volvo of his. Being taken to his lair, in my Crap Truck of all things, was an irreplaceable experience and one which I experienced with both eyes open.

We passed over the bridge at the Calaway River, the bridge where Grammy Duck had had her accident, and followed the road winding northward, upward towards the Yukon territories that Grampy Duck had started his first colony in the last century. The houses flashing past us grew further and farther apart, getting bigger as we continued deeper into the territories. And then we were past the other houses altogether, driving through the fern and trees of the misty forest. I was trying to decide whether to ask or be patient, whether to say this was taking forever or just think it, when he turned abruptly into an unpaved road. It was unmarked, barely visible among the forest of ferns. The fern-forest encroached on both sides, leaving the road ahead only discernible for a few meters as it twisted, serpentlike, around the ancient trees.²⁹⁸

And then, after a few miles, there was some thinning of the woods, and we were suddenly in a small meadow; or was it actually a lawn? The gloom of the forest didn't relent though, for there were six primordial cedars that shaded an entire acre with their vast sweep of branches. The trees held their protective shadow right up to the walls of the house, making obsolete the deep porch that wrapped around the first story.

I don't know what I had expected, I guess a cave, but it definitely wasn't this. The house was timeless, graceful, beautiful, lusty, and probably about a hundred years old. It was painted a soft, faded

297. Normally Bella laughs daily, but... ha ha! Cha-ching! Just kidding folks! I'll be here all week.

298. An allusion to the caduceus, a symbol of Hermes, who is the god and protector of merchants, shepherds and other lowlife scum.

white, three stories tall, rectangular and well-proportioned. The windows and doors were either part of the original structure or a perfect restoration, but either way they were great. My car was the only truck in sight. I could hear the river close by, hidden in the obscurity of the forest.

"Wow." I wondered if he—if *we*—would inherit it when his parents died but then shook my head: vampires don't die.

"You like it?" He smiled.

"It... has a certain charm."

He pulled the end of my ponytail twice and chuckled.

"Ready, dummy?" he asked, opening my door.

"Not even a little bit—let's go." I tried to laugh, but it seemed stuck in my throat. I smoothed my hair nervously.

"You look lovely." He took my hand easily without thinking about it.²⁹⁹

We walked through the deep shade up to the porch. I knew he could feel my tension; his thumb rubbed soothing circles into the back of my hand, telling me his thoughts.

He opened the door for me.

The inside was even more inspiring and less predictable than the exterior. It was very bright, very open, and *very* large. This must have originally been several rooms, but the walls had been removed from most of the first floor to create one wide space. The back, south-facing wall had been entirely replaced with glass, big glass, exposing a view that showed, beyond the shade of the cedars, a lawn which stretched bare and unadorned all the way to the river. A massive, sensual staircase dominated the west side of the room. The walls, the high-beamed ceiling, the wooden floors, and the thick carpets were all varying shades of white.

Waiting to greet us, standing just to the left of the door, under a chandelier in the morning sunlight, on a raised dais by a spectacular but black grand piano, were Fredward's vampire parents.

I'd seen Dr. Cullen before, of course, yet I couldn't help but be struck again by his youth, his outrageous perfection. At his side was Esme, I assumed, the only one of the family I'd never seen before. She had the same pale, beautiful features as the rest of them. Something about her heart-shaped face, her billows of soft, caramel hair, reminded me of the ingenues of the silent-movie era. She was small, slender, yet less angular, more rounded and fat than the others. They were both dressed casually, in light colors that matched the inside of the house.³⁰⁰ They smiled in welcome.

"Welcome," they said, spreading their arms.

"Carlisle, Esme," Fredward began, "this... is *Bella*."

"You're very welcome, Bella." Welcome for *what*? I wondered. Carlisle's step was measured carefully as he approached me. He raised his hand tentatively, moving it up and down as though shaking hands with a ghost. I stepped forward to grasp his hand.

"It's nice to see you again, Dr. Cullen," I said.

"Please, call me Carbomb."

"Carbomb." I grinned at him, getting the joke. I could feel Fredward's relief at my side, as if it were an entity separate from his being.

Esme smiled and stepped forward as well, reaching for my hand. Her cold, stone clasp was just as I expected...

"It's very nice to know you," she said with a wink.

"Thank you. I'm glad to... to meet you, too." And I was. It was like meeting a fairy tale—Snow White—or Quasimodo—in the flesh.

"Where are Alice and Jasper?" Fredward asked, but no one answered, as they had just appeared

299. Little did Bella know, Fredward had planned it all along.

300. Did the Cullens decorate to match their wardrobe, or buy their wardrobe to match the house?

at the top of the curvaceous staircase.

"Hey, Fredward!" Alice grunted enthusiastically. She ran down the stairs like a track star, a streak of black hair and white skin, coming to a sudden and graceful stop in front of me. Carbomb and Esme shot warning glances at her, but I liked it. All of it. It was all-natural and 100% real.

"Hi, Bella!" Alice yelled in my face, and she bounced forward to kiss my cheek. If Carbomb and Esme had looked cautious before, they now looked staggered, standing against the wall next to each other and clenching their fists at their sides. There was a shock in my eyes, too, but I was also very pleased that she seemed to approve of me so entirely. I felt Fredward stiffen on my side. I glanced at his face, but his expression was unreadable...

"You do smell nice, I never noticed before," she commented to my extreme embarrassment.

No one else seemed to know quite what to say, as we had already covered our names and it was pretty obvious that everyone was aware that they wanted to eat me. And then Jasper was there—tall and leonine.³⁰¹ A feeling of ease spread through me, a kind of vampire's soothing venom emitted from his essence, and I was suddenly comfortable despite where I was. Fredward glared at Jasper, raising one of his many eyebrows, and I remembered what Jasper could do...

"Hello, Bella," Jasper said. He kept his distance too, not offering to shake my hand. But it was impossible to feel awkward near him; I swooned.

"Hello, Casper," I smiled at him shyly, and then at all the others. "It's nice to meet you all. You have a very nice home.

"Thank you," Esme said. "We're so glad that you... came." She spoke with feeling, and I realized that she thought I was brave.

I also realized that Rosalie and Emmett were nowhere to be seen—at least by my human eyes—and I remembered Fredward's too-innocent denial when I'd asked him if the others didn't want to be my friends.

Carbomb's expression distracted me from this train of thought; he was gazing meaningfully at Fredward with an intense expression. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Fredward nod once.

I looked away, trying to be polite. My eyes wandered again to the beautiful instrument on the platform by the door. I suddenly remembered being a child and having the fantasy that, should I ever win the lottery, I would buy a grand piano for my mother. She wasn't really good³⁰²—she only played for herself on our secondhand upright—but I loved her; she was my mother.

She'd put me through lessons, of course, but like most kids I whined until she let me quit.

Esme noticed my preoccupation with her piano.

"Do you play Chopin?" she asked, inclining her head toward the piano dramatically.

I shook my head. "No."

"No," she laughed. "Fredward didn't tell you he was... *musical*?"

"No," I glared at his suddenly innocent expression with narrowed eyes. "I should have known, I guess."

Esme raised her delicate eyebrows in confusion.

"Fredward can do *everything*—and he can to it *really good*," I confessed.

Jasper snickered and Esme gave Fredward a reproving look as Fredward glared at Jasper.

"I hope you haven't been showing off—it's rude," she scolded motherly.

"Just a bit," he laughed. Her face softened at the sound, and they shared a brief look that I didn't understand.

"He's been too modest, actually," I corrected. "In fact, I'm sure there are tons of things that he does real good that he hasn't even shown me yet..."

301. Liony.

302. As a mother

"Well, play for her," Esme encouraged.

"You just said showing off was rude," he objected.

"There are exceptions to every rule, Fredward," she replied, gesturing at me. Everyone in the room felt an overwhelming, unimaginable sense of understanding. I looked at Jasper and saw he was nodding his head sagely.

"It's settled, then," Esme pushed him toward the piano. He pulled me along, sitting me on the bench beside him.

Fredward gave me a long, exasperated look before he turned to the keys.

And then his fingers flowed swiftly across the ivory, and the room was filled with a composition so complex, so luxuriant, so *musical*, that it was impossible to believe only one set of hands played. I heard my chin drop, my mouth open in astonishment, and low chuckles behind me at my reaction.

Fredward looked at me casually, the music still surging around us without a break, and winked. "Do you like it?" He asked, still playing.

"You wrote this?" I gasped, understanding.

He nodded. "It's Esme's favorite."

I closed my eyes, shaking his head.

"What's wrong?" He asked, still playing. The piece he was playing, which I later learned was called "Clair de Esme," began to escalate in complexity and tonal quality.

"I'm feeling extremely insignificant."

The music slowed, transforming into something softer, and to my surprise I detected the melody of his lullaby weaving through the profusion of notes.

"You inspired this one," he said softly. The music grew unbearably sweet, full of grace notes and runs; his fingers spanned the keys like his music surveyed all parts of human existence.

And then I couldn't speak.

"They like you, you know," he said conversationally. "Esme especially."

I glanced behind me, but the huge room was empty now. It seemed even huger for that reason.

"Where did they go?"

"Very subtly giving us some privacy, I suppose."

I sighed, thinking about how my life had been more perfect in the last few moments than it probably ever would be again. "They like me, but Rosalie and Emmett..." I trailed off, not sure how to express my doubts.

He frowned. "No doubts. Don't worry about Rosalie," he said, eyes wide and persuasive, looking directly into mine, not even needing to watch his hands on the piano keys. He took one of his hands from the piano and set it gently on my cheek, the music still ebbing and flowing through every kind of human emotion. "Rosalie is just a bitch," he said sweetly.

I pursed my lips skeptically. "And Emmett?"

"Emmett is a whipped little pussy." He whispered. "He doesn't have a problem with you. He's trying to reason with Rosalie."

"What is it that upsets her?"

He sighed deeply. "Rosalie struggles the most with what we are. It's hard for her to have someone on the outside know the truth. And she's a little jealous."

"Rosalie is jealous of *me*?" I asked incredulously. I tried to imagine a universe in which someone as breathtaking as Rosalie would have any possible reason to feel jealous of someone like me.

"You're human." He shrugged. "She wishes that she were, too."

"Oh," I muttered, still stunned. "Even Jasper, though."

"That's really my fault," he said. "I told you he was the most recent to try our way of life. I

warned him to keep his distance."

I suddenly remembered the reason for that, and shuddered.

"Esme and Carbomb...?" I continued quickly, to keep him from noticing.

"Are happy to see me happy," he said, completing my sentence. "Actually, Esme wouldn't care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time she's been worried about me, afraid that there was something missing from my essential makeup,³⁰³ that I was too young when Carbomb changed me... She's ecstatic. Every time I touch you, she just about chokes with satisfaction."³⁰⁴

"Alice seems very... enthusiastic."

"Alice has her own way of looking at things," he said through tight lips. "Her own way at looking at... you."

"And you're not going to explain that, are you?"

A moment of wordless communication passed between us. He realized that I knew he was keeping something from me, and I realized he wasn't going to tell me what it was. Not now, maybe not ever. I scowled into his frigid beauty.

"So what was 'Carbomb' telling you before?"

His eyebrows pulled tighter. "Oh, you noticed that, did you?"

I shrugged hard, never breaking eye contact. "Of course."

He looked at me thoughtfully for a few seconds before answering. "He wanted to tell me some news—news that he didn't know whether you were worth being told."

"Well am I?"

He looked at me thoughtfully again, gauging. Things had never been this intense between us before and I wondered why not. "I suppose, if only because I'm going to be a little... over-bearing for the next few days—or weeks—or however long it takes—and I wouldn't want you to think I'm naturally a tyrant."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Things seemed back to normal. "What's wrong?" I asked him.

"Nothing, per se. Maybe something. Alice just sees some visitors coming soon, on account of her psychic-vision ability. These visitors have heard of us, and they're curious."

"Visitors? Curious?"

"Yes... well, they aren't like us, of course—in diet, I mean. They still eat people, and you're one of those and, you know... ?"

I shivered, shaking my head and wishing that I didn't know.

"Finally, a rational response!" he murmured. "I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all."

I let that one pass, looking away to watch it float by, my eyes wandering around that spacious modern room.

He followed my gaze. "Not what you expected, is it?" He asked, his voice smug.

"No," I admitted. To be honest, I hadn't expected anything.

"No coffins, no skulls piled in the corners; I don't even think we have cobwebs... what a disappointment this must be for you," he continued slyly.

I didn't know what to say to that, although it seemed like it would be impossible to convince him that I hadn't actually thought ahead as to what his vampire house would look like. I struggled to compliment the place. "It's so light... so open."

He was more serious than he'd ever been when he answered. "It's the one place we never have to hide from vampire profiling."

The song he was still playing, my song, drifted to an end, the final chords shifting to a more

303. The straight gene.

304. A symptom of rapidly diffusing gay panic.

melancholy key. The last note hovered poignantly in the silence.

"Thank you," I murmured. I realized there were tears in my eyes. I dabbled at them, embarrassed by my humanity.

He touched the corner of my eye, trapping one I missed. He lifted his finger, examining the drop of moisture broodingly. Then, in a flash, he dabbed it onto the corner of his eye and let it run down.

I looked at him questioningly, and he gazed back for a long moment before he finally smiled.

"Do you want to see the rest of the house?"

"No coffins?" I verified, not sure he would hear the sarcasm in my voice.

He laughed, shaking his head and taking my hand. "No coffins," he promised, still chuckling at my joke.

We walked up the massive staircase, my hand trailing along the satin-smooth rail. The long hall at the top of the stairs was paneled with a tawny, golden wood, the same as the floorboards.

"Rosalie and Emmett's room... Carbomb's office... Alice's room..." He gestured at each as he led me past the doors.

He would have continued telling me where every door in the house led, but I'd stopped dead-hat at the end of the hall, staring incredulously at the ornament hanging on the wall above my head. Fredward chuckled at my bewildered³⁰⁵ face.

"You can laugh," he said. "It *is* sort of ironical."

I didn't laugh; I couldn't. My hand raised itself automatically, one finger at a time, extending as if to touch the large wooden cross, its dark patina contrasting with the lighter tone of the wall. Aged wood. I didn't touch it, though I was curious if it was silky.

"This aged wood must be very old, but silky," I said aloud.

He shrugged. "Silkwood from the early sixteen-thirties, more or less."

I looked away from the cross to stare at him.

"Why do you keep this here, Fredward? Why do you guys do this to yourselves?" I wondered aloud.

"Nostalgia. It belonged to Carbomb's father."

"He collected antiquities?" I suggested quietly.

"No. No, he carved this himself. He carved it and hung it on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he himself preached."

"Oh my goodness!" I wasn't sure if my face betrayed my shock, but I returned to gazing at the simple, ancient cross, just in case it did. I quickly did the mental math: the cross was around three hundred and sixty years old.³⁰⁶ The silence stretched on as I struggled to wrap my mind around the concept of so many years, and what they meant to my first vampire boyfriend.

"Are you all right?" He sounded worried.

I'd started holding my head, I was thinking so hard. "How old is Carbomb?" I asked quietly, ignoring his question, still staring up.

"He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty-second birthday," Fredward said. "He told us he wanted to do it big, so he took everyone go to Chuck E. Cheese to play skee-ball for five hours." I looked back at him, a million questions in my eyes.

He watched me carefully as he spoke.

305. As if it had gotten lost in the wilderness

306. An allusion to "360 deals," wherein a record label receives a static percentage of all proceeds earned by an artist from anything that has to do with their work or likeness. This includes record sales, merchandise sales, ticket sales, appearances on morning television, starring roles in film, book deals, activities done by alternate personalities or in alternate dimensions, etcetera.

"Carbomb was born in London, in the sixteen-thirties, he believes. Time wasn't marked accurately then as Advent calendars didn't exist and neither did animal charities or office supply stores. Not for the common people, at least. In any case it was just before Cromwell's rule, though."

I kept my face composed, aware of his scrutiny as I listened. He wanted me to look impressed that he knew about English people, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"He was the only son of an Anglican pastor.³⁰⁷ His mother died giving birth to him. His father was an intolerant man. As the Protestants came into power, he was enthusiastic in his persecution of Roman Catholics, witches, werewolves... and vampires." I grew very still at the word. "He believed very strongly in the reality of evil. And they burned a lot of innocent people in its pursuit—the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

"When the pastor grew old, he placed his obedient son in charge of the raids. At first Carbomb was a disappointment; he was not quick to accuse, to see demons where they did not exist. But he was persistent, and more cleverer than his own father. He actually discovered a real coven of true vampires that lived hidden in the sewers of the city, who only came out at night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends and film characters, that was the way many lived.

"The people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course"—his brief laugh was darker now—"and waited where Carbomb had seen the monsteres exit into the street. Eventually one emerged."

His voice was very quiet; I strained to catch the words.

"He must have been ancient, old, and weak from hunger. Carbomb heard him call out in Latin to the others when he caught the fragrant scent of the mob. He ran through the streets, and Carbomb—he was twenty-three and very fast—was in the lead of the pursuit. The creature could have easily outrun them, but Carbomb thinks he was too hungry, too drawn to the crowd's blood to run away from it. So he turned and attacked. He fell on Carbomb first, but the others were close behind, and he turned to defend himself. He killed two men, and made off with a third, leaving Carbomb bleeding in the street."

He paused. I could sense he was editing something, keeping yet another thing from me. I wondered what it was.

"Carbomb knew what his father would do. The bodies would be burned—anything infected by the monsteres must be destroyed. Not wanting to be destroyed, he acted instinctively. He crawled away from the alley into a cellar, buried himself in a pile of rotting potatoes and horse feces for three days. It's a miracle he was able to keep silent, to not cry out from the stench.

"It was over then, and he realized what he had become."

I wasn't sure what my face had revealed, but he suddenly broke it off.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I assured him. And, though I bit my lip in hesitation, he must have seen the curiosity burning up my eyes.

He smiled. "I expect you have a few more questions for me."

"A few."

His smile widened over his brilliant teeth like a dental dam. He started down the hall, pulling me along by the hand. His grip on my hand tightened and he started pulling really hard all of the sudden.

"Come on, then," he encouraged. "I'll show you..."

I screamed.

307. See Dusty Springfield's "Son of a Preacher Man" for a more in-depth treatment of this topic.

16.

CARBOMB

HE LED ME BACK TO THE ROOM THAT HE'D POINTED OUT was Carbomb's office, pausing outside the door for an instant coffee.

"Come in," Carbomb's voice invited.

Fredward opened the door to a high-ceilinged room with tall, west-facing windows. The walls were paneled again, in a darker wood—where they were visible. Most of the wall space was taken up by towering bookshelves that reached high above my head and held more books than a library.

The room was how I'd always imagined Fredward's fake father's would look—only Carbomb looked too young for the part. Carbomb sat behind the huge mahogany desk in leather pants. As we entered, he was just placing a bookmark in the pages of the extremely thick volume he held.

"What can I do for you?" he asked us pleasantly, his pants making a crinkling noise as he rose from his seat..

"I wanted to show Bella some of our history." Fredward admitted in a whisper. "If that's okay with you...!"

"I'm really busy right now, *Fredward*," said Carbomb. He turned to me. "I would love to catch up with you some other time, but I have a lot of really big books to read right now." He leaned towards me and opened the book he had been handling earlier, opening it to the place where he had booked marked it, showing me the page. It was full of complex, insane diagrams that I couldn't even begin to understand; no, I couldn't even tell where they began and where they ended. I nodded my head in admiration.

"I understand, Carbomb," I said.

"I knew you would," he retorted, giving me a huge smile. He then turned to Fredward and his smile turned suddenly crooked, as though it ran in the family; I noticed that Fredward was giving him the exact same smirk.

Just then, I noticed the fourth wall: the fourth wall was different from the others. Instead of bookshelves, this different wall was crowded with framed pictures of all sizes— and I mean all sizes—some in vibrant colors, others dull monochromes. I searched for some logic, some binding motif the items in the collection, but where was it? *What* was it?

Fredward pulled me toward the far left side, standing me in front of a small square oil painting in a plain wooden frame. This one did not stand out among the bigger and better pieces; painted in varying tones of sepia, it depicted a miniature city full of steeply slanted roofs, with thin spires atop the few scattered towers. A wide river filled the foreground fully, crossed by a bridge covered with structures that looked like tiny cathedrals.

"London in the sixteen-fifties," Fredward said.

"The London of my youth," Carbomb chuckled, slapping his thick olume onto his knee, a loud thump reverbrating throughout the study.

I felt puzzled, and leaned in to Fredward's personal space. "Did they have cameras in the eighteen-fifties?" I whispered.

Fredward smiled his crooked smile. "Bella, these are paintings."

I nodded without breathing.

"This is a story for Carbomb to tell... Will you tell it?" Fredward asked. I twisted all the way around to see Carbomb's reaction.

He met my glance and smiled. "I will," he replied. "But actually I already mentioned that I have a lot to do. The hospital called this morning—Dr. Sick is taking a snow day," he added, grinning at Fredward now.

It was a strange combination to absorb—the everyday concerns of a smalltown doctor stuck in the middle of a discussion of when they first used cameras to photograph London.

It was also unsettling to know that he spoke aloud only for my benefit.

After another warm smile, served up just for me, Carbomb left the room.

I stared at the little picture of Carbomb's hometown for a long moment.

"What happened then?" I finally asked, staring up at Fredward, who was watching me. "When he realized what had happened to him?"

He glanced back at the paintings, and I looked to see which image caught his interest now. It was a larger landscape in dull fall colors— an empty, shadowed meadow in a dark dark forest, with a dark craggy peak in the dank distance.

"When he knew what he had become," Fredward said quietly, "he rebelled against it. We all did. He tried to destroy himself. But that's not easily done."

"How?" I didn't mean to say it aloud, but the word broke through my shock.

"He jumped from great heights," Fredward told me this, his voice impressive. "First from a piano bench, then from a window, then from cliffs. He tried to drown himself, first in his bathtub, then his father's swimming pool, then in a full-blown ocean... but he was young to the new life, and very strong. His body would take on the traits of certain animals—for example, when he tried to jump off bridges, his body channeled the traits of an ant or a grasshopper... you know, something that doesn't die from long falls. Anyway, it is amazing that he was able to resist eating people when he was so new, so fresh, because the instinct is more powerful then. It takes over everything. But he was so repulsed by himself that he had the strength to try to kill himself with starvation."

"Is that possible?" My voice was faint.

"No, there are very few ways we can be killed." He paused. "When he tried to starve himself, he began to take on the traits of some extinct bird that could go without eating for a year."

I opened my mouth.

"So he grew very hungry, and eventually weak. He stayed as far as he could from human beings, recognizing that his willpower was weakening, too. For months he wandered by night, seeking the loneliest places to brood and loathe himself.

"One night, a herd of deer passed his hiding place. He was so wild with thirst that he attacked without a thought. His strength returned and he realized there was an alternative to being the vile monstere he always feared he was. Had he not eaten venison in his former life? Were deer not more than mere vegetables that had simply come alive? Over the next months, his new Philosophy was born. He could exist without being a Demon. He had found Himself again.

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

"To try to kill himself again?" I wondered aloud.

"People swim the Channel all the time, Bella," he reminded me patiently.

"Are you sure? It sounds kind of big."

"Yes, I'm sure. But swimming is easy for us—"

"Everything is easy for *you*," I griped, remembering the time he had made me faint by being so good at kissing."

He waited, his expression amused.

"I won't interrupt again, I promise."

He chuckled darkly, knowing the distinct value of a promise, and finished his sentence.

"Because, technically, we don't need to breathe... "

"You *what?*—" I began to accuse.

"No, no, you promised." He laughed, putting his cold finger lightly to my lips. "Do you want to hear the story or not?"

He lifted his hand, moving it to rest against my neck. The speed of my heart reacted to that, but I persisted.

"You don't have to *breathe?*" I demanded.

"No, it's not necessary. We simply do it to appear more... human."

"How long can you go without breathing?"

"Indefinitely, I suppose. I mean, I don't need to breathe to keep living, and I'm probably never going to die, so... "

"So you don't need to breathe *at all?*"

I wasn't paying attention to my own expression, but something in it made him grow somber. His hand dropped to his side and he stood very still, without breathing. His eyes intent on my face. The silence lengthened the sentence. His features were immobile as stone.

"What is it?" My hand whispered to his face as it glided down his marble cheeks.

His face softened beneath my hand, and he sighed. "I keep waiting for it to happen."

"For what to happen?"

"I know that at some point, something I tell you, or something you see me tell you, will be too much. And then you'll run away from me, screaming as you go." He smiled half a smile, the other side of his mouth bent into a frown, but his eyes were serious. "I won't stop you when you do this. I want it to happen, because I fear for your safety. Being your vampire boyfriend isn't easy, and yet... and yet, that's exactly what I want to be. The two desires are impossible to reconcile... " His eyes forged a trail to mine.

I put my finger to his lips, shushing him. "Then don't."

He smiled beneath my finger. "We'll see."

I tossed my head over my shoulder and giggled. "So, go on—Carlisle was swimming to France."

"Oh, yeah." His eyes skated toward another picture—the most colorful of them all, the most ornately framed, and the fattest; it was twice as wide as the door it hung next to. The canvas featured four figures high above a throng of people, robes billowing in a stately breeze that carried their fabric over balcony, around pillars and into the crowd. I couldn't tell if it represented Greek mythology, or if the characters floating in the clouds above were meant to be the dead people.

"Carbomb swam to France and continued on through Europe, stopping at all the major universities. By day he donned a thick cloak and a mustache made from horsehair and would attend lectures lectured by best and brightest of the West. By night he studied music, science, medicine—and found his calling, his passion, in that: in saving human lives." His expression became awed, almost reverent. "I can't adequately describe the artist's struggle; his toil took him through the centuries, from a ravenous hunger to his perfectly poised self-control. Now he is all but immune to the scent of blood, and he is able to pursue his calling without agony. He finds a great deal of peace there, at the hospital..." Fredward stared off into space for a long moment. Suddenly he seemed to recall his own purpose. He tapped his finger against the huge painting in front of us.

"He was studying in *Italia* when he discovered the others there. They were much more civilized and educated than the wraiths of the London sewers."

He touched a comparatively sedate quartet of figures painted on the highest balcony, looking

down calmly on the mayhem of cloth and pillars below them. I examined the grouping carefully and realized, with a startled laugh, that I had seen that golden-haired man before—in this very room, in fact.

"Solimena was greatly inspired by Carbomb's friends. He often painted them as gods. If only he'd known..." Fredward chuckled over his shoulder. "Aro, Marcus, Caius," he said, indicating the other three, two black-haired, one snowy-white. "Nighttime patrons of the arts."

"Waht happen them?" I wondered aloud, fingertip tracing the curves in the painted fabric.

"Don't touch that!" He lightly swatted my hand away, and then recoiled. I pouted and he said, "Bella, I'm sorry for hitting you. It is just really bad for paintings if you rub them."

"I know."

A look of mystery overtook his face. "Then why did you touch it?"

"I don't know."

He looked at me and I looked at him, both of us regarding the other with some ineffable feeling. Fredward sighed and turned back to the painting.

"Anyways, they're still there, as they have been for who knows how many millenia. Carbomb stayed with them only for a short time, just a few decades. He greatly admired their civility, their refinement, but they persisted in trying to cure his aversion to 'his natural food source,' as they called it. They tried to persuade him, as he tried *them*, but nobody could be persuaded in the end, and so Carlisle decided to try the New World. He dreamed of finding others like himself. He was very lonely, you see."

"He doesn't seem very lonely," I said, picking at a loose thread on the couch.

"No, back then he was lonely."

"Oh, okay."

"He didn't find anyone for a long time. But, as monsteres became the stuffing of fairy tales, he found he could interact with unsuspecting humans without being suspected of anything. He began practicing medicine in earnest, then. But the companionship he craved evaded him; he couldn't risk familiarity."

"Or family!"

"Bella, are you even listening?"

I looked up from the couch I'd been picking and realized I hadn't been listening at all. "Of course I am," I said as I withdrew my hand.

Fredward gave me a look, like he wanted to tell me again about how much he wished he could read my mind, but instead continued on to the next painting. The sky was black and underneath were brick buildings covered with people vomiting blood. "When the influenza epidemic hit, he was working nights in a hospital in Chicago. He'd been turning over an idea in his brain for several years, and he had almost decided to act—since he couldn't find a companion, he would make one. He wasn't absolutely sure how his own transformation had occurred, so he was hesitant. And he was loathe to steel someone's life the way his had been girded. It was in that frame of mind that he found me. There was no hope for me; I had the influenza. He had nursed my parents, and knew I was alone. And so he decided to try..."

His voice, nearly a whisper now, trailed off. He stared unseeingly into his own past, through the eastern windows. I wondered which images filled his mind now, Carlisle's memories or his own. Both, I decided. He was thinking about both.

When he turned back to me, a gentle angel-like angel's smile radiated down from his expression.

"And so we've come full circle," he concluded.

"Have you always stayed with Carlisle, then?" I wondered.

"Almost always." He put his hand lightly on my waist and pulled me with him as he walked through the door. I stared back at the wall of pictures, a lifetime in oils, wondering if I would ever get to have one about me.

Fredward didn't say any more as we walked down the hall, so I asked, "Almost?"

He sighed, reluctant to answer. "Well, I had a typical bout of rebellious adolescence—about ten years after I was 'born'... created... whatever you want to call it. I wasn't sold on his life of abstinence, and I resented him for curbing my appetite. So at the tender age of ten, I fell off the wagon.

"Really?" I was intrigued, rather than frightened, as I had never imagined his soul ever being so troubled.

He could tell. I vaguely realized that we were headed up the next flight of stairs, but I wasn't paying much attention to my surroundings.

"That doesn't repulse you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I guess it sounds... reasonable."

"Reasonable?!" He barked a laugh, more loudly than before. We were at the top of the stairs now, in another paneled hallway.

"From the time of my second birth," he muttered, "I had the advantage of knowing what everyone around me was thinking, both human and non-human alike. That's why it took me ten years to defy Carbomb—I could read his perfect mind, its perfect sincerity, and understood why he lived the way he did.

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

I shivered, remembering my own dark alley—empty in the night, a frightened girl, the dark man behind her. And my Fredward, terrible and glorious as a young god in a chariot of Volvo, unstoppable. Would she have been as grateful as I was, that girl, or more frightened than before? I smiled, already knowing the answer.

"But as time went on, I began to see the monster in my eyes. It couldn't escape me and I couldn't escape its debt in human lives, no matter how justified. And I went back to Carlisle and Esme. They welcomed me back like the prodigal son I was.³⁰⁸ It was more than I deserved."

We'd come to a stop in front of the last door in the hall.

"My room," he informed me, opening it and pulling me through.

His room faced south, with a wall-sized window like the piano room below. The whole back side of the house must be glass, I thought. His view looked down on the winding Sol Duc River, across the untouched forest to the Olympiad Mountain range. The mountains were much closer than I would have believed, had he told me.³⁰⁹

308. A reference to *Caine and Abel* (1985), an American buddy comedy about two brothers who couldn't be more different. The film's climaxes when Abel returns from a particularly long party and their father gives him Caine's would-be birthday present: a new wife. With his birthday only days away, Caine has no choice but to murder his own brother if he is to ensure himself a happy birthday.

309. From an earlier, hypothetical conversation:

FREDWARD

I live really close to the mountains.

The western wall was completely covered with shelf after shelf of compact discs. His room was better stocked than a music store. In the corner was a sophisticated-looking sound system, the kind I was afraid to touch because I was sure that Fredward might slap me again. There was no bed, only a wide, soft, and inviting black leather sofa. The floor was covered from head to toe with a thick, tawny golden carpet, and the walls were hung well with heavy fabric in a slightly darker shade.

"Good acoustics?" I guessed.

He chuckled, picked up a remote and turned the stereo on. It was quiet, but the soft jazz number sounded exactly like Clair De Lune. I went over to get my mind boggled by his music collection.

"How do you have these organized?" I asked, unable to find any rhyme or reason to the titles.

"Ummm, by year, and then by the extent to which their musical features deviate from Clair De Lune," he said absently.

I turned, and he was looking at me with a peculiar expression in his eyes.

"What?"

"I was prepared to feel... relieved. Having you know about everything, not needing to keep them secrets from you. But I didn't expect to feel more than that. I didn't expect to like it. I didn't expect it to make me...happy." He shrugged, liking it.

"I'm glad," I said, smiling. I'd worried that he might regret telling me these things. It was good to know that wasn't the case.

But then, as his eyes dissected my expression, his smile faded into a crease on his forehead.

"You're still waiting for the running and the screaming, aren't you?" I guessed.

A faint smile touched his lips, and he nodded. I smiled. "I hate to bust all over your bubble, but you're really not as scary as you think you are. I don't find you scary at all, actually."

He stopped, eyebrows aflame in blatant disbelief. Then he flashed a wide, wicked smile.

"You *really* shouldn't have said that," he chuckled.

He growled, a low sound in the back of his throat. I felt a tingly feeling as his lips curled back over his perfect teeth. His body shifted suddenly, half-crouched, tensed like a lion about to pounce.

I backed away from him, glaring. He was so annoying sometimes.

"You wouldn't."

I didn't see him leap at me—it was much too fast. I only found myself suddenly airborne³¹⁰ and then we crashed onto the sofa without an invitation, knocking it into the wall several times. All the while, his arms formed an iron cage of protection around me—I was barely jostled. But I was still gasping as I tried to right myself.

He wasn't having that. He curled me into a ball against his chest, holding me more securely than iron chains. I glared at him in alarm, but he seemed well in control, his jaw relaxed as he grinned, his eyes bright only with humor.

"You were saying?" he growled playfully, his voice thick.

"That you are a very, very terrrry-fying monstere," I said, my sarcasm marred a bit by my voiceless breath.

"Much better," he approved.

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

He just laughed.

"Can we come in?" a soft voice sounded from the hall.

I struggled to free myself, but Fredward merely readjusted me so that I was somewhat more

BELLA

No way.

310. Funding for the Princevard University Norton Authorial Critical Edition foundation provided by Airborne effervescing dietary supplements; Support Your Immune System!™

conventionally seated on his lap. I could then see that it was the playful, pixie-like Alice, with Casper behind her in the doorway. My cheeks burned but Fredward seemed at ease.

"Go ahead," Fredward was still chuckling demonically.

Alice seemed to find nothing unusual about our embrace; she walked—almost danced, her movements were so graceful—to the center of the room, where she folded herself sinuously into the shape of a squatting crane. Casper, however, paused at the door, his expression a trifle shocked. He stared at Fredward's face, and I wondered if he was tasting the atmosphere with his sensitivity.

"It sounded like you were having Bella for lunch—or should we say brunch?—so we came to see if you would share," Alice announced.

I stiffened for an instance, until I realized that Fredward was grinding me—whether at her comment or my response, I couldn't tell.

"Sorry, I don't believe I have enough to share," he replied, his arms holding me danger-close.

"Actually," Jasper said, smiling despite himself as he walked into the room, "Alice says there's going to be a real storm tonight, and Emmett wants to play airplanes. We came to pose the question: Are You Game?"

The words were all common enough, but the context confused me. I gathered that Alice was a bit more reliable than the weatherman, though.

Fredward's eyes lit up, but he hesitated.

"Of course you should bring Bella," Alice burped. I thought I saw Jasper throw a quick glance at her. "Do you want to go?" Fredward asked me, excited, his expression vivid.

"Sure," I couldn't disappoint such a face. "Um, where are we going?"

"We have to wait for thunder to play airplanes—you'll see why," he promised.

"Will I need an umbrella?"

All three burst out laughing in loud, enjoyable mockery.

"Will she?" Jasper asked Alice.

"No." She was positive. "The storm will hit over town. It would be dry enough in the clearing."

"Good, then." The enthusiasm in Casper's voice was catching, naturally. I found myself eager, rather than scared stiff.

"Let's go see if Carbomb will come!" Alice bounded up to the door in a fashion that would break any ballerina's heart.

"Like you don't know," Jasper teased, and they were swiftly on their way. Jasper managed to inconspicuously close the door behind them.

"What will we be playing?" I demanded.

"*You* will be watching," Fredward clarified. "*We* will be playing..." he paused significantly, "...*airplanes*."

I rolled my eyes.

17.

THE PLANES

IT WAS JUST BEGINING TO DRIZZLERS when Fredward turned onto my street, And then I saw the black car, a weathered Ford, parked in Charlie's driveway—and heard Fredward mutter something unintelligible in a low, harsh voice.

Leaning away from the rain under the shallow, front porch, Squaw Black stood behind his father's wheelchair. Billy's face was a massive stone as Fredward parked my truck against the curb. Squaw stared at the ground, his expression mortified.

Fredward's low voice was furious. "This is crossing my line."

"He came to warn Charlie that you're a vampire?" I guessed.

Fredward just nodded, answering Billy's gaze through the rain with narrowed eyes.

I felt weak with relief that Charlie wasn't home yet.

"Let me deal with this," I suggested. Fredward's black-ish glare made me anxious.

To my surprise, he agreed. "That's probably best. Be careful, though. The child has no idea."

I bridled a little at the word *child*. "Squaw is not that much younger than I am," I reminded him.

He looked at me then, becoming angry that I was defending Squaw.

I sighed and put my hand on the handle.

"Get them inside," he instructed, "so I can leave. I'll be back around dusk."

"Do you want my truck?" It was all I had to offer.

He rolled his eyes. "'I could *wealk* home faster than this truck moves."

"You don't have to leave," I said wistfully.

He rolled his eyes. "Actually, I do. After you get rid of the Blacks," he said, glaring in the Blacks' direction, "you still have to prepare Charlie to meet Your Vampire Boyfriend." He grinned wildly, showing all of his teeth.

I groaned. "Thanks. A lot."

He smiled the crooked smile that I loved even harder. "I'll be back soonish," he promised. His eyes flickered back and forth between me and the porch, and then he leaned in to swiftly kiss me just under the edge of my jaw, against my jugular vein. My heart lurched frantically, and I, too, glanced toward the porch. Billy's wooden face was no long impassive; had switched to a wild passing, thought and emotion flowing freely through his face. His hands had become white fistulas, clutching at the armrests of his wheelchair.

"*Soon*," I stressed as I opened the door and stepped out into the rain.

I could feel his eyes on my back as I half-ran, half-hurried through the light sprinkle toward the porch.

As I got closer, I looked up at Squaw. Water streamed down his cheeks and I couldn't tell if it was the rain or if he'd started crying. I ignored it. "Hey, Billy. Hi, Squaw." I greeted them as cheerfully as I could imagine. "Chuck's gone for the day—you know how he likes to cruise on the weekends. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Not long, not short." Billy said in a subdued tone. His black eyes were piercing. "I just wanted to bring this up." He indicated a brown paper sack that had been soaked through with grease. It was resting in his lap.

"Oh... thanks," I said. "Why don't you come in for a minute and dry off?"

I pretended to be oblivious to his beady eyes scrutinizing me as I unlocked the door, and waved them in ahead of me.

"I'll take that... *bag* off your hands," I said, turning to shut the door. I allowed myself one last glance at Fredward. He was waiting, perfectly still, his eyes solemn.

"Now you'll want to put that in the fridge," Billy noted as he handed me the package. "It's some of Harry Firewater's famous homemade fish fry—Charlie's favorite. The fridge keeps it drier. I think." He shrugged.

"Thanks," I repeated. "I was running out of new ways to fix fish, and he's bound to bring home more tonight." I winked.

Billy looked me in the eye. "You can't just put fish in that bag and have it automatically become a meal. That's not how you fry a fish."

"W-w-what?" I said, shaken.

He cleared his throat and repeated himself. "I said, 'Sometimes it surprises even me how much your father likes *fresh fish*,' " he said, chuckling.

"Ohh. Yes, I suppose it is kind of funny." My face was going red. I'd never talked about it with anyone else, particularly someone that knew my father.

He took in my changed expression, and it made him thoughtful.

"Squawbie," he said, still appraising me. "Why don't you get that new picture of Rebecca out of the car? I'll leave that for Charlie, too."

"What would he want with that?" Squaw asked, his voice morose. I glanced at him, but he was staring at the floor, pulling his eyebrows together.

"Because sometimes grown-ups care about each other's children," Billy said with exasperation. "Just go get it."

"Fine." Squaw slouched back out into the rain.

Billy and I faced one another in silence. After a few seconds, the quiet started to feel awkward, so I turned and headed into the kitchen. I could hear his wet rubber wheels squeak against the linoleum as he followed.

"I hope you're not making tracks, Billy," I said as I shoved the bag into the back of the fridge, and spun around to confront him. "I'd really hate to have to wash the floor again."

He remained silent and his deeply lined face was unreadable.

"Charlie won't be back for a long time." My voice was starting to get rude.

He nodded in agreement, but continued to say nothing.

"Thanks again for the fish fry," I hinted.

He continued nodding. I sighed and folded my arms across my breasts.

He seemed to sense that I had given up on entertaining him. "Bella," he said, and then he hesitated.

I waited.

"Bella," he said again, "Charlie is one of my best friends."

"I'll make sure to tell him."

He spoke each word carefully in his rumbling voice, "I noticed you've been spending time with one of the Cullens."

"I'll make sure to tell him," I repeated curtly.

His eyes narrowed. "Maybe it's none of my business, but I don't think that is such a good idea."

"You're right," I agreed. "It's a *great* idea."

He raised his graying eyebrows at my tone. "You probably don't know this, but the Cullen family has an unpleasant reputation on the reservation."

"Actually, I did know that," I informed him in my hardest voice. This surprised him; he'd never thought a girl could ever get so hard. "But that reputation couldn't be deserved, could it? Because the Cullens never set foot on the reservation, do they?" I could see that my less than subtle reminder of the agreement that both bound and protected his tribe pulled him up short—even shorter than usual.

"That's true," he acceded, his eyes guarded. "You seem... well informed about the Cullens. More informed than I expected."

I started him down. "Maybe even better informed than you expected."

He pursed his lips as he considered that. "Maybe," he allowed. "Is Charlie as well informed?"

He found the weak chink in my armor.

"Charlie likes the Cullens a lot," I hedged. He clearly understood my evasion. His expression was solemn, unsurprised.

"It's not my business," he said. "But it may be Charlie's."

"Though it would be my business whether or not this business is Charlie's business, right?"

I wondered if he even understood my confused question as I struggled not to say anything compromising to our business negotiation. But he seemed to. He thought about it while the rain picked up against the roof, the only sound breaking the silence.

"Yes," he finally surrendered. "I guess that's your business, too."

I sighed with relief. "Now don't you go Indian-giving this one."

"You want to talk about Indian-giving, talk about the—"

"I'm just busting your balls, Billy," I said, touching his shoulder.

"What's left of them," he smiled. I looked into his eyes, filled with nothing but concern for me, and there was nothing more I could say.

Just then the front door banged loudly, and I jumped at the sound.

"There's no picture anywhere in that car." Squaw's whine reached us before he did. His shirt was stained with the rain, rendering it translucent and exposing his hairy nipples. His hair twirled and sprayed when he rounded the corner.

"Hmm," Billy grunted, suddenly detached, spinning his chair round and round. "I guess I left it at home."

Squaw rolled his eyes dramatically. "Great."

"Well, Bella, tell Charlie"—Billy paused before continuing—"that we stopped by, I mean."

"I will," I muttered.

Squaw was surprised. "Are we leaving already?"

"Charlie's gonna be out late," Billy explained as he rolled himself past his son.

"Oh." Squaw looked disappointed. "Well, I guess I'll see you later, then, Bella."

"Sure," I winked.

"Take care," Billy warned me. I didn't answer.

Squaw helped his father out the door. I waved briefly, glancing swiftly toward my now-empty truck, and then shut the door before they were gone.

I stood in the hallway for a minute, listening to the sound of their car as it backed out and drove off into the increasing storm. I stayed where I was, waiting for the irritation and anxiety to subside. When the tension eventually faded a bit, I headed upstairs to change out of my messy dressy clothes.

I tried on a couple of different tube-tops, not sure what to expect tonight. As I concentrated on what was coming, what had just passed became insignificant. Now that I was removed from Jasper's and Fredward's influence, I began to make up for not being terrified before. I quickly gave up on choosing an outfit—throwing on an old flannel tube-top and jeans—knowing full-well that a tube-top never remained on for very long.

The phone rang and I sprinted downstairs to get it. There was only one voice I wanted to hear;

anything else would be uncivilized. But then I realized—no, *knew* that if *he* wanted to talk to me, he'd probably just materialize in my room.

"Hello?" I asked, speechless.

"Bella? It's me," Jessica said.

"Oh, hey Jess." I scrambled for a moment to come back down to reality. It felt like months rather than days since I'd spoken to Jess. Time really flies! "How was the dance?"

"It was so much fun!" Jessica gushed. Needing no more invitation than that, she launched into a minute-by-minute account of the previous night. I *mmm'd* and *ahh'd* in all the right places, pitying her mortal preoccupations. After all, how could she know how much more exciting my life was than hers? Jessica, Mike, the dance, the Forks High School—they all seemed strangely irrelevant at the moment. My eyes kept flashing to the window, trying to judge the degree of light behind the heavy clouds.

"Did you hear what I said, Bella?" Jess asked, irritated.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, Mike kissed me! Can you believe it?"

I sighed. "I guess," I said. It was hard to imagine that anyone could survive being kissed by someone with such large teeth.

"So what did *you* do yesterday?" Jessica challenged, still sounding bothered by my lack of attention. Or maybe she was upset because I hadn't asked for the kiss-details.

"Nothing, really. I just hung around outside to enjoy the sun."

I heard Charlie's car in the garage.

"Did you ever hear anything more from Edward Cullen?"

"*Fredward*," I corrected, nastily.

The front door slammed and I could hear Charlie banging around under the stairs, putting his cruising gear away.

"Um." I hesitated, not sure what my story even was anymore.³¹¹

"Hi there, kiddo!" Charlie called as he stepped over the jagged remains of the kitchen wall. I waved at him, wondering what he was so happy about.

Jess heard his voice. "Oh, your dad's there. Never mind—we'll talk tomorrow. See you in Trig."

"See ya, Jess." I hung up the phone. "Hey, Dad." He was scrubbing his hands in the sink.

"Where's the fish?"

"I put it out in the freezer," he said, winking.

"I'll go grab a few pieces before they freeze—Billy dropped by to drop off some of Harry Earthwater's fish fry this afternoon." I tried to sound enthusiastic.

"He did?" Charlie's eyes lit up. "That's my favorite."

Charlie cleaned up while I got dinner ready. It didn't take long 'til we were sitting at the table, eating in silence. Charlie was enjoying his food. I was wondering desperately how to fulfill my assignment, struggling of a way to broach the subject.

"What did you do with *your* bad self today?" he asked, snapping me out of my reverie.

"Well, this afternoon I just hung around the house..." Only the very recent part of this afternoon, actually. I tried to keep my voice upbeat, but the butterflies in my stomach were hollering out for the truth. "And this morning I was over at the Cullens'."

Charlie dropped his fork onto his lap. It landed fork-first and he screamed out in pain.

"Dr. Cullen's place?" he asked in astonishment, unable to feel pain anymore, he was so astonished.

I pretended not to notice his reaction. "Yeah."

311. This is the point at which Bella began to chronicle her experiences as a teenage lover, a journal which served as the raw material from which this novel was crafted.

"What were you doing there?"

"Well, I sort of have a date with Fredward Cullen right now, and he wanted to introduce me to his parents... dad?"

It appeared that Charlie was having an aneurysm.³¹²

"Dad, are you having an aneurysm?"

"You are going out with Fredward Cullen?" he thundered.

"I thought you liked the Cullens."

"He's too old for you," he ranted.

"We're both juniors," I corrected, though he was more right than he would ever dream.

"Wait... " He paused. "Which one is Edward?"

"*Fredward* is the youngest, the one with the reddishbrown sticky-uppy hair. The beautiful one, the godlike one, and the only man farmer enough to plough my field. You know?"

"Oh, well, that's"—he struggled—"better, I guess. I don't like the look of that big one. I'm sure he's a nice boy and all, but he's just... so big. Is this Edward your boyfriend?"

"It's Fredward, Dad."

"Is he?"

"Sort of, I guess."

"You said last night that you weren't interested in any of the boys in town." But he picked up his fork again, so I could see the worst was over.

"Well, Fredward doesn't live in town, Dad."

He gave me a disparaging look as he chewed.

"And, anyways," I continued, "it's kind of at an early stage, you know. Don't embarrass me with all the boyfriend talk, okay? I haven't even... I haven't even kissed him with tongue yet, you know?"

Charlie chuckled. "When is he coming over?"

"He's probably already here."

"Where is he taking you?"

I groaned loudly. "He's probably *already* taken me."

Charlie frowned.

"I hope you're getting the Spanish Inquisition out of your system now. We're going to play airplanes with his family."

His face puckered, and then finally chuckled. "You're playing *what*?"

"Well, I'll probably just watch most of the time."

"You must really like this guy," he observed suspiciously, probably wondering where, exactly, Fredward had already taken me...

I sighed and rolled my eyes.

I heard the roar of an engine other than my own pull up in front of the house. I jumped for joy, and started cleaning my dishes.

"Leave the dishes, I can do them tonight. You baby me too much."

The doorbell rang and Charlie stalked off to answer it, with me half of a step behind him.

I hadn't realized how hard it was pouring outside—probably because I'd been inside for so long. Fredward stood in the halo of the porch light, looking like a male model in an advertisement for raincoats, except that he wasn't wearing a raincoat. Just a V-neck shirt and some wet galoshes.

"Come on in, Fredward," Charlie invited, tugging at his perfect arm.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Charlie got his name right.

"Thanks, Chief Duck," Fredward stumbled in a respectful voice.

312. Seeing a loved one have an aneurysm is actually a very frightening and sad experience.

Charlie smiled. "Go ahead and call me Charlie. Here, I'll take your jacket."

"Thanks, sir," Fredward said, taking off his imaginary jacket and handing it to my father.

"Have a seat there, Fredward."

I grimaced, noticing that my father was pointing to a place at the table which lacked a seat.

Fredward squatted down in front of the table, forcing me to sit next to Chief Duck on the sofa. I quickly shot him a dirty look.

"So I hear you're getting my girl to watch airplanes."

"Yes, sir, that's the plan." He didn't look surprised that I'd told my father the truth. He might have been listening, though.

"Well, more power to you, I guess."

Charlie laughed, and Fredward joined in on the fun.

"Okay," I stood up. "Enough humor at my expense. Enough laughing. Put on your imaginary jacket. Let's go." I walked back to the hall and pulled on my jacket. They followed.

"Not too late, Bell."

"Well it is for you," I huffed.

"Don't worry, Charlie, I'll have her home early," Fredward dazzled.

"You take care of my baby girl, you hear?"

I groaned, but they ignored me and began to chuckle again. It was as though they were fighting a secret war between them, masked as humor at my expense.

"She'll be safe with me and my promise, sir," someone said.

Charlie couldn't doubt Fredward's sincerity, and Fredward wouldn't doubt Charlie's.

I stalked out. They both laughed, and Fredward followed me.

I stopped dead on the porch. There, behind my truck, was a Monster Jeep. Its tires were higher than my waist, each one bigger than the last; metal crash-guards over the headlights, like giant football helmets; and ten large spotlights on the roll-bar, all of them pointed at the house. I walked over and touched the vehicle's enameled surface and felt a presence. Something was alive inside this Jeep. Some kind of monster.

Charlie let out a low whistle. "Wear your seat belts," he muttered admiringly.

Fredward followed me around to my side and opened the door. I gauged the distance to the seat and backed up a few steps, preparing to jump for it. He sighed and caught me mid-leap, gently lifting me with a single hand. I hoped Charlie didn't notice.

"Make sure you buckle her in, too," Charlie said, all chuckles. Fredward used one hand to buckle me up and the other to stroke my jaw line, smartly blocking Charlie's view with himself.

"Good one," called my father, holding up a can of Vitamin R. At that instant I hoped he would drink himself to death in front of the TV tonight. Although I'd never felt this way about my father before, at that time I wasn't sure if I ever hadn't felt this way about him... I watched as he tilted the tall boy back and guzzled, beer splashing down his chin.

As Fredward went around to the driver's side at a normal, human pace, I looked down at the seat belt he'd put on me and all I saw were buckles.

"What the fuck is this?" I asked when he opened the door.

"It's an off-roading harness."

"Uh-oh."

I tried to figure out how it all stayed together, confused and angry that I'd been tricked into another off-road adventure. Is this how things would be with Fredward? Hikes every day? Monster Jeeps? As if he could read my mind, Fredward reached over and began to pretend to adjust my harness; a mere pretense to touch my neck, graze my collarbone, squeeze my arms. I looked out my window for my father, but he'd retreated back to the porch. All I could see of him through the curtain of rain was

the white can glinting as he took another swig. With any luck he couldn't see Fredward ravishing me not twenty feet away.

I was close to hyperventilating when Fredward suddenly announced, "Great, looks like you're all set," and turned the key. Like a true monster, the engine roared to life. We pulled away from the house.

"This is a... *big* Jeep you have."

"...it's Emmett's," he said, frowning. "I didn't think you'd want to run the whole way."

"Where does he keep this thing?"

"We remodeled one of the outbuildings into a garage. He parks it in there just like the rest of us."

"Aren't you going to put on your seat belt?"

He threw me a disbelieving look.

Then something sunk in.

"Run the *whole* way? As in, we're still going to run part of the way?" My voice edged up a few octaves.

He grinned tightly. "Well, *you're* not going to run."

"*I'm* going to be sick."

"Keep your eyes closed, you'll be fine." I bit my lip, fighting my panic.

He leaned over to kiss the top of my head, and then groaned. I looked at him, puzzled, not sure if I'd heard him right.

"You smell so good in the rain," he groaned again.

"In a good way, or in a bad way?" I asked cautiously.

He sighed. "Both, baby. Always both."

I didn't know how he found his way in the gloom and downpour, although I suspected it had something to do with his built-in radar, but he somehow found a side road that was less of a road than it was a side. For a long while conversation was impossible because I was bouncing up and down on the seat like a jackhammer. He seemed to enjoy it though, smiling hugely the whole way.

And then we came to the end of the road; the trees formed green walls on three sides of the Jeep, the fourth wall broken by the path we came in on. The rain was a mere drizzler, slowing every second, the sky brightening through the clouds.

"Sorry, Bella, we have to go on foot from here."

"You know what? I'll just wait here."

"What happened to all your courage? You were extra-ordinary this morning."

"My courage is just fine, thank you very much."

He was around to my side of the car in a blur and started unbuckling me with those cold hands of his.

"You get those, I can go on ahead."

Fredward looked up and winked. "That's what I was thinking."

"I mean I'll get those, you can go on ahead."

"Hmmm...", he mused as he quickly finished. "It seems I'm going to have to tamper with your memory."

"My what?"

"Exactly." Before I could react, he pulled me from the Jeep and set my feet on the ground. It was barely misting now; Alice was going to be right.

"No really, tamper with my memory?" I asked nervously.

"Your what?" He was watching me intently, carefully, but there was a humor deep in his eyes. He placed his hands against the Jeep on either side of my head and leaned forward, forcing me to press

back against the door. He leaned in even closer, his face inches from mine. I had no room to escape.

"Now," he breathed, and just his smell disturbed my thought processes, "what exactly are you worrying about?"

"Well, um, hitting a tree"—I gulped—"and dying. And then getting sick."

He fought back a smile. Then he bent his head down and touched his cold lips to the hollow at the base of my vagina throat.

"Are you still worried now?" he murmured against my skin.

"Yes." I struggled to concentrate. "About hitting trees and getting sick."

His nose drew a line up the skin of my throat to the point of my chin. His cold breath tickled my skin.

"And now?" His lips whispered against my jaw.

"Trees," I gasped. "Motion sickness."

He lifted his face to kiss my eyeballs. "Bella, you don't really think I would hit a tree, do you?"

"No, but I might." There was no confidence in my voice. He smelled an easy victory; or an easy *something*.

He kissed slowly down my cheek, stopping just at the corner of my mouth.

"Would I let a tree hurt you?" His lips barely brushed against my trembling lip.

"No," I breathed. I knew there was a second part to my brilliant defense, but I couldn't quite recall it. "But a sentient tree monster might," I mumbled.

"You see," he said, his lips moving against mine. "There's nothing to be afraid of, is there?"

I reared back slightly. "Wait, what? No, what about the tree monsters?"

Then he took my face in his hands most roughly, and kissed me in earnest, his unyielding lips moving against my yieldy ones.

There really was no excuse for my behavior. Obviously I knew better by now. And yet I couldn't seem to stop from reacting exactly as I had the first time he kissed me with that nasty, impertinent mouth of his. Instead of keeping safely motionless, my arms reached up to twine tightly around his neck, and I was suddenly welded to his stone figure.³¹³ I sighed, and my lips parted.³¹⁴

He staggered back, breaking my grip effortlessly.

"Damn it, Bella" he broke off, gasping. "You'll be the death of me, I swear you will."

I leaned over, bracing my hands against my knees for support.

"You're indestructible," I mumbled, waiting for my lips to unpart.

"I might have believed that before I met *you*. Now let's get out of here before I do something really stupid," he growled.

He threw me across his back as he had before, like a rucksack, and I could see the extra effort it took him to be as gentle as he was. I locked my legs around his waist and secured my arms in a choke hold around his neck.

"Don't forget to close your eyes," he warned severely.

I quickly tucked my face into his shoulder blade and under my own arm, and squeezed it shut.

And I could hardly tell we were moving. I could feel him gliding along beneath me, but he could have been strolling down a sidewalk or walking across water, the movement was so smooth. I was tempted to peek, just to see if he was really flying through the forest like before, but I resisted. Knowing wasn't worth that awful dizziness. I contented myself with listening to his breath come and go, in and out.

I wasn't quite sure we had stopped until he reached back and tugged on my hair.

"It's over, Bella."

313. The author is being ironic here, as stone is not a material which can be welded.

314. You know which ones ;)

I dared to open my eyes, and, sure enough, it was over. I stiffly unlocked my stranglehold on his body and slipped to the ground, landing on my kiester.

"Oh!" I huffed as I hit the wet ground.

He stared at me incredulously, evidently not sure whether he was still too mad to laugh at me. But my bewildered expression pushed him over the edge, and he broke into a roar of liony laughter.

I picked myself up, ignoring him as I brushed the mud and bracken from the back of my jacken. That only made him laugh harder. Annoyed, I began to stride off into the forest.

I felt his arm around my waist, on account of that's where it was.

"Where are *you* going, retard?"

"To watch *airplanes*. You don't seem to be interested in airplanes anymore, but I'm sure the others will just airplane without you."

"You're going the *wrong* way if you're looking for the runway," he chuckled.

I turned around without looking at him, and stalked on and on. He caught me again and again.

"Caught ya!" He exclaimed, rubbing my shoulders vigorously, and then rubbing his own, as if in some gesture of divine symmetry. "Don't be mad, girl. I couldn't help myself. You should have seen your face. You should have detached your eyes from your face so you could see your own goddamn face. You should have." He chuckled.

"Oh, you're the only one who's allowed to get mad?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

"I wasn't mad at you."

"Bella, you'll be the death of me?" I quoted sourly.

He looked confused. "Why are you quoting me?"

I tried to turn away from him but he held me, fast and hard.

"You were mad," I insisted. "I was *there*," I added with a hiss.

"Yes."

"But you just said—"

"It's not you that I was mad at. Can't you see that, Bella?" He was suddenly intense—no, extense, his self had gone completely beyond tense—and all trace of teasing? Gone. "Don't you see?"

"See what?" I demanded, confused by his sudden mood swings as much as his words.

"I'm never angry with you—how could I be? Brave, trusting... warm." He pulled me close against his coldness.

"Then why?" I whispered into his chest, remembering the black moods that pulled him away from me that I'd always interpreted as well-justified frustration—frustration at my weakness, my slowness, my unpredictable carnal needs...

He put his hands carefully on both sides of my face. "The universe," he said gently. "The way it can't seem to stop putting you in sexual danger. My very existence puts you at risk. Sometimes I truly hate myself. Sexually. I should be stronger, I should be able to—"

I placed my hand over his mouth. "Don't." I didn't want to hear how strong he wished his thing was. No girl should have to hear that from her man.

He took my hand, moving it from his lips, but holding it to his face.

"I love you," he said. "It's a poor excuse for what I'm doing, but it's my only excuse."

It was the first time he'd said he loved me—in so many words. He might not have realized it, but I certainly did.

"Now, please try to behave yourself," He continued, and he bent to softly brush his lips against mine.

I held properly still. Then I sighed. "You promised Charlie that you would have me home early, remember? We'd better get going."

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled wistfully and released all of me but one hand. He led me a few feet

through the tall, wet ferns and hot draping moss, along the skirts of a girthy hemlock tree; and then we were there, all the way there. Together.

We emerged from the woods on the edge of an enormous open field in the lap of the Olympus peaks. It was twice the size of any airfield I'd ever seen.

I could see all the others there: Esme, Emmett, and Rosalie were the closest to us, sitting on a bare outcropping of rock maybe a hundred meters away. Much farther out I could see Jasper and Alice, at least a quarter of a mile apart, appearing to throw something back and forth, although I couldn't tell what it was. Off to the side, Carlisle was building airplanes, but that couldn't be right. Was he really building airplanes?

When we came into view, the three on the rocks rose.

Esme started toward us. Emmett followed after a long look at Rosalie's backside; Rosalie had risen gracefully and strode off toward the field without a glance in our direction. My stomach quivered uneasily in response.

"Was that you we heard, Fredward?" Esme asked as she approached.

"It sounded like a bear choking," Emmett clarified.

I smiled hesitantly at Esme. "That was him."

"Bella was being unintentionally funny," Fredward explained, quickly settling the score.

Alice left her position and was running—or dancing—toward us. She curtsied to a fluid stop at our feet. "It's *tiitiiiiime*," she sang.

As soon as she spoke, a deep rumble of thunder shook the forest beyond us and lightning crashed westward toward town.

"Eerie, isn't it?" Emmett said with easy familiarity, winking at me.

"Totally," I said noncommittally. Was he flirting? In front of my Fredward?

"Let's go." Alice reached for Emmett's hand and they danced toward the field, Alice prancing like a gazelle. Emmett was nearly as graceful and just as fast—yet he could never be compared to a gazelle. He was just too brawny. He was just too big.

"Are you ready for some airplanes?" Fredward asked, his eyes eager, bright.

I tried to sound appropriately enthusiastic. "Let 'er rip!"

Fredward snickered and, after mussing my hair, bounded off after the other two. His dance was more aggressive, a cheetah rather than a gazelle, and he quickly overtook them. "Beep beep!" He cried. The grace and power took my breath away.

"Shall we go down?" Esme asked in her soft, melodic voice, and I realized I was staring open mouthed at his backside, like two full-moons dripping down out of the night sky.

I quickly reassembled my expression and nodded. "I'd love to go down."

Esme kept a few feet behind me, and I wondered if she was still being careful not to frighten me. She matched her stride to mine without seeming impatient at the pace.

"You don't play with them?" I asked shyly.

"No, I prefer the role of air traffic controller—I like keeping them honest," she explained.

"Do they like to cheat, then?"

"Oh, yes! You should hear the arguments they get into. Actually, I hope you don't, you would think they were raised by a pack of wolves."

Or vampires, I thought with a shudder. "You sound like my mom."

She laughed. "Well, I do think of them as my children in most ways. I could never get over my mothering instincts. Did Fredward tell you I had lost a child?"

"No," I murmured, stunned, scrambling to understand what lifetime she was remembering.

"Yes, my first and only baby. He died just a few days after he was born, the poor tiny thing," she sighed. "It broke my heart—that's why I jumped off the cliff, you know," she added matter-of-

factly.

"Oh? Fredward said you just fell," I counter-matter-of-factlied.

"Always the gentleman." She smiled, as if remembering a time that she'd thought of him as more than a child... "Fredward was the first of my new sons. I've always thought of him that way, even though he's older than I. In one way, at least." She winked at me with all the warmth that her cold, dead eyeballs could muster. "That's why I'm so happy that he's found you, deary." The endearment sounded very natural on her lips. "He's been the odd man out, so to say, for far too long; it's hurt me to see him so alone."

"You don't mind then?" I asked, hesitant again. "That I'm... all wrong for him? That I have... flesh?"

"No," she said thoughtfully. "You're what he wants. It will work out, somehow," she said, though her forehead was creased with worry, harder and deeper than I'd ever seen someone crease a worry. Another peal of thunder began.

Esme stopped then; apparently we'd reached the edge. It looked as if they'd formed teams. Fredward was way out in one corner next to one giant airplane, Carlisle stood between some other airplanes on a different part of the field, and Alice held in her hand one very small airplane, positioned on the spot that must have been the runway.

Emmett was swinging a Boeing 747 on his forearm; it whistled almost imperceptibly through the air. Jasper stood several feet behind him, pointing a laser-pointer up into the sky.

"All right," Esme called out in a clear voice, which I knew even Fredward would hear, as truly *far out* as he was. "Batter up!"

Alice stood straight, deceptively motionless. Her style seemed to be stealth rather than an intimidating windup. She held the Bumblebee II in both hands at her waist, and then, like the strike of a cobra, she squatted and sprung, throwing both arms and the plane up into the air, towards Jasper's laser. It crossed through, unchallenged, and fell back to the earth, Jasper running to catch it just in time.

"I don't think I understand this game," I whispered to Esme.

"If they don't hit it, she gets a point," she told me.

Jasper hurled the plane back to Alice's waiting hand. She permitted herself a brief grin. And then her hands spun out again.

This time, before I could even see it, Emmett's 747 was in the air and smashing against the tiny Bumblebee. The crack of impact was shattering, thunderous, echoing off the mountains. I immediately understood the necessity of the thunderstorm.

Both planes hung in mid-air briefly before falling down towards the surrounding forest.

"So is that Emmett's point?" I asked, my forehead creased with questioning.

"Wait," Esme cautioned, watching intently, one hand raised. Emmett was a blur of dancing and slapping his rear, Carlisle shadowing him. I realized Fredward was missing.

"Fredward!" Esme cried in a clear voice. I stared in disbelief as Fredward sprang from the trees swinging his Spruce Goose like a club at the tangle of airplanes, setting off a nebula of explosions, his wide grin visible even to me.

"Emmett throws the hardest," Esme explained, "but Fredward *swings* the hardest."

The game continued before my incredulous eyes. It was impossible to keep up with the speed at which the airplanes flew, the rate at which their sleek bodies smashed into each other and blew apart.

I learned the other reason they waited for a thunderstorm to play when Jasper, trying to avoid Fredward's infallible swinging, threw a knuckler toward Carlisle. Carlisle chucked a Gulf Stream at it and then raced Jasper to ground zero. When they collided in the middle of the explosion, the sound was like the crash of two massive boulders meeting in the middle of an atomic bomb. I jumped up in concern, but they were somehow unscathed.

"Safe," Esme called in a calm voice.

Emmett was up by one—Rosalie the closest second from flitting around the field and tagging small fliers—when Fredward caught the third missed pitch-plane and ending the inning. He sprinted to my side, sparkling like an excited diamond.

"Whaddaya think, huh? Is this the best game ever or what??" he asked.

I carefully modulated how I felt about them spending the afternoon destroying planes and grinned. "One thing's for sure, I'll never be able to sit through dull old Major League Baseball again."

"And it sounds like you did so much of that before," he laughed.

"Well, I *am* a little disappointed," I teased.

"Why?" he asked, puzzled.

"Well, it would be nice if I could find just one thing you didn't do better than everyone else on the planet."

He flashed his special crooked smile, the one he saved for special occasions, leaving me breathless.

"I'm up," he said, jogging off to the depot for another plane.

He played intelligently, keeping his pitches low to the ground, but high enough to be out of reach for Rosalie's swatting tactics, racking up points like lightning before Emmett could lumber over and power-slam it. Carlisle heckled from the sidelines with a booming voice that hurt my ears, but Fredward still managed to outwit even psychic Alice in her rebound-play.

The score constantly changed as the game continued, and they razed each other like any street aviator³¹⁵ would as they took turns with the lead. Occasionally Esme would call them to order. The thunder rumbled on, but we stayed dry, as Alice had predicted.

Carlisle was up to pitch, Fredward on the laser, when Alice suddenly gasped. My eyes were on Fredward, as usual :P, and I saw his head snap up to look at her. Their eyes met and something menstrual flowed between them in an instant. He was at my side before the others could ask Alice what was wrong.

"Alice? What's wrong?" Esme's voice was tense.

"I didn't see—I couldn't tell... I saw vampires in my head," she whispered.

All the others were gathered by this time.

"What's that, Alice? You didn't see something?" Carlisle asked with the calm voice of authority.

"They were traveling much quicker than I thought. I can see I had the wrong perspective before," she murmured.

Jasper leaned over her, his breast on her shoulder. "What changed?" he asked.

"Everything," she gulped. "They heard us playing, and it changed their path."

Seven pairs of quick eyes flashed to my face, and then away.

"How soon?" Carlisle said, turning toward Fredward.

A look of intense concentration traveled briefly across his face.

"Less than five minutes. They're running—they want to play." He scowled.

"Can you make it?" Carlisle asked him, his eyes flickering toward me again.

"No, not carrying *her* fat—" He cut himself short. "Besides, the last thing we need is for them to catch the scent and start hunting."

"How many?" Emmett asked Alice.

"Three," she answered tersely.

"Three!" he scoffed. "Let them come." Steel bands of muscle flexed along his massive arms.

"I've shit bigger things of three."

315. The author based these characterizations on her experiences with the legendary street aviators of Arizona, particularly Lucky Baloo (1923) and Mikey Neutron (1932), who essentially changed how the game was played in their respective eras.

For a split second that seemed much longer than it really was, I pictured all of the things Emmett must have pooped in his lifetime. Do vampires poop? If Fredward swallowed a pickle, would it come out the other end... still a pickle? Could I eat it?

"Let's just continue the game," Carlisle said. His voice was cool and level. "Alice said they were simply curious."

All this was said in a flurry of words that lasted only a few seconds. I had listened carefully and caught most of it, though I couldn't hear what Esme now asked Fredward with a silent vibration of her hips. I only saw the slight shake of his head and the look of relief on her face.

"You laser it, Esme," he said. "I'll call it now." And he planted himself in front of me.

The others returned to the field, warily combing the dark forest with their sharp eyes. Alice and Esme seemed to orient themselves around where I stood.

"Take your hair down," Fredward said in a low, soothing voice.

Feeling compelled beyond myself, I obediently and slowly slid the rubber band out of my hair and shook it out around me. Long, flowing tresses of auburn-brown hair swirled around my head, uncoiling into the ether like waves of sunlight, suddenly slowed and piling up one into the next as they approached my pale skin, arriving at some asymptotal infinity that they were destined to forever approach but never reach.

I stated the obvious. "The others are coming now."

Fredward audibly rolled his eyes, again. "Yes, stay very still, keep quiet, and don't move from behind me, please." He hid the stress in his voice well, but I could hear it. He pulled my long hair forward and wove it around my face, as tight as he could get it.³¹⁶

"That won't help," Alice said softly. "I could smell her across the field."

"Alice, you're standing almost right in front of us."

Alice's eyebrows flexed worriedly. "I can't seem to keep my perspective straight..."

Carlisle stood at the pitch, and the others joined in the game halfheartedly.

"What did Esme ask you?" I whispered.

"...whether they were thirsty," he muttered unwillingly.

"No fucking way," I hissed. "I didn't come up a mountain to get eaten, *Fredward*."

He tightened his lips and watched the field. He knew I was right.

The seconds ticked by; the game progressed with apathy now. No one dared to hit harder than a clunk, and Emmett, Rosalie and Casper hovered around the mound and the laser. Now and again, despite the fear that numbed my brain, I was aware of Rosalie's eyes on me. They were expressionless, but something about the way she held her mouth made me think she was angry about something.

Fredward paid no attention to the game at all, eyes and mind ranging the forest.

"I'm sorry, Bella," he muttered with absolute fierceness. "It was stupid, irresponsible, and wrong to expose you like this. I'm so sorry."

I heard his breath stop, and his eyes zeroed in on a space off to the right. He took half a step, angling himself between me and what was coming.

Carlisle, Emmett, and the others turned in the same direction, hearing sounds of passage much too faint for my ears.

316. Even Fredward's vampiric strength cannot break the mysterious infinity surrounding Bella's pale skin.

18.

THE BUNDT STUNT

THEY EMERGED ONE BY ONE, TWO BY TWO FROM THE FOREST EDGE, ranging a dozen meters apart. The first male into the clearing fell back immediately, allowing the second to take the front, orienting himself around that first male, tall and dark-haired, in a manner that clearly displayed who led the pack, who had the fangs, who shined the shoes, fried the eggs, ate the cabbage, pressed the shirts, wrote and/or deposited the checks, mowed the lawn with his shirt off on Saturday mornings, wearing only tight pants and a big belt buckle over a fat old wiener, the flesh pressed up close against the fabric. The third was a woman; from this distance, all I could see of her was that she was not male.

They closed ranks before continuing cautiously toward Fredward's family, exhibiting the natural respect a troop of predators has as it encounters a larger, unfamiliar group of its own kind.

As they approached, I could see how different they were from the Cullens. Their walk was catlike, a gait that seemed constantly on the edge of shifting into a squat. They dressed in the ordinary gear of backpackers: jeans and button-down shirts of heavy, weatherproof flannel. The clothes were frayed, though, and they were barefoot. Both men had cropped hair, but the woman's brilliant female hair was filled with leaves and debris from the woods.

Their sharp eyes carefully took in the more polished, urbane stance of Carbomb, who, flanked by Emmett and Casper, stepped guardedly forward to meet them. Seemingly without any communication between them, they straightened into a casual, more erect bearing. Though little better than wild animals, it was obvious they'd had some training.

The man in front was easily the most beautiful, his skin olive-toned beneath the typical pallor, hair a glossy black. He was of a medium build, hard-muscled, of course, but nothing next to Emmett's brawn. He smiled an easy one, exposing a flash of gleaming white teeth.

The woman was wilder, her eyes shifting uncontrollably, rapidly between the men facing her, and the loose grouping around me, her chaotic hair quivering in the slight breeze. Her posture was distinctly porcine.³¹⁷ The second male hovered unobtrusively behind her, slighter than the other male, his light brown man-hair and regular features both nondescript. His eyes, though completely still, somehow seemed the most vigilant.

Their eyes were different, too. Different from ours, but also each other; their right eyes were different from their left eyes. They weren't the gold or black that I had come to expect after dating my own vampire, but a deep burgundy color that was disturbing and sinister, reminiscent of the color of a very deep pool of blood...

The dark-haired man, still smiling, stepped toward Carbomb.

"I have thought that I have heard something. When I was walking through the forest, it was a time that I heard something happening" he said in a relaxed voice with a thick Transylvanian accent. "I am nice to meet you. My name, Lurnet. These vampires, they are Yames and Victoria." He gestured to the vampires beside him.

"I'm Carbomb," Carbomb said casually. "This is my family, Emmett and Jasper, Rosalie, Sesame?, Alice, Fredward, and Bella. Bella Duck. Mrs. Bella Duck Cullen."

317. Please see thought question #12.

"I am very glad to hear that. Are you having the room for a few more of players?" Lurnet asked sociably.

Carbomb matched Lurnet's friendly tone. "Actually, we were just finishing up. But we'd certainly be interested another time. Are you planning to stay in the area for long?"

"We will head north... but still, we are curious for you, for your family. We don't many often see the vampires who are situated in your area."

"No, this region is usually empty except for us and the occasional visitor, like yourselves." He paused. "I mean, you'd think more people would come here, but..." He shrugged.

The tense atmosphere had slowly subsided into a casual, even boring, conversation; I guessed that the Japster was using his peculiar gift to control the situation.

"Your hunting range... what is it?" Lurnet casually inquired.

Carbomb ignored the assumption behind the inquiry. "The Olympic Range here, up and down the Coast Ranges on occasion. We keep a permanent residence nearby. There's another permanent settlement like ours up near Denali."

Lurnet rocked back and forth on his two inch heels, over and over.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." There was an honest curiosity in his voice.

"Why don't you come back to our home with us and we can talk more comfortably in the comfort of our own home?" Carbomb invited. "It's a rather long story."

Yames and Victoria exchanged a surprised looker at the mention of the word "home," but Lurnet controlled his expression better.

"Mm, yes, that is seeming good." His smile was super-genial. "We, we and my family, we do not for a long time... how do you say it... clean up the blood clot." His eyes moved appreciatively over Carbomb's refined appearance.

"Please don't take offense, but we'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from hunting in this immediate area. We have to stay inconspicuous, you understand," Carbomb explained.

"Mmmmm," Lurnet nodded warmly. "Of course. We are having much respect for you family, and this region, it is yours. We and my family, we understand it. It is okay. I think it is okay. We were eating outside of Seattle. We are okay," he laughed, bobbing his head up and down. A shiver ran up my spine.

"We'll show you the way if you'd like to run with us—Emmett and Alice, you can roll with Fredward and Bella to get the Jeep," he casually added.

Three things seemed to happen simultaneously while Carbomb was speaking:

- 1.) My hair ruffled with the light breeze, undulating like dough coming out of a spaghetti press.
- 2.) Fredward stiffened.
- 3.) The second male, Yames, suddenly whipped his head around.
 - a. He also scrutinized me.
 - b. His nostrils also flared.

A swift rigidity—a certain hardness—fell on all of them as Yames lurched one step forward into an offensive squat. Fredward bore his teeth as though sacrificing them to a god, squatting in defense, a feral snarl rippling through his throat.

It was nothing like the playful sounds I'd heard from him this morning; it was the single most threatening thing I had ever heard, and the chills ran from the crown of my head to the back of my heels.

"Oi!" Lurnet exclaimed in open surprise. Neither Fredward nor Yames relaxed their aggressive poses. Yames feinted slightly to the side, and Fredward shifted in response. Yames resumed his erect posture, and Fredward got deeper into his squat.

"She's with us," Carbomb's firm, buff rebuff was directed towards Yames. Lurnet seemed to catch my scent less powerfully than Yames, but awareness now donned his face.

"You brought the snack?" he asked, his expression, incredulous, as he took an involuntary step forward. "You brought the snack."

God, was I just a piece of meat?

Fredward snarled even more ferociously, harshly, his lip curling high above his glistening, bared teeth. Lurnet involuntarily stepped back.

"I said she's with us," Carbomb corrected in a hard voice.

"Sorry, but she is snack," Lurnet whinnied. The words were not at all aggressive, but I found myself objecting to them.

"Yes." Emmett was very much in evidence at Carbomb's side, his eyes on Yames. Yames slowly straightened out of his crotch, but his eyes never left me alone, nostrils still wide, as though ready to welcome something inside. Fredward stayed tense, like a lion, in front of me.

When Lurnet spoke, his tone was soothing—trying to defuse the sudden hostility. "It appears we have a lot to learn about the other."

"Indeed." Carbomb's voice was still cool as a Carcumber.

"But we are still friends." His eyes fucked toward me and back to Carbomb. "I understand." He patted on his chest. "I can see that we will not share your snack, but still we are friends."

Yames glanced in disbelief and aggravation at Lurnet and exchanged another brief look with Victoria, whose eyes still fucked edgily from face to fuckface.

Carbomb measured Lurnet's open expression for a moment before he spoke. "We'll show you the way. Casper, Rosalie, Esme?" he called. They gathered together, blocking me from view as they converged. Alice was instantly at my side, and Emmett fell back slowly, his eyes locked on Yames as he backed toward us.

"Let's go, Bella." Fredward's voice was low and bleak.

The whole time I'd been rooted in place, terrified into absolute immobility, not even able to move. Fredward had to grip my elbow off to break my trance. Alice and Emmett were close behind us, behind me. I stumbled alongside Fredward without even moving my legs still stunned with fear. I couldn't hear if the main group had left yet. Fredward's impatience was almost intangible as we moved at human speed towards the forest edge.

Once we were into the trees, Fredward hung me over his back without breaking stride. I gripped as tightly as humanly possible when he took off, the others close on his heels. I kept my head down, but my eyes, wide with fright, wouldn't close. They plunged through the now-black forest like wraiths. The sense of exhilaration that usually seemed to possess Fredward as he ran was completely absent, replaced by a fury that consumed him and drove him still faster. Even with me on his back, the others were dingleberrying behind.

We reached the Jeep in an impossibly short time, and Fredward barely slowed as he flung me, elbow and all, into the back seat.

"Strap her in," he ordered Emmett, who slid in beside me.

I didn't even know where in my history of successful seat beltings to begin my protest, but Emmett's two timber-like arms were already a blur as they reached across and snapped the belt home.

Alice was already in the front seat, and Fredward was starting the engine. It roared to life and we swerved backward, spinning around to face the winding road.

Fredward was growling something too fast for me to understand, but it sounded a lot like a string of profanities.³¹⁸ "Hope everyone's buckled up," he muttered audibly while looking at me in the

318. "Motherfucking cocksuckers playing grab-ass dookie in the middle of our fucking Airplanes game and my big fucking date like they couldn't pick a better fucking time to try and knob gobble us to death with fucking bloodsucking bullshit

mirror, and I began to mutter my own string of profanities³¹⁹ when he stomped the accelerator and the Jeep took off.

The jolting trip was much worse this time, and the darkness only made it more frightening. Emmett and Alice both glared out the side windows.

We hit the main road and though our speed increased, I could see much better where we were going. My pocket compass told me that we were headed south, away from Forks.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

No one answered. No one even looked at me.

"Dammit, Fredward! Where are you taking me?!"

"We have to get you away from here—from there—from away—*now*." The speedometer read a hundred and five miles an hour.

"Turn around! You have to take me home!" I shouted. I struggled with the stupid harness, tearing at the nylon straps with my fingernails.

"Emmett," Fredward said grimly.

And Emmett secured my hands in his steely grasp.

"Argh! No, Fredward! No! You can't do this!"

"Yes, I can," he chuckled, looking up at himself in the rear view mirror as he continued to drive at a hundred and five miles an hour. "But I also have to, Bella; now please be quiet."

"I won't! You have to take me back—Charlie will call the FBI! They'll be all over your family—Carlisle! Esme! They'll have to leave, forever!"

"Calm down, Bella." His voice was cold. "We're vampires. Even if we do leave, it could hardly be forever."

"Not over me, you don't! I am my own woman, Fredward Cullen, and if I say something I mean it, and right now I say remove my harness! Remove it or I'll never..." I was lightheaded from all the shouting. "You're ruining everything!" I struggled violently with total futility.

Alice spoke for the first time. "Fredward, pull over."

He flashed her a hard look, and then sped up. "Vroom vroom, kiddo."

"Fredward, let's just talk this through."

"You don't understand!" he roared in frustration. I'd never heard his voice so loud; it was deafening in the confines of the Jeep. The speedometer neared on a hundred and fifteen. "He's a tracker, Alice, do you know what that means? Huh? Alice? He's a *tracker*!"

I felt something in Emmett stiffen next to me, and I wondered at his reaction to the word. It meant something more to the three of them than it did to me; I'd always thought a tracker was someone who tracked things. I wanted to understand, but there was no opening for me to ask.

"Pull over, Fredward." Alice's tone was reasonable, but there was a ring of authority in it I'd never heard before.

The speedometer inched past one-twenty.

"Do it, Fredward."

"Listen to me, Alice. I saw his mind. Tracking is his hobby, his passion—and he wants her, Alice—he wants to track *her*. He begins the hunt tonight."

"He doesn't know where—"

He interrupted her. "He's a tracker, dumbass! He doesn't have to! How long do you think it will take him to cross her scent in town? His plan was already set before the words were out of Laurnet's

swear to fucking God think they're such fucking hot shit see who's hot shit when I fucking rip their heads off and shit down their necks it'll be my hot shit all over their fucking filthy little hemp ponchos, fucking pricks," he said.

319. "Fredward thinks he's so darn great yeah maybe well guess what Fredward at least I'm not a big dumb jerk—" she squeezed out before the car lurched immediately into third gear.

dirty foreign mouth."

I gasped, knowing where my scent could lead. "Charlie! You can't leave him there! You can't leave him!" I wiggled against the harness.

"She's right," Alice said.

The car slowed slightly.

"Let's just look at our options for a minute," Alice coaxed.

The car slowed again, more noticeably, and then suddenly we screeched to a stop on the highway's shoulder. I flew against the harness, and then slammed back into the seat.

"There are no options," Fredward hissed.

"I'm not leaving my Charlie!" I yelled.

He ignored me completely.

"We have to take her back," Emmett finally spoke.

"No." Fredward was resolute.

"He's no match for us, Freddie. He won't be able to touch her."

"He'll wait."

Emmett the Grizzly Bear smiled. "I can wait, too."

"You didn't see—you don't understand. Once he commits to a hunt, he's unshakable. He doesn't get shaken. We'd have to kill him to even *begin* to shake him."

Emmett burped nonchalantly. "I like killing."

"And the female. She's with him. If it turns into a fight, the leader will go with them too."

"You sayin' I can't hit a woman? Or some foppy foreigner? Sheeit," he said, sucking at a tooth.

"There's another option," Alice said quietly.

Fredward turned on her in a fury, shoving his face right up against hers. "THERE—IS—NO—OTHER—OPTION!"

Emmett and I both stared at him in shock, but Alice seemed unsurprised. The silence lasted for a long minute as Fredward and Alice stared each other down.

I broke it. "Does anyone want to hear my plan?"

"No." Fredward growled. Alice glared at him, finally provoked.

"Listen," I pleaded. "You take me back."

"No," he interrupted.

I glared at him and continued. "You take me back. I tell my dad I want to go home to Phoenix.³²⁰ I pack my bags. We wait 'til this tracker is watching, and then we run. Not literally, Fredward. He'll follow us and leave Charlie alone. Charlie won't call the FBI or the CIA on your family. Then you can take me any damned place you want."

They stared at me, stunned.

"It's not a bad idea, actually." Emmett's face was lit by a corona of surprise.

"It might work—and we simply can't leave her father unprotected. You know that," Alice said.

Everyone looked from Alice to Fredward.

Fredward paused to think before interrupting himself. "It's too dangerous! I don't want him within a hundred miles of her white flesh!"

Emmett was supremely confident and was now doing curls with two-pound weights. "Fredward, he's not getting through us."

Alice thought for a minute. "I don't see him attacking. He'll try to wait for us to leave her alone."

"It won't take long for him to realize that's not going to happen."

320. Phoenix, Arizona; home of the power window.

"I *demand* that you take me home." I puffed out my chest.

Fredward pressed his fingers to his temples and squееееееzed his eyes shut, like he was trying to get something horrible out of them.

"Please," I said in a much smaller voice.

He didn't look up when he spoke, his voice soft and worn, like a shoe.

"You're leaving tonight, whether the tracker sees or not. You tell Charlie that you can't stand another minute in Forks. Tell him whatever story works. Pack the first things your hands touch, and then get in your truck, no matter what he says to you. You have fifteen minutes. Do you hear me? Fifteen of them. Not ten, not thirty. Not five. Fifteen minutes from the time you cross the doorstep."

The Jeep rumbled to life and he spun us around, the tires squealing on the asphalt as I squealed inside. The needle on the speedometer started to race up the dial and soon we were traveling European speeds into a future unknown.

"Emmett?" I asked, looking pointedly at my hands.

"Oh gosh," he said. In his rush to pump iron before the fight, he'd put both of them in his giant cave of an armpit and clamped down. He let me loose.

A few minutes passed in silence, other than the roar of the engine. Then Fredward spoke again.

"This is how it's going to happen," he said, retrieving a small whiteboard from his back pocket. "When we get to the house, if the tracker is not there, I will walk her to the door."

Fredward drew a stick-figure girl walking up to a door with a stick-figure tracker hiding in the bushes three miles off.

He glared at me in the rear-view mirror, and when I didn't take him seriously, he wiped the board clean with his thumbs and drew a stick-figure eye glaring at me. I gulped.

"Emmett, you take the outside of the house. Alice, you get the truck."

He drew a stick-figure man outside of a house, and then held the board out in front of him to compare the picture to the reality of Emmett. He shook his head in consternation, and then began nodding wildly as he added some length to Emmett's legs and made his arms bigger. Fredward smirked. Then he drew a truck with a head floating in it, to represent Alice.

"I'll be inside as long as she is. After she's out, you two can take the Jeep home and tell Carbomb."

"No way, bro," Emmett broke in. "I'm with you to the max."

"Think it through, Emmett. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"Until we know how far this is going to go, I'm with you. To the max." Emmett reached a fist of solidarity forward into the front seat to emphasize his point.

Fredward sighed. "If the tracker *is* there," he continued grimly, "we keep driving."

"We're going to make it there before him," Alice said confidently, gesturing towards her future-telling brain.

Fredward seemed to accept that. Whatever his problem with Alice was, he didn't doubt her now.

"What are we going to do with the Jeep?" Alice asked.

His voice had a hard edge. "You're driving it home."

"No, I'm not," she said calmly.

The unintelligible stream of profanities started to flow again.

"We can't all fit in my truck," I whispered.

Fredward didn't appear to hear me.

"I think you should let me go alone," I said even more quietly.

He heard that.

"Please just do this my way, Bella. Just this once," he said between clenched teeth.

"Listen, Charlie's not an imbecile," I clarified. "If you're not in town tomorrow, he's going to get

suspicious that..."

"That *what*, Bella?"

"That you're a vampire, Fredward. That you're a vampire that has put me in lethal danger and now you're carting me across the country with your incestuous family."

"That's irrelevant. We'll make sure he's safe, and that's all that matters."

"Then what about this tracker? He saw the way you acted tonight. He's going to think you're with me, wherever you may be."

Emmett looked at me, insultingly surprised again. "Fredward, listen to her" he urged. "I think the twist is right."

"Yes, she is," Alice agreed.

"I can't do that." Fredward's voice was icy. "I can't let her be right..." he whispered.

"Emmett should stay too," I continued. "He definitely got an eyeful of Emmett."

"What?" Emmett turned on me.

"You'll get a better crack at him if you stay," Alice agreed.

Fredward stared at her incredulously. "You think I should let my piece of meat just wander off my plate into another hungry man's³²¹ lap? No-fuckin'-thanks."

"Of course not," Alice said. "Jasper and I will take her."

"I can't do that," Fredward repeated, but this time there was a trace of defeat in his voice. The logic was working on him.

I tried to be persuasive. "Hang out here for a week—" I saw his expression in the mirror and amended—"a few days. Let Charlie see that you haven't kidnapped me, and lead this Yames on a wild-goose chase or two. Make sure he's completely off my tail. Then come and meet me. Take a roundabout route of course, and then Jasper and Alice can go home."

I could see him beginning to consider it.

"Meet you where?"

"Phoenix." Of course.

"No. He'll hear that's where you're going," he said impatiently.

"And you'll make it look like that's a ruse, obviously. He'll know that we'll know that he's listening. He'll never believe I'm actually going where I say that I'm going but I'm not really going."

"She's diabolical," Emmett chuckled.

"And if that doesn't work?"

"There are seven million people in Phoenix," I informed him with serious knowledge.

"It's not that hard to find a phone book."

"Well then I won't answer the phone."

"Oh?" he inquired, a dangerous note in his voice.

"I'll still have my cell, Fredward."

"Fredwad," Alice nagged, "we'll be with her."

"What are *you* going to do in *Phoenix*?" He asked her scathingly.

"Girl stuff," she giggled.

"I kind of like it." Emmett was thinking about cornering Yames, no doubt.

"Shut up, Emmett."

"Look, if we try to take him down while she's still around, there's a much better chance that someone will get hurt. Now, if we get him alone, and you keep your meat out of the battle..." He trailed off with a slow smile. I was right and everyone knew it.

The Jeep was crawling slowly along now as we drove into town. Despite my brave talk, I could

321. Swanson Hungry Man Dinners, featuring 11lb of food.

feel all the thick hairs on my arms standing up. I thought about Charlie, alone in the house, probably in my room crying into a pillow, and tried to be courageous.

"Bella." Fredward's voice was very soft. Alice and Emmett suddenly looked out their windows. "If you let anything happen to yourself—anything at all—I'm holding you. I'm holding you personally. I'm holding you personally responsible. *Do you understand that?*"

"Yes." I gulped a big one.

He turned to Alice.

"Can Jasper handle this?"

"Give him some credit, Fredward. He's been doing very, very well at handling this."

"Can *you* handle this?" he asked.

And graceful little Alice parted those pretty little lips in one horrific moment and let it all loose with a guttural snarl that had me cowering against the seat in terror.

Fredward smiled at her. "But keep your opinions to yourself," he muttered suddenly.

19.

GOODBYEZ

PAPA CHARLIE WAS WAITING UP FOR ME. ALL THE HOUSE LIGHTS were off except the light in my room. Through the window, I could see that Charlie was standing in front of my mirror. It looked like he was wearing a blouse with a conical bra underneath, and I couldn't see any lower than that. My mind was blank as I tried to think of a way to make him let me go. This wasn't going to be pleasant.

Fredward pulled in slowly, staying well back from my truck. All three of them were acutely alert, ramrod straight in their seats, listening to the sound of every tree, looking through the shadow of every shadow, catching every scent, searching for something out of place. Something unwanted. Something foreign. The engine cut off and I sat, motionless, as they continued to listen.

"He's not here," Fredward said tensely. "Let's go."

Emmett reached over to help me get out of the harness.

"Don't worry, Bella," he said in a low but cheerful voice, "we'll take care of things here quickly."

I felt moisture filling up my eyes as I looked at the grin on Emmett's eraser-shaped head. I barely knew him and yet, somehow, I had come to know him, and not knowing when I would see him again after tonight was anguishing. I knew this was just a faint taste of the goodbyes to come, and the thought of their delivery made the tears begin to spill from my eyes.

"Alice, Emmett." Fredward's voice was a command. They slithered soundlessly into the darkness, instantly disappearing like snakes into the abyss. Fredward opened my door and took my hand, then drew me into the protecting enclosure of his arm. He walked me swiftly toward the house, eyes roving through the night.

"Keep the tears up, fatty, 'cause Charlie's up there right now wondering when his baby's coming home so he can tell her all about what he caught while cruising, and we don't have time for that. Jesus, look at you. It's like you just got fat from the ride over. Your hormones acting up? Put on some water weight? Oops about your poops? Booboo want her baabaa?"

"I'm crying just fine without your help, Fredward."

"Fifteen minutes," he warned under his breath.

"I can do this," I blubbered. Fredward had given me an inspiration.

I stopped on the porch and took hold of his face in my hands. I looked fiercely in his eyes like a chrome cheetah.

"I love you harder than I've ever loved anything," I said in a low, intense voice. "I will always love you, no matter what happens now."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Bella," he said just as fiercely.

"Just follow the plan, okay? Keep Charlie safe for me. He's not going to like me very much after this and might want to kill himself, and I want to have the chance to apologize later."

"Quit dawdling, Bella. We have to hurry." His voice was urgent.

"One more thing," I whispered passionately. "Don't forget about me!" He was leaning in, and so all I had to do was stretch up on my knees to kiss his surprised, icy lips with as much force as I was capable of. Then I turned and kicked the door open, smashing the hinges and knocking it out of the

frame.

"Fuck YOU, Fredward!" I yelled at him, running inside and slamming the broken door shut in his still-shocked face.

"Bella?" Charlie had just sat down in front of the TV and shoved his face into a banana pie, and now leapt to his feet.

"Leave me alone, fag!" I screamed at him through my tears, which were flowing relentlessly now. I ran up the stairs to my room, throwing the door shut and locking it. I ran to my bed, flinging myself on the floor to retrieve my duffel bag from the floor. I reached swiftly between the mattress and box spring to grab the knotted dirty sock that contained my secret nug stash.

Charlie was pounding on the door.

"Bella, are you okay? That wasn't very nice, what you said to me." His voice was frightened and sad.

"I'm going *home*," I shouted, my voice breaking in the perfect spot.

"Well, I don't know if you looked around before you stormed in, but technically—"

"No!" I shrieked a few octaves higher. I turned to my dresser, and Fredward was already there, silently yanking out armfuls of random clothes, which he proceeded to throw at me.

"Did he break up with you?" Charlie was confused.

"No!" I yelled, slightly more breathless as I struggled to keep up with Fredward, shoving everything into the bag. Fredward just kept throwing stuff, even though the bag was full now.

"What happened, Bella?" Charlie shouted through the door, pounding again even as he started jiggling the knob.

"I broke up with *him*!" I shouted back, jerking on the zipper of my bag. Fredward's capable hands pushed mine away and vampire-strength-zipped it smoothly. He put the strap carefully over my arm.

"I'll be in the truck—go!" he whispered, and pushed me toward the door. When I turned, he'd already vanished.

I unlocked the door and pushed past Charlie roughly, struggling with my heavy bag as I ran down the stairs.

"What happened!?" He was right behind me as he yelled. "I thought you liked him!"

He caught my elbow in the kitchen. Though he was still bewildered, his grip was firm. "Did... did he touch you?"

He spun me around to look at him, and I could see in his face that he had no intention of letting me leave, at least not until he'd heard me say it. I could think of only one way to escape, and it involved hurting him so much that I hated myself for even thinking it, but I had no time, and I had to keep him safe.

I roared. "I can't do this anymore! I can't put down any more roots here! I don't want to end up trapped in this stupid, boring town like Mom! I'm not going to make the same dumb mistake she did. I hate it and I hate you and I can't stay with either another minute!"

His hand dropped away from my arm like I'd electrocuted him and then turned his arm into stone. I turned away from his shocked, wounded face and headed for the door.

"Bells, you can't leave now. It's nighttime," he whispered.

I didn't turn around. "I'll sleep in the shitmobile if I get tired."

"Just wait another week," he pleaded. I could hear tears catching somewhere in the back of his voice. "R  nee will be back by then."

This completely derailed me. "What?"

Charlie continued eagerly, almost babbling with relief. "She called while you were out and said that things weren't going to so well in Florida, not at all, and that if Phil doesn't get signed by the end of

the week who knows, maybe she'll leave him, maybe Phil just wasn't the one, maybe—maybe—maybe —"

I shook my head, trying to reassemble my now-confused thoughts. This was the closest he'd ever come to saying it.

"Maybe what, she'll love you again?" I muttered, turning the knob. He was too close, one hand extended toward me, his face dazed. I couldn't lose any more time arguing with him. I was going to have to hurt him further.

"Just let me go, Charlie." I repeated my mother's last words as she'd walked out of his life into a rainy Forks evening, out this same door so many years ago. I said them as angrily as I could manage, and I threw the broken door open. "It didn't work out, okay? I really, really, really, really, really hate Forks!"

My cruel words did their job—I could see it in Charlie's eyes as my mother's words entered his ears, my words now, our voices of memory and present intermingling until they had become one, a singular rejection of him and his town. Charlie stayed frozen even as I ran into the night. I was hideously frightened of the empty yard and ran wildly for the truck, visualizing a dark shadow behind me. I threw up when I reached the door, guilt and shame twisting me to my marrow. I wrenched the door open. The key was waiting in the ignition.

I looked through the rain-soaked windshield to Charlie's slumped figure on the porch, wishing more than anything that I could explain everything to him right then, knowing I would never be able to. I gunned the engine and peeled out.

Fredward reached for my hand.

"Pull over," he said as the house, and Charlie, disappeared behind us.

"I can drive," I said through tears pouring down my cheeks.

His long hands unexpectedly gripped my waist, and his foot pushed mine off the gas pedal. Before I knew it, he'd lifted me up, wrenching my hands free of the wheel, and deposited me in the passenger seat. He smoothed his hair back before grabbing hold of the wheel. The truck didn't swerve an inch.

I threw myself at him, beating my fists against his rock-hard chest. "You asshole! Fredward, you butt!"

"You wouldn't be able to find the house," he explained.

Lights flared suddenly behind us. I stared out the back window, eyes wide with horror.

"It's just Alice," he reassured me. He took my hand again.

My mind was filled with the image of Charlie in the doorway. "The tracker?"

"He heard the end of your performance," Fredward said grimly.

"Charlie?"

"No, the tracker."

"But what about Charlie?" I wailed.

"The tracker will follow us. It's what they do. He's running behind us now."

My body went cold.

"Can we outrun him?"

"No." But he sped up as he spoke, as though he knew he was right but wanted, in his heart, to believe that he wasn't.

My plan suddenly didn't glow so brilliantly anymore.

I was staring back at Alice's headlights when the truck shuddered and a dark shadow sprung up outside the window.

My bloodcurdling scream probably curdled blood all the way from Forks to Phoenix before Fredward's hand clamped down on my mouth.

"Iiiiiiiiit's... Emmett!" He announced like a game-show host, releasing my mouth and winding his arm around my waist.

We raced through the quiet town toward the north highway.

"I didn't realize you were still so bored with small-town livin'," he said conversationally, and I knew he was trying to distract me. "It seemed like you were adjusting fairly well—especially recently. Maybe I was just flattering myself that I was making life more interesting for you."

"I wasn't being nice," I confessed, looking down at my knees. "That was the same thing my mom said when she left him. You could say I was hitting below the belt, so to say."

"Don't worry. He'll forgive you." He smiled a little, though it didn't touch his eyes. Big though his smiles were, they weren't that big.

I stared at him desperately, and he saw the naked panic in my eyes. *That* brought the smile to his eyes.

"Bella, it's going to be alright."

"But it won't be when I'm not with you," I whispered.

"Bella," he breathed. "I'm growing a little weary of having to constantly encourage you." He added quietly, apologetically, "Don't forget that this was your idea."

"It was the best idea—of course it was mine."

His answering smile was bleak and disappeared immediately. "Guess you don't need as much encouragement as you like to act like you need," he mumbled under his breath.

"Why did this happen?" I asked, my voice catching. And then I asked a question I'd heard other people ask, and never understood: "Why me?"

He stared blankly at the road ahead, into the naked panic ahead of us. "It's my fault—I was a fool to expose you like that, to expose you to my world... my ugly world." The rage in his voice was directed internally, into his guts.

"That's not what I meant," I insisted. "I was there, big deal. It didn't bother the other two. Why did this Yames character decide to kill me? There are people all over the place. Has he ever even *been* to a mall? An airport? Why me?"

He hesitated, thinking before answering.

"I got a good look at his mind tonight," he began in a low voice. "I'm not sure if there's anything I could have done to avoid this, once he saw you. It is partially your fault." His voice was wry. "If you didn't smell so appallingly lusciously awesome, he might not have been so bothered. But when I defended you... well, that made it a lot worse. He's not used to being...thwarted, as we say, no matter how insignificant the object. His existence is consumed with tracking, and a challenge is all he asks of life. Sometimes this question, this quest of an existence, comes back at him, the waves of desire reflecting back when they hit something that will not absorb them. That's you. That's you, Bella. You amplify desire at a molecular level by denying it. Suddenly, we've presented him with a beautiful challenge—a large clan of strong fighters all bent on protecting one vulnerable element. You wouldn't believe how euphoric he is now. It's his favorite game, and we've just made it the most exciting match ever. You wouldn't believe how much I've thought about this."

He paused the moment.

"But if I had stood by, he would have killed you right then," he said with hapless frustration.

"I thought... I didn't smell the same to the others... as I do to you," I said distractedly.

"You don't. But that doesn't mean you aren't still a temptation to every one of them. If you *had* appealed to the tracker—or any of them—the same way you appeal to me, it would have meant a fight right there."

I shuddered.

"I don't think I have any choice but to kill him now," he sighed. "Carbomb won't like it."

I could hear the tires cross the bridge, though I couldn't see the river in the dark. I knew we were getting close. I had to ask him now. I had to ask him in my eagerest tone.

"How do you kill a vampire?"

He glanced at me with unreadable eyes and his voice was suddenly harsh. "The only way to be sure is to tear him to shreds, and then burn the pieces."

I screamed.

"Yeah!" Fredward confirmed. "How 'bout that?" He chuckled, shifting his weight from one side of his body to the other, punching Bella in the arm softly.

I gulped. "And the other two will fight with him?"

"His woman certainly will. I'm not sure about Lurnet. They don't have a very strong bond—he's only with them for convenience. He was embarrassed by Yames in the meadow..."

"But Yames and the woman—they'll try to kill you?" I asked, my voice raw.

"Bella, don't you *dare* waste time asking me questions you already know the answer to. Your only concern should be keeping yourself safe and—please, please—*trying* not to be reckless. I know this will take all of your concentration."

"Is he still following us?"

"Yes. He won't attack the house, though. Not willy-nilly."

He turned off onto the invisible drive, with Alice following behind.

We drove right up to the house. The lights inside the house were bright, but they did little to alleviate the blackness of the encroaching forest. Emmett had my door open before the truck was stopped; he pulled me out of the seat, tucked me like a football into his vast chest, and ran me through the door.

We burst into the large white room, Fredward and Alice at our sides. All of them were there; they were already on their feet at the sound of our approach. Lurnet stood in their midst. I could hear low growls rumble deep in Emmett's throat as he set me down next to Fredward.

"He's tracking us," Fredward announced, glaring balefully at Lurnet.

Lurnet's face was unhappy. "I am unhappy of that."

Alice danced to Jasper's side and whispered in his ears; each of her lips quivered with the speed of her silent speech. They flew up the stairs together, dancing mid-air. I stared. Rosalie watched them, and then moved quickly to Emmett's side. Her beautiful eyes were intense and they flickered unwillingly to my face after swinging around the room in a desperate attempt to avoid me.

"What will he do?" Carbomb asked Lurnet in chilling tones.

"I will regret to tell you," he answered. "they will find her. They will eat her."

"Can you stop him?"

Lurnet shook his head. "No, there is nothing to stop Yames now. He is already starting on the bloodclot. There is nothing to stop him."

"We'll stop him," Emmett promised. There was no doubt that he meant business.

"No, no. You cannot do that." Lurnet meant business as well. "I am very sorry for you cannot win. Yames is killer. Please, don't try."

His coven, I thought. Of course. The show of leadership in the clearing was merely that, a show. And not a very entertaining one, if you asked me.

Lurnet was shaking his head. He glanced at me, perplexed, and back to Carbomb. "I am not very understanding. You will fight? For this?" He asked, gesturing to me.

Fredward's enraged roar filled the room; Lurnet cringed back.

Carbomb looked gravely at Lurnet. "I'm afraid you're going to have to make a choice."

Lurnet understood and laughed casually, sizing up everyone in the room, starting with me. "I do not need time for choice."

"Go in peace," was Carbomb's formal answer.

Laurnet took another long look at himself, and then he hurried out the door.

The silence lasted less than a second.

"How close?" Carbomb looked to Fredward.

Esme was already moving; her hand touched an inconspicuous keypad on the wall and with a groan, huge metal shutters began sealing up the glass wall. I gaped.

"About three miles out past the river; he's circling around to meet up with the female."

"What's the plan?"

"We break their fuckin' legs," Emmett said, punching his hand decisively.

"Actually, I was thinking we'd lead him off, and then Jasper and Alice will run her south."

"And then we break their legs?"

Fredward's tone was deadly. I hoped Yames was listening. "As soon as Bella is clear, we hunt him down."

"Fuckin' A," Emmett belched.

"I guess there's no other choice," Carlisle agreed, his face grim.

Fredward turned to Rosalie.

"Get her upstairs and trade clothes," Fredward commanded. She stared back at him with livid disbelief.

"I haven't done my laundry in *centuries*, Fredward!"

"We don't have time for jokes, Rosalie. Time is of the ess—"

"Why should I?" She hissed. "What is she to me? She's nothing, a human, a delicious little menace—a danger you've chosen to inflict on all of us."

I flinched. I couldn't believe she was such a dirty bitch, and now of all times.

"Rose..." Emmett murmured, putting one hand on her shoulder. She shook it off.

"WHY SHOULD I?" She screeched.

Fredward rolled his eyes. "You aren't the only one wearing clothes in this room, Rosalie. Esme?"

"Of course," Esme murmured.

Esme was at my side in half a heartbeat, swinging me up easily into her arms and dashing up the stairs before I could gasp in shock. Flashes of wedding arches and bridal thresholds flashed through my mind. She had strong, sure hands. I tried to stifle a blush.

"What are we doing?" I asked breathlessly as she set me down in a well lit room off the second-story hall.

"Trying to confuse the smell. It won't work for long, but it might help get you out." She shrugged out of her dress, and I gaped. Her breasts emerged with a slight lift and then settled in the air, nipples stiff, rosy, proud and ageless. As her neckline lowered further and further, I saw more of her taut body emerge; her alabaster abdomen, the soft but firm stomach, hips that rode like twin horses, and then her neat, short black triangle began to peak out.

"I... um..." I struggled to find the words, but her hands were abruptly pulling my shirt over my head. Her movements were smooth, refined; I was already topless before I realized what was happening. I quickly stripped my jeans off, but hesitated. "Even my..." I said, pointing down at myself.

She nodded and it all came off. We stood there, naked, facing each other. I didn't dare look away, for fear of missing whatever came next.

Esme handed me her dress and a pair of tights, and told me to put them on. I struggled to get my arms through the right holes and things only got worse when I got to the tights. She deftly pushed my hands away and rolled them up my legs, leaving me free to stand and shiver in pleasure. I then noticed that somehow she was already in my clothes. She pulled me back to the stairs, where Alice stood

holding a small leather bag. They each grabbed one of my elbows and half-carried me as they flew down the stairs.

It appeared that everything had been settled downstairs in our absence. Fredward and Emmett were ready to leave, Emmett carrying a heavy-looking backpack over his shoulder ("weights," he said with a wink.) Carlisle was handing something small to Esme. He turned and handed Alice the same thing—it was a tiny silver telephone.

"Esme and Rosalie will be taking your truck, Bella," he told me as he passed.

"What if I want to drive it when I come back?"

"If you come back," Rosalie said.

"They aren't taking it forever, Bella. And Rosalie, please, that's not even funny." Rosalie glanced at Carbomb with a resentful expression and he continued. "Alice, Jasper—take the Mercedes Benz. You'll need the dark tint in the south."

They nodded as well.

"We're taking the Jeep."

I was surprised to see that Carbomb intended to go with Fredward. I realized suddenly, with a stab of fear, that they made up the hunting party.

"Alice," Carbomb asked, "will they take the bait?"

Everyone watched as Alice shook her eight-ball and peered into its murky depths.

"It says, 'He'll track you. The woman will follow the truck. We should be able to leave after that.'" Her voice was certain.

"Good enough for me. Let's go." Carbomb began to walk toward the kitchen.

But Fredward was at my side at once. He caught me up in his iron grip, crushing me against his impossibly hard body. He seemed unaware of his watching family as he pressed my face to his, lifting my feet off the floor. For the shortest second, his lips were icy and hard against mine and I could barely breathe. Then it was over. He set me down, still holding my face, his glorious eyes burning into mine.

His eyes went blank, curiously dead, as he turned away.

"Fredward, why are your eyes—"

And then they were gone.

I stood there, the others looking away from me as the tears streaked noiselessly³²² down my face.

The silent moment dragged on, and then Esme's telephone vibrated in her hand. She held it to her ear, where it vibrated again.

"Hello?"

The phone vibrated a third time.

"Now!" she said. Rosalie stalked out the front door without another glance in my direction, but Esme touched my cheek as she passed.

"Be safe, baby." Her whisper lingered behind them as they slipped out the door. I heard my truck start thunderously, and then fade away.

Jasper and Alice waited. Alice's phone seemed to be at her ear before it buzzed.

"Fredward says the woman is on Esme's trail. I'll get the car." She vanished into the shadows the way Fredward had vanished into the shadows, eyes and all.

Jasper and I looked at each other. He stood across the length of the entryway from me... being careful.

"I'm dating Alice," he announced.

"Okay."

322. "I've always found it curious how tears, the very essence of crying and human sadness, are themselves silent." - The Author, *Charlie Rose*, September 9, 2009.

"I just didn't want you getting the wrong idea."

I thought about Esme and Fredward; I had all sorts of wrong ideas. "Which one would that be?"

"Nevermind." He paused. "You're wrong, you know."

"Oh yeah?"

"I can feel what you're feeling now—"

—I gasped—

"—and you are worth it."

"I'm not," I sighed. Maybe I was feeling things I didn't know I was feeling. Maybe he was being polite. "If anything happens to them, it will be for nothing."

"You're wrong," he repeated, smiling inscrutably.

I shivered, but then Alice stepped through the front door and came toward me with her arms held out.

"May I?" she asked.

"You're the first one to ask permission," I smiled.

She lifted me in her slender arms as easily as Emmett had, shielding me protectively, and then we flew out the door, leaving the lights on behind us.

20.

IMPLANTS

WHEN I WOKE UP I WAS CONFUSED. MY THOUGHTS were hazy and still twisted up in dreams of nightmares; it took me longer than it should have to realize where I was.

This room was too bland to belong to anyone but a motel. The bedside lamps bolted to the tables were a dead giveaway, as were the long drapes made from the same fabric as the bedspread, the rug, the seat upholstery, the toilet cover and the shower curtain. Generic watercolor prints of old presidents completed the scene.

I tried to remember how I got there, but nothing happened at first.

I did remember the sleek black car, the glass in the windows darker than those on a limousine. The engine purred like a kitten, though we'd raced tons of people across the black freeways at more than twice the legal speed.

And I remembered Alice laying with me on the dark leather backseat. Somehow during the long cold night, my head had ended up against her granite neck. My closeness didn't seem to bother her at all, and I know it didn't bother me: her cool, hard skin was oddly comforting. The front of her thin cotton shirt was cold and damp, mostly with the tears that streamed from my eyes. Sleep evaded me throughout the night as my mind continued to torment me; my aching, red, sore, and sometimes-dry eyes strained open even as the night finally ended.

Dawn broke over a low peak somewhere in California. The gray light, streaking across the cloudless sky, stung my eyes. But I couldn't close them; when I did, the images that flashed all too vividly, like a slideshow behind my lids, were unbearable. Charlie's broken expression; Fredward's brutal snarl, teeth bared; Rosalie's filthy glare; the keen-eyed scrutiny of the tracker; the dead look in Fredward's eyes after he kissed me the last time... I couldn't stand to see the images twist and tumble. Couldn't stand to see Charlie's brutal snarl, teeth bared; Rosalie's keen-eyed dead look in eyes that weren't even hers; the tracker's broken eyes after he kissed me; and all the other things I saw behind these lids. So I fought against my weariness and the sun rose higher.

I was still awake when we came through a shallow mountain pass and the sun, behind us now, reflected off the tiled rooftops of the Valley of the Sun. I didn't have enough emotion left to be surprised that we'd made a three-day journey into one. I stared blankly at the wide, flat expanse laid out in front of me. Phoenix—the palm trees, scrubby creosote, haphazard lines of the intersecting palm trees, green swaths of swimming pools, turquoise smears of swimming pools and all the other things I saw, all submerged in a thin smog and embraced by the short, rocky ridges that weren't big enough to be called mountains.

The shadows of the palm trees slanted across the freeway—defined, sharper than I remembered, paler than they should be. No tracker could hide in *these* shadows. The bright, open freeway seemed benign enough. But I felt no relief, no sense of homecoming.

"Which way to the airport, Bella?" Jasper had asked and I flinched, though his question was quite soft and unalarming. It was the first sound, besides the purr of the car, to break the long night's cold, wet silence, and his words had cracked like thunder against the car's pale fire.

"Stay on the I-10," I answered automatically, my knowledge of Phoenix geography rushing back to me geographically. "We'll pass right by it."

My brain worked slowly under the fog of sleep deprivation.

"Are we flying somewhere?" I'd asked Alice.

"No, but it's better to be close, just in case."

I remembered the car beginning the loop around Sky Harbor International... but not ending it. I suppose that must have been when I fell asleep, again.

Though, now that I'd chased the memories down, trying to find some sense, some meaning in what had happened, I found that I did have a vague memory of leaving the car—the sun was just dropping behind the horizon—my arm draped over Alice's shoulder and her firm arm around my waist, dragging me along as I stumbled through the shadows.

I had no memory of this room.

I had never been in this room before.

I looked about, nervously.

I looked at the digital clock on the nightstand. The red numbers claimed it was three o'clock, but not which three o'clock. No edge of light could possibly make it past the thick curtains, but the room was lit bright by lamps.

I rose stiffly and staggered to the window, pulling back the drapes.

It was dark outside. Three in the morning, then. My room looked out on a deserted section of the freeway and the new long-term parking garage for the airport. I hadn't been back to this airport since my journey began, and now here I was: now and here.

I looked down at myself. I was still wearing Esme's clothes, but the vomit had disappeared, leaving behind only brown stains. I was on my way to find new clothes when a light tap on the door made me jump.

"Can I come in?" Alice asked.

I took a breath and I took it deep. "Sure."

She walked in, and looked over at me cautiously. "You look like you could sleep longer," she said, chuckling.

I just shook my head, refusing to give her the satisfaction.

She drifted silently to the curtains and closed them securely before walking back to sit next to me on the bed.

"We'll need to stay inside," she told me.

"For how long?"

She shrugged. "Forever."

I shrugged. "I mean, I have a Biology IV test on Friday, but..." She didn't seem to be paying attention to me, so I trailed off. She didn't say anything for a minute or so, and I gave a little cough to remind her that I *even exist*. "Thirsty?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I'm okay. How about you?" I'd read that if someone was trying to get you to admit weakness, you should try to find a way to highlight their own frailty. I scanned her face for any sign of confusion, stress or feebleness.

"Nothing unmanageable." She smiled, no doubt aware of the game we were playing. "I ordered some food for you, it's in the front room. Fredward reminded me that you have to eat a lot more frequently than we do."

I chuckled. "And different stuff, too."

Alice exploded into laughter, a sound that was similar to a flock squalling over a fish carcass. "You're a sharp one," she said.

"Fredward called?"

"No," she said, and watched as my face fell. "It was before we left."

She took my hand carefully and led me through the door into the living room of the hotel suite.

I could hear a low buzz of voices coming from the TV, its blue glow the only light in the room. Jasper sat motionlessly at the desk in the corner, his eyes watching the news with no glimmer of interest.

I sat on the floor next to the coffee table, where a tray of food awaited me, and began picking at it without noticing what I was eating.³²³

I ate slowly, watching her, turning now and then to glance quickly at Jasper. It began to dawn on me that they were too still. They never looked away from the screen, though commercials were playing now. I pushed the tray away, my stomach abruptly uneasy. Alice looked down on me.

"What's wrong, Alice?" I asked.

"Nothing's wrong." Her eyes were wide, honest... and I still didn't trust them.

"What do we do now?"

"We wait for Carbomb to call."

"And he should have called by now?" I could see that I was near the mark. Alice's eyes flitted from mine to the phone on top of her leather bag and back.

"What does that mean?" My voice quavered, and I fought to control it.

She shrugged, too nonchalantly for my taste. "It means that he hasn't called yet." But her voice was too even, and the air she exhaled was rotten with deceit.

Jasper was suddenly beside Alice, closer to me than usual, almost as close to me as she was.

"Bella," he said in a suspiciously soothing voice. "You have nothing to worry about. You are completely safe here."

"I know that."

"Then why are you frightened?" he asked, confused. He might feel the tenor of my emotions, but he couldn't read the reasons behind them.

"You heard what Lurnet said." My voice was just a whisper, but I was sure they could hear me. "He said Yames was lethal. What if something goes wrong, and they get separated? If something happens to any of them, Carbomb, Emmett...*Fredward*..." I gulped hard. "If that wild female hurts Esme..." My voice had grown higher, rising above the gulp in my throat, a note of hysteria dancing lightly between the two. "How could I live with myself when it's all my fault? How could I live at *all*?"

"Bella," Jasper started.

I was still hysterical, throwing my hands up and bringing them down just to bring them up again. "How could I even...how could I even think of...living?..."

"Bella, stop," Jasper interrupted.

I didn't stop. "But Casper, I..."

"Bella," he cooed.

"Casper..." I whispered, in hysterics.

"Bella, *stop*," Alice cried, her words pouring out so quickly that they were hard to understand. "You're worrying about all the wrong things, Bella. Trust me on this—none of us are in jeopardy, much less double or final jeopardy. You are under too much strain as it is; don't add to it with wholly unnecessary worries."

"Listen to me!" Jasper suddenly yelled. "Our family is strong. Our only weakness is you!"

And with that, I burst out crying and began to wheeze irregularly.

Alice touched my erratically moving cheek with her cold fingers. "It's been almost a century that Fredward's been alone. Now he's found you. You can't see the changes that we see, hear the beautiful soul sounds that we hear, we who have been with him for so long. Do you think any of us want to look into his eyes for the next hundred years if he loses you? Do you have any idea how often we'd have to hear him play *Claire De Lune*?"

323. There exists no precise record (anywhere) of exactly what Bella was eating.

My guilt and sobbing slowly subsided as I looked into her dark eyes. But, even as the calm spread over me, I knew I couldn't trust my feelings with Jasper here.

It was so hard to know how I felt over the course of that long day. It was sort of fun staying inside all day. Alice called room service and ordered five cheeseburgers for me, with fries, and then Jasper made the bellhop feel like there were ants in his pants, and he freaked out and took them off and was wearing long johns underneath. The long johns reminded me of Charlie and when the bell hop left, the depression set in again. The windows stayed shut, the TV on, though no one watched it; nobody could stand to watch it. The silver phone resting on Alice's bag seemed to grow bigger and more silver as the hours passed.

My babysitters handled the suspense better than I did. As I fidgeted and paced, they simply grew more still, two statues whose eyes followed me imperceptibly, although I perceived it as I moved about the room. I occupied myself with memorizing the place; the striped pattern on the couches, tan, peach, cream, dull gold, puce, lemon, cherry, and tan again. Sometimes I stared at the abstract prints, randomly finding pictures in the random shapes, like I'd found pictures in clouds as a child. I traced a pale blue hand, a woman combing her spaghetti hair, a cat stretching its big old legs. But when the red circle became a staring eye, I looked for something else to do.

As the afternoon wore on, I went back to bed. I hoped that by myself in the dark, I could give in to the terrible fears that hovered on the edge of my subconsciousness, unable to break through Jasper's emotional powers.

But Alice followed me casually, as if by some coincidence she had grown tired of the front room at the same time I had, while simultaneously deciding to share a nap. I was beginning to wonder exactly what sort of instructions Fredward had given her. I lay sideways across the bed and she sat, legs folded next to me. I ignored her at first, pretending to sleep. But after a few minutes, the panic that had held off in Jasper's presence began to make itself known to me. I quickly gave up on the idea of sleep and curled up into a small ball, wrapping myself up in my legs.

"Alice?" I asked.

"Hmm?"

I kept my voice very calm. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I just thought it was time for a nice sit with my favorite human, Bella." She placed her hand on my back for emphasis.

"Oh." I thought about it for a moment. "Well, what do you think everyone else is doing?"

"Carbomb and Emmett are probably drinking beer somewhere in Manitoba, waiting for Yames to show up so that they can rip his arms off."

"Emmett can drink?"

Alice laughed softly. "He's much older than he looks. *Much* older."

"And Esme?"

"She'll knock a few back every now and then. She and Rosalie are probably arguing about how jealous Rosalie is that Emmett said you had a good idea. Emmett has *never* said something like that about Rosalie."

"Wow." And I bet he never will, either.

"So anyways, they're keeping an eye on Charlie while also keeping a low profile. Esme wouldn't risk calling if there's any chance the female will overhear. I expect they're just being very careful."

"And Rosalie?"

"What about her?" Alice laughed. "Esme hasn't even gotten her a phone yet. She thinks she'll spend all her minutes talking to Emmett."

I sighed with pleasure. It was good to know that I wasn't the only one who thought things about

Rosalie. "But do you think they're safe, really?"

"Bella Emma Duck, how many times do we have to tell you that there's no danger to us?"

"Would you tell me the truth, though?"

"Yes. I will always tell you the truth." Her voice was earnest.³²⁴

I deliberated for a moment, and decided that she really was earnest.

"Tell me then... how do you become a vampire?"

My question caught her off guard. She was quiet. I rolled over to look at her, and her expression seemed ambivalent. I wondered if I was out of bounds.

"Fredward doesn't want me to tell you that," she said firmly, but I sensed that she didn't agree.

"But I sense that you don't agree."

"I know."

I looked at her, waiting.

She sighed. "He'll be *extremely* angry."

"He's *always* extremely angry," I sighed. "Besides, it's none of his business. This is between us girls. Alice, as a friend, as a *girlfriend*, I'm begging you."

She looked at me with her splendid wise eyes, choosing.

"I'll tell you the mechanics of it," she said finally, "but I don't remember it myself. And I've never done it before, so keep that in mind."

I grunted.

"As predators, we have a glut of weapons in our physical arsenal—much, much more than really necessary. The strength, the speed, the acute senses, not to mention those of us like Fredward, Jasper and I, who have super powers as well. And then, like a carnivorous flower, we are physically attractive to our prey."

I was very still, remembering how Fredward had demonstrated the same concepts for me in the meadow.

She smiled wide. "We also have another superfluous weapon. We're also venomous," she said.

"The venom doesn't kill—it incapacitates. It works slow, widening the veins so much that, once bitten, our prey is in too much physical pain to escape us.

"Mostly superfluous, as I said. If we're that close, the prey doesn't escape: we do, with blood mustaches. Of course, there are always exceptions. Carbomb, for example."

"So... so if this... *venom*... is left to spread..." I murmured.

"It takes a few days for the transformation to be complete, depending on how much venom is in the bloodstream, and how it enters the heart. As long as the heart keeps beating, the poison spreads, healing, changing the body. Eventually the heart stops, and a vampire is born. But all that time, every minute of it, the victim would be wishing for death. Total death. Forever."

I shivered at the thought.

"It's not pleasant, you see."

"No way."

"It's pretty bad."

"Yes. Well, Fredward said that it was very hard to do... I don't quite understand," I said, "why he said that."

"Well don't forget, we're also like sharks as well. Once we taste the blood, or even smell it for that matter, it becomes very hard to keep from feeding. Sometimes even impossible. So you see, to actually bite someone, to taste the blood, is to begin the frenzy. It's a demon hell-ride for both sides—vampire *and* human."

324. *Goes to Camp, Saves Christmas, Goes to Jail, Scared Stupid, Rides Again, Goes to School, Goes to Africa, Back in the Saddle, The Return of, Can't Stop, The Importance of Being, and Other Unbearable Likenesses.*

"Damn, that's a cunt sandwich."

Alice shrugged. "I dunno. For everyone else, the pain of transformation is the sharpest memory they've ever had of being human. I remember nothing." Her voice was wistful.

We lay silently, wrapped in our individual meditations on life and death.

The seconds ticked by as I stopped having things to meditate on.

Then, without any warning, Alice leaped from the bed, landing lightly on her feet. My head jerked as I stared at her, startled.

"Something's changed." Her voice was urgent, and she wasn't talking to just me anymore.

She reached the door at the same time the Jopster did. He had obviously been listening in. He put his hands on her shoulders and guided her back to the bed, sitting her on the edge.

"What you see?" he asked intently, staring into her face. Her face was focused on something very far away. I sat close to her, leaning in to see if I could catch a reflection of it in her eyes.

"I see a room. It's long, and there are mirrors everywhere. The floor is wooden. He's in the room, and he's waiting. There's gold... a gold stripe across the mirrors."

"Like a balance bar?" I thought of my old ballet gym, where I first learned my moves.

"I don't know. Something is missing—another decision hasn't been made yet."

"How much time?"

"It's soon. He'll be in the mirror room today, or maybe tomorrow. It all depends on what he does. He's waiting for something. And he's in the dark now."

Jaster's voice was calm, methodological, as he questioned her in a practiced way. "What is he wearing?"

"It's too dark. He's watching TV... no, he's running a VCR and watching in the dark, in another place."

"Can you see what he's watching?"

"No, it's too dark."

"And the mirror room, what else is there?"

"Just the mirrors, and the gold. It's a band, a gold band wrapping around the room. And there's a black table with a big black stereo and a TV which is also black. He's touching the VCR there, but he doesn't watch the way he does in the dark room. This is the room where he waits." Her eyes drifted, then focused on Jasper's face.

"There's nothing else?"

She shook her head. They shook their heads at each other, motionless.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

Neither of them answered for a moment, then Jasper looked at me.

"What do you think, Bella? Do you think it means that the tracker's plans have changed? That he's made a decision that will lead him to the mirror room, and the dark room?"

"Well, yeah, but don't we know where those rooms are?"

"No."

"But we do know that he won't be in the mountains north of Washington, being hunted. He'll elude them." Alice's voice was bleak.

"Should we call?" I asked. They traded a serious look, undecidedly.

And the phone vibrated.

Alice was across the room before I could lift my head to look at it. Dang!

She held the phone to her ear, but didn't speak first.

The phone vibrated.

"Carbomb," she breathed. She didn't seem surprised.

The phone vibrated twice.

"Yes," she said, glancing at me. She listened to its continued vibrations for a long moment.

"I just saw him." She described again the vision she'd seen. "Whatever made him get on that plane... it was leading him to those rooms." She paused. "Yes," Alice said into the phone, and then she spoke to me. "Bella?"

She held the phone out toward me. I ran to it.

"Hello?" I breathed.

The phone vibrated against my ear.

"Oh, FREDWARD! I was so WORRIED!" I didn't even know where to begin telling him about my frustrations: the hours spent memorizing hotel furniture, Jasper's cruel barbs, and the constant anguish...!

The phone vibrated again, faster and then slower. I got the sense that Fredward was saying something about how annoyed he was that I was worrying. I decided to ignore it.

"Where are you?"

More vibrations. I didn't really understand how these new cellular phones worked, how you were supposed to converse. They weren't like any other phone I'd ever used before. It was as if I could feel Fredward's words in my cells, and the more I used it, the clearer those words got...

"...We're outside of Vancouver, Bella. That's in Canada. I'm sorry. We've lost him." Fredward was breathing hard between sentences. "He seems suspicious of us. I think he knows I can read his mind, but he's gone now. It looks like he got on a plane, although I'm not positive. It could have been an airbus. We think he's heading back to Forks to start over." I could hear Alice breathing behind me.

"I know. Alice saw that he got away."

"You don't have to worry, though. You don't have to worry about anything but yourself. I told you not to. You just have to stay there with Casper and Alice, okay? You just have to stay there and eat cheeseburgers and let me love you. Do you understand?"

I felt like Nancy Drew getting shoved aside by the Hardy Boys.

"I'll be fine," I lied. "Is Esme with Charlie?"

"Yes—the female has been in town. She went to the house, but while Charlie was at work. She hasn't gone near him, so don't be afraid. He's safe with Esme and Rosalie watching."

"What are you wearing?"

"Um, well, I guess I'm wearing a snug, ¾ length charcoal grey t-shirt and some dark wash Levi's 510 Super Skinny Jeans."

"I miss you," I whispered into the phone, hoping that Alice wouldn't be able to hear me over the sound of her own breathing.

"I know, Bella. Believe me, I know." He paused. "So what are *you* wearing?" He giggled.

I giggled! "I'm wearing... your mom's dress, some big slippers, um... ketchup?... "

There was a silence. "Would you like me to go on?" I whispered in my most sensual voice.

Fredward's voice cracked when he replied: "No, thanks."

"I love you," I reminded him.

"Could you believe that, despite everything we've put each other through, that we love each other?"

"What?"

"I'll come for you soon."

"I'll come for you anytime."

"I'll be waiting."

"Me too."

As soon as the phone went dead, the cloud of depression began to creep over me again.

I turned to give the phone back to Alice and found her out in the living room, bent over the table

and sketching on a piece of hotel stationery while getting pounded by Jasper's bone. I leaned on the back of the couch, looking over her shoulder.

She drew a long room: a long, rectangular room. The wooden planks that made up the floor were stretched lengthwise across the room. Down the walls were lines denoting the breaks in the mirrors. And then, wrapping around the walls, waist high, a long band. Alice had said the band was gold.

"It's a ballet studio," I said, suddenly recognizing the familiar shapes: squares, etc.

They looked at me, surprised.

"Do you know this room??" Jasper yelled, with an undercurrent of something I couldn't identify. Alice bent her head to her work, her hand flying across the page now, the shape of an emergency exit taking shape against the back wall, the stereo and TV on a low table by the front right corner.

"It's, it's..." I stuttered. "It's *my* ballet studio." I paused, recollecting myself. "When I was eight or nine, before I was diagnosed with...well, it was shaped just the same." I touched the page, tracing the outline of the rectangular-shaped room. "That's where the bathrooms were. The bathrooms were *right there*. The doors were through the other dance floor. But the stereo was here,"—I pointed to the left corner—"it was older, and there wasn't a television, much less a VCR. There was a window in the waiting room—you would see the room from this perspective if you looked through it. Like, through the window into the room. From the other room."

Alice and Jasper were staring at me.

"Are you sure it's the same room??" Jasper yelled suddenly.

"No, not at all—I suppose most dance studios would look the same—the mirrors, the bar, the gold band, the stereo, the floor, the walls, the ceiling..." I traced my finger along the ballet bar set against the mirrors. "It's just the shape that looked familiar." I touched the door, set in exactly the same, familiar place as the one I remembered: on the wall.

"Would you have any reason to go there now?" Alice asked, breaking my reverie.

"No, I haven't been there in almost ten years. I was a terrible dancer, even then—they always put me in the back for recitals, or told me the wrong time to come, so I'd show up as everyone was leaving," I admitted.

"So there's no way it could be connected with you?" Alice asked.

"No, I don't even think the same person owns it. I'm sure it's just another dance studio, somewhere."

"Where was the studio you went to?" Jasper yelled suddenly. Sweat was dripping down his brow.

"It was just around the corner from my mom's house. I used to walk there after school..." I said, my voice trailing off. I didn't miss the look they exchanged.

"Here in Phoenix, then?" His voice was casual as a jacket.

"Yes," I whispered. "Fifty-Eighth Street and Cactus."

We all sat in silence, staring at the drawing.

"Alice, is that phone safe?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can I use it to call my mom?"

"Yes," she reassured me. "That number would just trace back to Washington."

"Then I can use it to call my mom."

"I thought she was in Florida."

"She is—but she might also be in Arizona, and she can't come back to that house while..." My voice trembled. I was thinking about something Fredward had said, about the red-haired female at

Charlie's house, at the school, where my records would be lying out in the open for everyone to see.

"How will you reach your mommy?"

"They don't have a permanent number except at the house—she's supposed to check her messages regularly."

"Jasper?" Alice asked.

"What?"

"What do you think about it?"

He paused. "What do I think about what?"

Alice sighed and nodded, giving me the go ahead. I reached eagerly for the phone and dialed the familiar number, the one I'd come to know as my own since we'd escaped the dismal town of Forks. The phone rang four times, and then I heard my mom's breezy voice telling me to leave her a message.

"Mom," I said after the beep, "me. It's me. Listen, I need you to do something. It's important. As soon as you get this message, call me at this number." Alice was already at my side, writing the number for me on the bottom of her picture. I read it carefully, twice. "It's 360-273-8326. Please don't go anywhere until you talk to me; your life could be in danger. Don't worry about me, I'm okay." I winked at Alice and Jasper. "But I have to talk to you right away, no matter how late you get this call, all right? Okay. I love you Mom. Bye." I closed my eyes and prayed to God with all my might that no unforeseen change of plans would bring her home before she got my message.

I settled into the sofa, nibbling on a plate of left-over fruit, anticipating another long evening/day. I thought about calling Charlie, telling him that there might be a vampire after him, too, but I wasn't sure if he'd believe me or not. I concentrated on the news, watching out for stories about Florida maulings, or about spring training massacres due to blitzkrieg vampire strikes, vampire-related hurricanes or joint Arab-Vampire terrorist attacks—anything that might send them home early.

Immortality must grant endless patience. Neither Jasper nor Alice seemed to feel the need to do anything at all. Since I hung up the phone and flooped down on the couch, the two of them hadn't moved a millimeter. Alice stood next to where I'd made the phone call, drawing still in hand, and her timeless eyes staring somewhere past the wall in front of her. Jasper, too, seemed to have no urge to pace, or peek through the curtains, or run screaming out the door, the way I did. He simply stood there next to the television, staring.

I must have fallen asleep on the couch, waiting for the phone to ring again. The touch of Alice's cold, dead hands woke me briefly as she carried me to the bed, but I was unconscious again before she could tuck me in.

21.

GIRL TALK

I COULD FEEL IT WAS TOO EARLY—AGAIN—WHEN I WOKE, and I knew I was getting the schedule of my days and nights slowly reversed. I lay in my bed and listened to the quiet voices of Alice and Jasper in the other room. It was strange that they were loud enough for me to hear at all. I rolled across the bed until my feet touched the floor and then staggered to the living room. The clock channel on the TV said it was just after two in the morning. Alice and Jasper were sitting together on the sofa, Alice sketching again while Jasper looked over her shoulder. They didn't look up when I entered, too engrossed in what Alice was drawing to notice me. I crept to Jasper's side for a peek.

"BOO!" I cried, shaking him by the shoulders.

Jasper sighed. "Bella, I could hear your eyelids open when you woke up. You will never sneak up on me."

"Fine." Jasper was turning into such a jerk and I couldn't wait until I was back with Fredward so that I could tell him all about it. I memorized every detail of this moment for later, and then I asked, "Did Alice see something more?"

"Yes. Something has brought him back to the room with the VCR, but it's light now."

I watched as Alice drew a square room with dark beams across its low ceiling. The walls were paneled in wood, a little too dark, out of date. The floor had a dark carpet with coffee stains on it. There was a large window against the south wall, and an opening through the west wall led to the living room. One side of that entrance was stone—a large tan stone fireplace that was open to both rooms. The focus of the room from this perspective, the TV and VCR, balanced on a too-small stool, were in the southwest corner of the room. An aged sectional sofa curved around in front of the TV, a round coffee table in front of it.

I'd seen this place before.

"The phone goes there," I whispered dramatically, pointing with one big finger down at the paper.

Two pairs of eternal eyeballs stared at me.

"That's my mother's house."

A slow horror slowly crept over us. Alice was already off the couch, phone in hand, dialing. I stared at the precise rendering of my mother's family room. Uncharacteristically, Jasper slid close to me. He lightly touched his hand to my shoulder, and the physical contact seemed to make his calming influence stronger. The panic stayed dull, unfocused.

"That is my mother's house."

Alice's lips were trembling with the speed of her words, the low buzzing impossible to decipher. I couldn't concentrate on deciphering anything anymore.

"Bella," Alice said.

I looked at her numbly. "That is my mother's house."

"Bella, Fredward is coming to get you. He and Emmett and Carbomb are going to take you somewhere, to hide you for a while."

"I thought I was hiding," I mumbled.

"Yes, but Fredward—"

"Fredward is coming?" The words were like a life vest: orange, neon, buoyant, holding my head above the flood of emotion.

"Yes, he's catching the first flight out of Seattle. We'll meet him at the airport, and you'll leave with him."

"But, my mommy... he came here for my momommy, Alice!" Despite Jasper, the hysteria bubbled up in my throat.

"Fredward's coming for *you*, honey. Not your mother."

"NO!" I flailed, lashing out at the couch. "No, the vampire that wants to kill my mom!"

"Jasper and I will stay 'til she's safe."

"Can't you see?" I screeched. "Because I can! My eyes are wide open and I can totally see. This is just what he wants! Are you blind? He's not tracking me at all. Why would he? I'm just ugly old Bella Duck, nothing special. Who he wants are the people I love, and he'll hurt them just to get to me... Alice, I can't—"

I was lightheaded from all the shouting and fell over before I could finish, right into Alice's arms. She held me and said, "We'll catch him Bella. That's a promise."

"But what if you get hurt, Alice? Do you think that's okay with me? Do you think it's only my human family he can hurt me with? Can you even *feel* emotions, Alice? Do you know what it's like?"

Alice looked meaningfully at Jasper. A deep, heavy fog of lethargy washed over me, and my eyes closed without my permission. My mind struggled against the fog, realizing what was happening. I forced my eyes open and stood up, stepping away from Jasper's groping hand.

"I don't want to go back to sleep," I snapped.³²⁵

I walked to my room and shut the door, slammed it, so I would be free to go to pieces privately. This time Alice didn't follow me. For three and a half hours I stared at the wall, curled in a ball, rocking. My mind went around in circles, trying to come up with some way out of this nightmare. I wished I had my Jane Austen with me, but there was no escape, no reprieve. I could see only one possible end looming darkly in my future. The only question was how many other people I'd hurt doing it, and if they'd care.

The only solace, the only hope I had left, was knowing that I was young and in love. Maybe, if I could just see his face again, I would also be able to see the solution that eluded me now: maybe in his high cheekbones I would find my future.

When the phone rang, I returned to the front room, a little ashamed of my behavior. I hoped I hadn't offended either of them, that they would still think of me as Bella Duck the beautiful, Bella Swan the divine.

Alice was talking as rapidly as ever, but what caught my attention was that, for the first time, Jasper was not in the room. I looked at the clock—it was five-thirty in the morn.

"They're just boarding the plane," Alice told me. "They'll land at nine-forty-five." Just a few more hours to keep breathing 'til he was here.

"Where's the Jap?"

"He went to check out."

"You aren't staying here?"

"No, we're relocating to a hideout closer to your mother's house."

Out of nowhere the phone rang again, distracting me. Alice looked surprised, but I was already walking forward, reaching hopefully for the phone.

"Hello?" Alice asked. "No, she's right here." She held the phone out to me. Your mother, she

325. "One of my motivations in writing the Twilight Saga was to show the scientific community that sleep was an emotion, not just a physical activity." The Author, Harvard Commencement Speech 2015

mouthed.

"Hello? Mommy?"

"Bella? Bella? Bella? Bella?" It was my mother's voice, in a familiar tone I had heard a thousand times in my childhood, anytime I'd gotten too close to the edge of the sidewalk or tried to go home with a strange man. It was the sound of maternal panic.

I sighed. I'd been expecting this. I could always count on my mom to freak out over nothing.

"Calm down, mommy," I said in my smoothest voice, walking slowly away from Alice. I wasn't sure if I could lie with her timeless eyes on me. "Everything is fine, you know? Just give me a minute, and I'll tell you about it."

I paused, surprised that she hadn't interrupted me yet. Was she dead? Already? I worried.

"Mommy?"

"Be berry careful not to say anything until I tell you to say something." The voice I heard now was as unfamiliar as it was unexpected. And by that, I mean it *definitely* wasn't my mom. It was a man! His voice was a solid tenor with firm musical overtones; a very pleasant, generic voice—the kind that you heard in the background of luxury car commercials. He spoke very quickly, like he was trying to sell me something luxurious.

"Now, I don't need to hurt your mother. So please do exactly what I say, and she'll be *fine*." The emphasis on 'fine' made me feel sick to my stomach again. He paused for a minute while I listened in mute horror. "That's berry good," he congratulated. "Now, repeat after me. And do try to sound natural. Do say, 'No, Mom, stay where you are.'"

I was silent.

The voice boomed in my ear: "Say it now, Belna."

"Ohhhhh," I said aloud. I had thought I was still waiting for further instruction.

I stuttered. "N-no, Mom, stay where you are." My voice was bearly more than a whisper.

"I can see this is going to be... difficult." The voice was annoyed but amused. "Why don't you walk into another room now so that your face doesn't ruin *EBERYTHING*? There's no reason for your mother to suffer. As you're walking away, please say, 'Mom, please listen to me.'" He paused, and then added: "I would like you to say it now, as in right after I'm finished giving you this instruction."

"Mom, please listen to me," my voice pleaded. I walked very slowly to the bedroom, feeling Alice's worried stare on my back. I shut the door behind me, trying to think clearly through the terror that gripped my fumbling brain with its steady tentacles.

"There now, are you alone? Just answer yes or no."

"Yes."

"But they can still hear you, I'm sure."

"Yes."

"All right, then," the voice continued. "Say, 'Mom, trust me.'"

"Mom, trust me."

"This worked out rather better than I expected. I was prepared to wait, but your mother arrived ahead of schedule. It's easier this way, isn't it? Less surprise, less anxiety for you."

I waited. Was this a prank call? A joke?

"Now I want you to listen berry carefully. I'm going to need you to get away from your friends; do you think you can do that? Answer yes or no."

"No."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping you'd be a little more creative than that. I guess you're just a pussy. Guess I'm just going to have to kill your mom."

I almost gasped. Somehow, there had to be some way to stop some of this madness. I remembered that we were going to the airport. The Phoenix Airport: crowded, famous, confusingly laid

out, windows up the...

"Yes."

"That's better. I'm sure it won't be breezy, but if I get the slightest hint that you have any company, well, I'll have to kill your mother," the voice promised. "You must know enough about us by now to realize how quickly I would know if you tried to bring anyone along with you. I'd probably know you were doing it before you knew you were doing it. And how little time I would need to deal with your mother if that was the case. Do you understand? Answer yes or no."

"I guess," I sighed. This was going to be really, really difficult.

"Very good, Belna. Now this is what you have to do. I want you to go to your mother's house. Next to the phone there will be a number. It will be written on a piece of paper. I need you to pick up the phone, and use it to call the number. You will hear my voice through the receiver, telling you where to go." I already knew where I would go, and where this would end... how I, Bella Duck, would end. But I would follow his instructions exactly. "Can you do that? Answer yes or no."

"Yes."

"Before noon, please, Belna. I haven't got all day. I've only got half of the day."

"Where's Phil?" I asked tersely.

"Who?"

"Exactly," I said, feeling a sudden camaraderie with the voice. So we both hated Phil; maybe this wouldn't turn out as poorly as I thought.

I waited.

"It's important, now, that you don't make your friends suspicious when you go back to them. Tell them that your mother called, and that you talked her out of coming home for the time being. Now repeat after me, 'Thank you, Mommy.' Say it now."

"Thank you, Mom." The tears were coming. I tried to fight them back into their eyeholes.

"Say, 'I love you, Mom. I'll see you soon.' Say it now."

"I love you, Mom." My voice was thick with emotion. "I'll see you soon," I promised.

"Goodbye, Belna. I *really* look forward to seeing you again." He hung up.

I held the phone to my ear. My joints were *frozen* with *terror*. I could hardly move. It was like I was already dead.³²⁶

I knew I had to think, but my head was filled with the sound of my mother's audible panic. Seconds ticked by while I fought for control over my joints.

Slowly, slowly, my thoughts started to break past the brick wall of psychic pain. To plan. For I had no choices now but one: to go to the mirrored room. And die. I had no guarantees, nothing to keep my mother alive. I could only hope that Yames would be satisfied with winning the game, that beating Fredward would be enough. Despair gripped me once more; there was no way to bargain, nothing I could offer or withhold that would influence him. But I still had no choice. I had to try.

I punished the terror as well as I could. Sent it to the corner, threatened a spanking... My decision was made. It did no good to waste time agonizing over the outcome. I was going to die in a mirrored room. It could be worse, right? I could be in a concentration camp. I could have been gang-raped in Fort Angles. I could have never loved at all.

I had to think clearly because Alice and Jasper were waiting for me and evading them was absolutely essential, and essentially impossible.

I was suddenly grateful that Jasper had gone to check out. If he had been here to feel my anguish in the last five minutes, how could I have kept them from being suspicious? I choked back the

326. "I originally intended for this to be the end of the novel, but wound up adding the rest when the publisher bounced it back to me and requested a more 'round' ending. Roundabout, is more like it." The Author, *The Charlie Rose Show*, September 5 2032

dread, the anxiety, tried to stifle it. I couldn't afford it now.

I concentrated on my escape. I had to hope that my familiarity with the airport would turn the odds in my favor. Somehow, I had to keep Alice away... from me...

I knew Alice was in the other room waiting, crying if not dying of curiosity. But I had to deal with one more thing in private, before Jasper returned.

I had to accept that I wouldn't see Fredward again, not even in Heaven, not even one last glimpse of his sparkly diamondskin to carry with me to the mirror room. I was going to hurt him, and I couldn't even say goodbye. I let the waves of torture wash over me, have their way for a time. Then I pushed those back, too, and went to find Alice.

The only expression I could manage was a dull, dead look. For some reason, it was always the easiest one. I saw her alarm and I didn't wait for her to ask.

"Mommy was worried. She wanted to come home. But it's okay. I convinced mommy to stay away." My voice was lifeless; my performance was brilliant.

"We'll make sure she's fine, Bella, don't worry."

I turned away; I couldn't let her see that I was cracking a smile. My performance so was brilliant.

My eye fell on the stack of hotel stationery that Jasper and Alice had been bending each other over on the previous day. I went to it slowly, a plan forming. There was an envelope there, too. That was good, very good.

"Alice," I asked slowly, without turning, keeping my voice level. "If I write a letter for my mother, would you give it to her? Leave it at the house, I mean."

"Sure, Bella." Her voice was careful. She could see me coming apart at the seams. I had to keep my emotions under better control.

I went to the bedroom again, and knelt next to the little bedside table to write.

"Fredward," I wrote. My hand was shaking; the letters were hardly legible.

I love you. I am so sorry. He has my mom, and I have to try. I have to try before it's too late, before you can stop me. I'm not sure what I'm going to do, but I have to do it. I know it may not work. I am so very, very sorry. I am so sorry I love you.

Don't be angry with Alice and Jasper. If I get away from them it will be a miracle. Tell them thank you for me. Alice especially, please.

Please.

And please, please, please don't come after him. That's what he wants. I think. I'm not sure, but I can't bear it if anyone has to be hurt because of me, especially you. Please, this is the only thing I can ask you now. For me.

Let me die.

I love you. Forgive me. Etc.
Bella.

I folded the letter carefully once, twice, three times a lady, and sealed it in an envelope with a kiss. Eventually he would find it. I only hoped he would understand my sacrifice, and listen to me just this once.

And then I carefully sealed away my heart.

22.

HIDE-AND-PEEK

IT HAD TAKEN MUCH LESS TIME THAN I'D THOUGHT—all the terror, despair, and the shattering sealing of my heart. The minutes were ticking by more slowly than ever before. Jasper still hadn't come back when I returned to Alice. I was afraid to be in the same room with her, afraid that she would guess my secret... and I was afraid to hide from her for the same reason.

I would have thought I was far beyond the ability to be surprised, my thoughts tortured as they were, but I *was* surprised when I saw Alice bent over the desk, gripping the edge with two hands.

"Alice?"

She didn't react when I called her name, but her head was slowly rocking side to side, her bare buttocks and clean-shaven area mimicking the motion, and I saw her face. Her eyes were blank, dazed... My thoughts flew to my mother. They flew to Africans in mudhuts. They flew anywhere but here. I tried to avert my eyes, but couldn't.

"Alice!" Jasper's voice whipped, and then he was right behind her, his hands curling over hers, loosening them from their grip on the table.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She turned her face away from me, into his chest. "Bella," she gasped.

I blushed. "I have no idea what she's talking about. I just walked in and she was like that."

Her head twisted around, her eyes locking on mine, their expression still strangely blank. I realized at once she hadn't been accusing me; she'd had another vision, and it was of me.

"What did you see?" I said.

Jasper looked at me sharply. I kept my expression vacant and waited. His eyes were confused as they flickered swiftly between Alice's face and mine, feeling the chaos... for I could guess what Alice had seen now: me in a dimly lit ballet studio with Yames bathing in my blood.

It remained a mystery why she was so naked.

I felt a tranquil atmosphere settle around me. I welcomed it, using it to keep my emotions disciplined and under control.

Alice, too, recovered herself.

"Nothing, really," she answered finally, her voice remarkably calm and convincing. "You know how it is sometimes." She laughed at herself, rolling her eyes. Jasper made some supportive yuk-yuk sounds.

She finally looked at me, her expression smooth and withdrawn. "Did you want breakfast?"

"Does the Pope hate fags?"³²⁷ I chortled. "No, I'll eat at the airport." I was very calm, too. I went to the bathroom to shower. Almost as if I were borrowing Jasper's strange extra sense, I could feel Alice's wild—though well-concealed—desperation to have me out of the room, to be alone with Jasper so she could tell him that they were doing something wrong, that maybe in the eyes of the Lord they

327. It is unclear what Pope Benedict XVI's current stance on homosexual persons is. Prior to his election as Pope, Benedict twice cosigned letters in 1986 and 1992 that said that, while the homosexual inclination itself is not a sin, "it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder." Since his 2005 election, Benedict has avoided speaking on the issue altogether.

shouldn't be doing this, that they were going to fail...

I got ready methodically, concentrating on each little task. I let my hair down, swirling it around me, covering my face with it. The peaceful mood Jasper created worked its way through my brain and helped me think clearly. I grabbed a hairbrush and sang "Fantasy"³²⁸ to myself in the mirror while I planned. By the time I forgot the rest of the lyrics, I had it all worked out. I dug through my bag until I found my dirty sock full of nugs. I emptied it into my pocket.

I was anxious to get to the airport, and glad when we left by seven. I sat alone this time in the back of the dark car. Alice leaned against the door, her face toward Jasper but shooting me glances from behind her sunglasses every few seconds. As if I would just roll out the car while it was still moving; get a life, Alice.

"Alice?" I asked.

She was wary. "Yes?"

"How does it work? How are you so cool?" I stared out the side window and my voice sounded dreamy. "Fredward said it wasn't definite... that you weren't always cool." It was harder than I would have thought to say his name. That must have been what alerted Jasper, why a fresh wave of serenity filled the car.

"Yes, things change...," she murmured. "Some people are more cool than others... like the weather. It's hard to be cool. I'm only really cool when I'm not trying to be, you know? Once I change what I'm doing, once I start *being* cool—no matter how hard I try not to—the whole thing changes."

I nodded thoughtfully. "So what about Yames? Is he cool?"

"Absolutely not. You can tell; he's trying *way* too hard."

And she hadn't even said anything about me, if I was cool. Maybe I wasn't; or maybe I was. Maybe Yames was trying to be cool by getting to me, by feeding off of my coolness. Maybe that's what she saw this morning. I tried not to think about what else she might have seen. I didn't want my panic to make Jasper more suspicious. They would be watching me twice as carefully now, after Alice's vision. This was going to be *impossible*.

We got to the airport. Luck was with me, or maybe it was just good vibes. Fredward's plane was landing in terminal four, the largest one and where most flights landed, but also the terminal I needed: the biggest, the most confusing, and the one with the door on level three that might be my only chance.

We parked on the fourth, and overall largest, floor of the huge garage. I led the way, for once more knowledgeable about my surroundings than they were. We took the elevator down to level three, where the passengers unloaded. Alice and Jasper spent a long time looking at the departing flights board. I could hear them discussing the pros and cons of Jew York, Blacklanta, Mickago. Places I'd never seen. 'And never would see,' I thought to myself.

I waited for my opportunity, impatiently unable to stop my toe from tapping. We sat in the long row of chairs by the airline counters, Jasper and Alice pretending to people-watch but really just person-watching: me. Every inch I shifted in my seat was followed by a quick glance and Jasper clearing his throat. It was hopeless. Should I run? Would they dare stop me, physically, with their hard bodies? Or would they just run alongside until I wore myself out and fell over?

I pulled the unmarked envelope out of my pocket and set it on top of Alice's black leather bag. She looked at me.

"My letter," I said. She nodded, tucking it under the top flap. He would find it soon enough.

The minutes passed and Fredward's arrival grew closer. It was amazing how every cell in my body seemed to know he was coming, to long for his coming. That made it very hard. I found myself trying to think of excuses to stay, things I could tell myself so that I could see him first before running

328. Mariah Carey, 1995

off to get torn to shreds. But I knew it was impossible, that I was too unreasonable and too stubborn, and too much my own woman to let anyone get in the way of me achieving my own goals.

Several times Alice offered to go get breakfast with me. Later, I told her. Not yet.

I stared at the arrival board, watching as flight after flight arrived on time. The flight from Seattle crept closer to the top of the board.

And then, when I had only thirty minutes to make my escape, the numbers changed. His plane was ten minutes early. I had no more time.

"I think I'll eat now," I said quickly.

Alice stood. "I'll come with you."

"Do you mind if Jasper comes instead?" I asked. "I'm feeling a little..." I didn't finish the sentence, instead making a wibbly-wobbly hand gesture. My eyes were wild enough to convey what I didn't say.

Jasper stood up. Alice's eyes were confused, but—I saw to my relief—not suspicious. She must be attributing the change in her psychic vision to some maneuver of the tracker's rather than a betrayal by Duck: Bella Duck.

Jasper walked silently beside me, his hand on the small of my back, rubbing, as though searching for something. I pretended a lack of interest in the first few airport cafes. "That one looks expensive," I said to the first. "Those sandwiches look too cold," I said, regarding the second. All the while, my head was scanning for what I really wanted. And there it was, around the corner and out of Alice's sharp sight: the three-level ladies' room.³²⁹

"Do you mind?" I asked Jasper as we passed.

He shrugged. "No."

As I turned to walk into the first-level entrance of the three-level ladies' room, I still felt Jasper's hand on the small of my back.

I coughed. "Jasper. This is a solo venture." He removed his hand.

As soon as the door shut behind me, I was running. I remembered the time I had gotten lost inside this bathroom, because it had twelve exits.

Outside the far door it was only a short sprint to the elevators, and if Jasper stayed where he said he would, I'd never be in his line of sight. I didn't even look behind me as I ran. I just ran.

People stared, but I ignored them; I just ran. Around the corner the elevators were waiting for me, opening up before I even approached them. I dashed forward, throwing my hand into the elevator before my body, desperate in my blind panic to get inside. People stared, but I ignored them, squeezing in beside the irritated passengers and checking to make sure that the button for level one had already been really pushed. It was already lit, and the doors closed. I pushed it again.

As soon as the door opened I was off again, running at the speed of light, at the speed of sound, the sound of annoyed murmurs behind me. If only they knew what I was really running from... I slowed myself as I passed the security guards by the luggage carousels, only to break into a run again as the exit doors came into view. I had no way of knowing if Jasper was looking for me yet, but I secretly hoped that he was, even though I hoped he wasn't.

I would only have seconds—literally, *seconds*—if he was following my scent. I jumped out the automatic doors, nearly smacking into the glass when they opened too slowly.

I catapulted out into the heat like a cannonball being flung from a catapult, landing in an elegant somersault along the crowded curb where there wasn't a cab in sight.

I had no time. Alice and Jasper were either about to realize I was gone, or they already had. It was an either/or situation and they would find me in a heartbeat.

329. The Phoenix International Airport is also home to the world's first and only three-story bathroom for ladies.

A shuttle to the Hyatt Hotel was just closing its doors a few feet behind me when I finally noticed it.

"Wait!" I called, running, waving both arms at the driver, jumping up and down and kicking my feet from side to side.

"This is the shuttle to the Hyatt!" the driver said in utter confusion as he opened the doors.

"Yes," I huffed, "that's where I'm going." I hurried up the steps.

"You?" He demanded mockingly. "You?!" He was positively bewildered. "You don't look like you just got off a plane. You don't even have any luggage!"

I pushed past him without making eye contact. Most of the seats were empty. I sat as far from the other travelers as possible, and watched out the window as first the sidewalk and then the airport drifted away. I couldn't help imagining Fredward, where he would stand at the edge of the road when he found the end of my trail. I couldn't cry yet, I told myself. I still had a long way to go before it would be time to cry.

My luck held. In front of the Hyatt, a tired-looking couple was getting their last suitcase out of the trunk of a cab. A cab I wanted to get into, immediately! I jumped out of the shuttle and ran to the cab, sliding into the seat, real smooth, behind the driver. The tired couple and the shuttle driver stared at me. "Fuck off!" I exclaimed, laughing, shutting the cab door.

I told the surprised cabbie my mother's address. "I need to get there as soon as possible."

"That's in Scottsdale," he whined.

I threw a grip of nugs at his face.

"Will that be enough?"

He stared at me. "There better be more where that came from."

"Obviously. Just step on it."

I sat back against the seat, folding my arms tight across my lap. Dank nugs meant nothing to me anymore. Nothing. The familiar city began to rush around me, but I didn't look out the windows. I exerted myself to maintain control. I was determined not to lose my self-control at this point, now that my plan was successfully completed. There was no point in indulging in more terror, more anxiety. My path was set in stone. My plan was cold and hard like stone; my plan was cold and hard like Fredward.

The thought of Fredward pushed my mood to new heights. Instead of panicking, I began to swoon over the unimaginable image in my head, Fredward's invisible voice in my ears, the cold, hard touch I dreamt of in my waking hours... I closed my eyes and spent the twenty minutes' drive ensconced in my memories of Fredward's helping hands.

I wondered where we would have gone in our new life together. North somewhere, so he could be outside in the day. So we could go outside together, walk our dogs, and take our children to the park without worry. Or maybe somewhere very remote, so we could lay together all day in the sun, watching him sparkle. I imagined him by the seashore, his bare skin sparkling like the sea. It wouldn't matter how long we had to hide. To be trapped in a hotel room with him would be a kind of Heaven, a new way of knowing him, a new way of knowing the world. So many questions I still had for him, questions that could only be answered in a hotel room. I could talk to him forever, asking these questions, and more, never sleeping, never leaving his side, never losing sight of his shine.

I could see his face so clearly now... could almost hear his voice. And, despite all the horror and hopelessness, I was fleetingly happy. So involved was I in my escapist daydreams, I lost track of how many seconds had raced by.

"Hey tootsie, what's that number?"

The cabbie's question punctured my fantasy, letting all the air rush out of it. Fear, bleak and hard, was waiting to fill the empty space left behind.

"Fifty-eight twenty-one." My voice sounded strangled. The cabbie looked at me, nervous that I

was having an episode. Maybe he was right; maybe I was.

"Here we are, then."

"Thank you," I whispered, getting out of the car. I almost shut the door, lingering just outside, and then jumped back in and demanded my change.

"How am I supposed to split this?" He held up the pile of nuggets, their fine red hairs glistening in the Phoenix sun.

"You just," I reached out to pinch some off but it crumbled between my fingers, disintegrating into a fine powder. "What EVER, man." I turned and slammed the door against his angry cries, and walked up the gravel driveway. There was no need to be afraid, I reminded myself. I was just marching to my death. Marching to my empty house, to my empty death, for the first and last time... I had to hurry; my mom was waiting for me, frightened, depending on me.

I ran to the door, reaching up automatically to grab the key under the eave that I had grabbed so many times before, and would never grab again. It was dark inside; empty, normal. I ran to the phone, turning on the kitchen light on the way. There, on the white-board, was a ten-digit number written in a small, neat hand. My fingers, suddenly bloated and fat with nerves, stumbled over the keypad, making various mistakes. I had to hang up and start again. I concentrated only on the buttons this time, carefully pressing each one in turn. I was successful. I held the phone to my ear with a shaking hand. It rang only once.

"Hello, Belna," that easy voice answered. "That was berry quick. I'm impressed."

"Is my mom all right?"

"She's fine. Don't worry Belna, everything's cool." He paused for a moment, thought about it.

"Unless you didn't come alone. Of course, then things will be berry *uncool*."

"I'm alone." I confirmed. "I've never been more alone in my entire life," I said.

"Berry good. Now, do you know the ballet studio just around the corner from your home?"

"You mean the one down the street?"

"Yes."

"You mean the one I used to go to?"

A sigh. "Belna, your mother's life is hanging in the balance."

"I know! I'm just—"

A abrupt click and the line went dead. I slammed the phone down and ran from the room, through the door, out into the baking heat.

There was no time to look back at the house, and I didn't want to see it as it was now—empty, a symbol of fear instead of sanctuary. The last person to walk through those familiar rooms was my enemy.

From the corner of my eye, I could almost see my mother standing in the shade of the big eucalyptus tree where she'd stood when I was a child. Or kneeling by the little plot of dirt around the mailbox, the cemetery full of all the flowers she'd tried to grow. The memories were better than any reality I would see today. Yes, my childhood was better than death. But I raced away from my memories, my childhood, turning the corner, leaving everything behind me.

I felt so slow, like I was running through wet sand—I couldn't seem to get enough purchase from the concrete. I tripped several times, once falling, catching myself with my hands, scraping them on the sidewalk, and then lurching up to plunge forward again. But at last I made it to the corner. Just another street now; one more street to run down, sweat pouring down my face, gasping. The sun was hot on my skin, too bright as it bounced off the white concrete and blinded me. I felt dangerously exposed, more fiercely than I would have dreamed I was capable of, and I wished for the green, protective forests of Forks...of *home*.

When I rounded the last corner, onto Cactus, I could see the studio, looking just as I had first

remembered it, all those hours ago. The parking lot in front was empty, the vertical blinds in all the windows drawn. I couldn't run anymore—I couldn't breathe; exertion and fear had gotten the best of me, all of me. I had to think of my mother to keep my feet moving at all, one in front of the other.

As I got closer, I could see the sign inside the door. It was handwritten on hot pink paper; it said the dance studio was closed for spring break. I touched the handle, tugged on it cautiously. It was unlocked. I fought to catch my breath, and opened the door.

The lobby was dark and empty, cool, the air conditioner thrumming. The plastic molded chairs were stacked along the walls, and the carpet smelled like shampoo. The west dance floor was dark, I could see through the open viewing window. The east dance floor, the biggest dance floor in the east, was lit.

Terror seized me so strongly that I was literally trapped by it. I couldn't make my feet move forward.

And then my mother's voice called.

"Bella? Bella?" That same tone of hysterical panic. I sprinted to the east hall's door, to the sound of her voice.

"Bella, you scared me! Don't you ever do that to me again!" Her voice continued as I ran into the long, high-ceilinged room.

I stared around me, trying to find where her voice was coming from. I heard her laugh, and I whirled to the sound.

There she was, on the TV screen!

She was tousling my hair in relief.

It was Thanksgiving, and I was twelve.

We'd gone to see my grandmother in California, the last year before she died.

We went to the beach, and I'd leaned too far over the edge of the pier.

She'd seen my feet flailing, trying to reclaim my balance.

"Bella? Bella?" she'd called, in fear that I was dying.

And now I really was...

Then the TV screen was blue.

I turned slowly. He was standing very still by the back exit, so still I hadn't noticed him at first. In his hand was a remote control. We stared at each other for a long moment, and then we smiled.

He walked toward me, quite close, and then passed me to put the remote down next to the VCR. I turned carefully to watch him.

"Sorry about that, Belna, but I tricked you."

And suddenly it hit me. My mother was safe. She was still in Florida. What I'd heard, what I'd seen, it had all just been an image on the television screen, a voice in the speakers. She'd never gotten my message at all. She'd never been terrified by the dark red eyes in the abnormally pale face before me. She was safe in Florida, and she had been the whole time.

"Yes," I answered, my voice saturated with relief.

"You don't sound angry that I tricked you."

"I'm not." My sudden high³³⁰ made me brave. What did it matter now? It would soon be over. Charlie and Mom would never be harmed, would never have to fear. Even though I felt almost giddy, some analytical part of my mind warned me that I was dangerously close to snapping from the stress of

330. It is possible that Belna may have absorbed the disintegrated marijuana through her fingertips.

it all.

"How odd. You really mean it." His dark eyes assessed me with interest. "You really are unique." The irises of his eyes were nearly black, just a hint of ruby around the edge. Thirsty. "I will give your strange coven this much, you humans *can* be quite interesting. I guess I can see the draw of observing you. It's amazing—some of you seem to have no sense of your own self-interest at all. I don't know if that's beautiful or—" he farted, "*beautiful*."

He was standing a few feet away from me, arms folded, looking at me curiously. There was no menace in his face or stance. I realized, after all this time, that despite the threat he posed to me, I found him rather attractive. His eyes were so fierce, and his voice was so coaxing, almost sensual. His skin was so white, some of the whitest skin I had ever seen, that I found myself incredibly drawn to it, almost wishing I could stroke it for just a minute just to see what it would feel like. I had never felt any skin besides Fredward's, or my own. His looked so soft, and yet seemed so dangerous.

"I suppose you're going to tell me that your boyfriend will avenge you?" he asked, hopefully it seemed to me.

"No, I don't think so. At least, I asked him not to."

"And what was his reply to that?"

"I don't know." It was strangely easy to Converse³³¹ with this genteel hunter. It was like he was the light bulb and I was the fly. I was the trout and he was the shiny lure pulling me up to the surface. I knew what was waiting for me in the place where he would take me, and yet, something deep inside me longed to just go there. The words flowed off my tongue and his words flooded my ears, like all of my gates were open to him... "I left him a letter."

"How romantic, a last letter," he taunted. "And do you think he will honor it?" His voice was just a little harder now, a hint of sarcasm marring his smooth tone.

"I hope so."

"Hmmm. Well, our hopes differ then. You see, this was all just a little too easy, too quick. To be quite honest, I'm disappointed. I expected a much greater challenge. And, after all, I only needed a little luck."

I waited in silence, mesmerized by his shoes.

"When Victoria couldn't get to your father, I had her find out a little more about you. There was no sense in running all over the planet chasing you down when I could comfortably wait for you in a place of my choosing. So, after I talked to Victoria, I decided to come to Phoenix to pay your mother a visit. At first, I never dreamed you meant it when you said you were going home, but then I wondered. Humans can be berry predictable; they like to be somewhere familiar, somewhere safe. Again, it is some instinct, some essence that lies between beauty and beauty. And wouldn't it be the perfect ploy, to go to the last place you should be when you're hiding—the place that you said you'd be.

"But of course I wasn't sure, it was just a hunch. I usually get a feeling about the prey that I'm hunting—a sixth sense if you will. I am so skilled at this you wouldn't believe it if I told you. I listened to your message when I got to your mother's house, but of course I couldn't be sure where you'd called from. I don't have that kind of government super-terrorist equipment. It was berry useful to have your number, but you could have been in Antarctica for all I knew, and the game wouldn't work unless you were close by.

"Then your boyfriend got on a plane to Phoenix. Victoria was monitoring them for me, naturally; in a game with this many players, I couldn't be working alone, now could I? And so they told me what I'd hoped, that you were still here after all. I was prepared; I'd already been through your charming home movies. I had spent hours at your house, sitting on the couch naked, rubbing my balls

331. Converse footwear, "The mark of originality." A subsidiary of Nike Footshoes.

all over it, watching all of your baby movies.

I shuddered, a warmth spreading throughout my body.

"Berry easy, you know, not really up to my standards. So, you see, I'm hoping you're wrong about your boyfriend. Edward, isn't it?"

"Fredward," I corrected icily.

Get it over with! I thought, sensing that he was coming to the end of his gloat. It wasn't meant for me anyway. There was no glory in beating me, a weak human.

"Would you mind, berry much, if I left a little letter of my own for your Fredward?"

He took a step back and touched the record button on my mom's old video camera, balanced carefully on top of the stereo. A small red light indicated that it was running. He adjusted it a few times, widened the frame. I stared at him in horror. He was going to *film* this? Good grief!

"I'm sorry, but I just don't think he'll be able to resist hunting me after he watches this. And I wouldn't want him to miss anything. It was all for him, of course. You're just some breezy who was in the wrong breezy place at the wrong breezy time. And indisputably breezing with the wrong crowd, I might add."

He stepped toward me, smiling, holding his arms out in front of him. "Before we begin..."

I felt a curl of nausea in the pit of my stomach as he spoke. I was nervous: getting eaten and dying was something I had not anticipated.

"I would just like to rub it in, just a little bit. Rub it. Rub it in. The answer was there all along, waiting to be rubbed, and I was so afraid Fredward would rub it out and ruin my fun. It happened once, oh, ages ago. The one and only time my prey escaped me.

"You see, the vampire who was so stupidly fond of this little victim made the choice that your Fredward was too weak to make. When the old one knew I was after his little friend, he stole her from the asylum where he worked—I will never understand the obsession some vampires seem to form with you humans—and as soon as he freed her he made her safe. She didn't even seem to notice the pain, poor little creature. She'd been stuck in that black hole of a cell for so long. A hundred years earlier and she would have been burned—I would know—burned at the stake for her visions. In the nineteen-twenties it was the asylum and the shock treatments and the salt baths and the therapy circles and the constant beration of one's own mental hygiene as sullied, incorrectly filthy—when she opened her eyes, strong with her freshhot youth, it was like she'd never seen the sun before. The old vampire made her a strong new vampire, and there was no reason for me to touch her then." He sighed. "Even though I really wanted to. With my plans ruined, I had little choice but to destroy the old one in vengeance."

"Alice," I breathed, astonished.

"Yes, your little friend. I was surprised to see her in the clearing. So I guess her coven ought to be able to derive some comfort from this experience. I get you, but they get her. The one victim who escaped me; quite an honor, actually.

"And she did smell so delicious. I still regret that I never got to taste... She smelled even better than you do. It was like a freshly cut peach, perfectly ripe... Sorry—I don't mean to be offensive. You have a berry nice smell. Floral, somehow..."

He took another step toward me 'til he was just inches away. He lifted a lock of my hair and sniffed at it delicately. Then he gently patted the strand back into place, and I felt his cool fingertips against my throat. He reached up to stroke my cheek once quickly, with his thumb, his face curious. I wanted so badly to run, but I was frozen. I couldn't even flinch away. Literally!

"No," he murmured to himself as he dropped his hand, "I don't understand." He sighed. "Well, I suppose we should get on with it. And by it, I mean sucking out all of your blood into my mouth. Then I can call your friends and tell them about it, and where to find the video. Something tells me they'll want to see it."

I was definitely sick now. There was pain coming, I could see it in his eyes. It wouldn't be enough for him to win, to feed and go. There would be no quick end like I'd been counting on. My knees began to shake, knocking together with a hollow thocking sound.

He stepped back and began to circle casually, as if he were trying to get a better view of a statue in a museum. His face was smug and he held his hands behind his back as he paced, deciding where to start.

Then he slumped forward into what I recognized was a crouch, and his smile slowly widened, grew 'til it wasn't a smile at all but a contortion of teeth, exposed and glistening all the way up to his eyes.

I couldn't help myself—I tried to run. As useless as I knew I could be, as weak as my knees already were, panic took over and I bolted for the emergency door.

It was then that my legendary clumsiness struck back, confusing everything below my hips and making each of my legs and feet spring forward simultaneously, so that I pitched forward towards the dim floor.

He was in front of me in a flash. I didn't see if he used his hand or his foot to get across the room, it was so fast. A crushing blow sunk into my chest—I felt myself flying backward, and then heard the crunch as my head bashed into the mirrors. The glass buckled against my thick skull, some of the pieces shattering and splintering onto the floor beside me.

I was too stunned to feel the pain. I could not breathe yet.

He walked toward me slowly.

"That's a berry nice effect," he said, examining the mess of glass. "I thought this room would be visually dramatic for my little film. I've always wanted to direct; did you know that? Always have ever since they made motion pictures. I once tried to learn under Murnau, but he pushed me away. He was fussy. I could never have learned anything from him. I guess I gave up after that, trying to learn how. It wasn't until recently that home taping became a real possibility, but even then... you know what video's like." He sighed. "Anyway, that's why I picked this place to meet you. It's perfect, isn't it?"

I ignored him, scrambling on my hands and knees, crawling toward the other door.

He was over me at once, his foot stepping down hard on my leg. I heard the sickening snap before I felt it, although I felt it too; but then I *did* feel it, and I'd wished I hadn't. I couldn't even begin to hold back my scream of agony, and then I *looked* at it, and saw it was totally broken, and I knew: he had broken my leg by stepping on it. I twisted up to reach for my leg, but he was *still* standing on it! Smiling!

"Would you like to rethink your last request?" he asked pleasantly. His toe nudged my broken leg and I heard a piercing scream. With a shock, I realized it was *mine*.

"Wouldn't you rather have Fredward try to find me?" he prompted.

"No!" I shouted. "No, Fredward, don't—" and then something smashed into my face, throwing me back into the broken mirrors.

Over the pain of my leg, I felt a sharp rip across my scalp where the glass had cut into it. And then the warm wetness began to spread through my hair with alarming speed. I could feel it soaking the shoulder of my shirt, hear it dripping on the wood below. The smell of it twisted my ignat all curly.

I was pretty sure my brains were leaking out.

Through the nausea and dizziness and all the dripping, I saw something that gave me a sudden, final shred of hope. His eyes, merely intent before, now burned with an uncontrollable need. The blood was driving him mad. No matter his original intentions, he was one step away from sucking me dry.

'Let it be quick now,' was all I could hope as the flow of blood from my split head sucked my consciousness away with it. My eyes were closing and I heard, as if from underwater, the final growl of the hunter. I could see through the long tunnels of my eyes his dark shape coming towards me. With

one last effort, my hand instinctively raised to protect the only worthwhile thing about me: my once-beautiful face. My eyes closed, and I drifted away.

23.

MY ANGEL

AS I DRIFTED, MY MIND CREAMED A DREAM, one where I floated on dark water as I heard the happiest sound my mind could conjure up—as beautiful, as uplifting as it was ghastly. It was another snarl: a deeper, wilder roar that rang with familiarity.

I was brought back, almost to the surface of my creamy ocean, by a sharp pain slashing my upraised hand, but I couldn't find my way back far enough to open my eyes.

And then I knew I was dead.

I knew I was dead because through the heavy water, I heard the sound of an angel calling my name, calling me to the only heaven I wanted to go to.

"Oh no, Bella, no!" the angel's perfect voice cried in horror.

Behind that longed-for sound was another noise—an awful tumult that my mind shied away from. A dirty bass growling, a shocking snapping sound, and a high keening, suddenly breaking off...

I tried to put all that nastiness aside and concentrate on the angel's voice instead.

"Bella, please! Bella, listen to me, please, please, Bella, please, listen to me!" he begged.

Yes, I wanted to say. Anything. But I couldn't find my lips. They must have been lost in the scuffle.

"Carbomb!" The angel called, agony in his perfect voice. "Bella, Bella, no, oh, please, no, oh!" And the angel was sobbing tearless, broken sobs.

An angel shouldn't weep; it was wrong. His face should never have to weep, should never be marred by such sadness. I tried to find him, to tell him everything was fine, but the water was so deep, it was pressing on me, and I couldn't breathe.

There was a point of pressure against my head. It hurt. Then, as that pain broke through the darkness around me, other pains came: stronger pains. I cried out, gasping, breaking through the dark waters.

"Bella!" the angel Fredward Cullen cried.

"She's lost some blood, but the head wound isn't deep," a calm voice informed me. "Watch out for that leg though: it's broken!"

A howl of rage strangled the angel's lips.

I felt a sharp stab at my side. Why would he do this? Why was this happening?

"Some ribs, too, I think," Carbomb said. "Maybe."

But the sharp pains were fading. There was a new pain, an angelic pain in my hand that was overshadowing everything else...

I was burning. "Fredward," I tried to tell him, but my voice was so heavy and slow that I couldn't understand myself, the words coming out of my mouth like bales of hay.

"Bella, you're going to be fine. Can you hear me? Bella? I love you."

"Fredward," I tried again. My voice was a little clearer. "It hurts!"

"I know, Bella, I know," and then, away from me, anguished—"can't you do anything?"

"Can't YOU do anything?" I wanted to scream.

"My handbag, please... Hold your breath, Alice, it will help," Carbomb promised.

"Alice?" I groaned.

"She's here, she knew where to find you."

"Alice?" I repeated. "My hand hurts," I tried to tell her.

"I know, Bella. Carbomb will give you something. It will stop."

"My hand is B-U-R-N-I-N-G!" I screamed, finally breaking through the last of the darkness, my eyes fluttering open and darting from side to side. I couldn't see his face; something dark, warm, and unfamiliar was clouding my eyes. Why couldn't they see the fire and put it out?

His voice was frightened. "Bella?"

"The fire! Someone stop the fire!" I screamed as it burned me. "Oooh, cut it out!" I yelled, wondering if I could communicate with the fire itself.

"Carbomb! Her hand!"

"He bit her." Carbomb's voice was no longer calm; it was appalled.

I heard Fredward catch his breath in horror.

"Fredward, you have to do it." It was Alice's voice, close to my head, cool as the fingers which brushed at the wetness of my welting eyes.

"Ugh!" he bellowed. His cry of disgust echoed through the mirror-filled hall.

"Alice," I moaned.

"There may be a chance," Carbomb said.

"What?" Fredward begged.

"See if you can suck the venom back out. The wound is fairly clean. Suck it, Fredward. Just..." As Carbomb spoke, I could feel more pressure on my head, something poking and pulling at my scalp. Why was Alice doing this to me? My hand still felt like it was burning.

"Will that work?" Alice's voice was strained.

"I don't know," Carbomb said. "But we have to hurry."

"Carbomb, I..." Fredward hesitated. "I don't know if I want to do that." There was agony in his beautiful voice again.

"It's your decision, Fredward. I have guided you through your young life up to now. I created you and I have been your mentor, but there comes a day in every young man's life when he has to make a choice: to suck it, or not to suck it. I can't help you with this decision."

"Fredward!" I screamed. "Fredward, do it for me! Right now, Fredward! I'm burning! I'm on fire! I'm going to die! I'm going to burn up! Fucking grow a pussy and *suuuuck iiiiiiiit!*" I hollered, realizing my eyes were closed again. I opened them, desperate to find his face. And I found it. Finally, I could see his perfect face, staring at me, twisted into a mask of indecision and pain.

"Alice, get me something to brace her leg!" Carbomb was bent over me, working on my head. "Fredward, you must do it now, or it will be too late." Carbomb put his hand on Fredward's shoulder and rubbed it perfectly, looking deep into his tormented eyes. "Be a man, boy."

Fredward's face was drawn. I watched his eyes as the doubt was suddenly replaced with a blazing determination—the will to do it, the will to put out my fire once and for all. His jaw tightened. He puckered his lips. I felt his cool, strong fingers on my on-fire hand, locking it in place. Then his head bent over it, and his cool lips pressed against my skin, one and then the other.

At first the pain was worse. Can you imagine? I screamed and thrashed against the cool hands that held me back. His firm grip on my body at once terrified and soothed me. Despite the ungodly pain, something about it felt very right, very familiar.

Then, slowly, my writhing calmed as my hand grew more and more numb. The fire was dulling, focusing into an ever-smaller point until I almost wasn't in agonizing pain at all.

I felt my consciousness slipping as the pain subsided. I was afraid to fall into the black waters again, afraid the angel might not come back for me this time...

"Fredward," I tried to say, but I couldn't hear my voice. Everyone else could hear me, though.

"He's right here, Bella."

"Stay, Fredward, stay with me..."

"I will." His voice was strained, resistant.

I sighed contentedly. The fire was gone, he had done it! He had doused me good with his lips, and that's how I felt—good. My other pains were dulled by a sleepiness seeping through my body.

"Is it all out?" Carbomb asked from somewhere far away.

"Her blood tastes clean," Fredward said quietly. "I can taste the morphine."

"Bella?" Carbomb called out to me.

I tried to answer. "Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm?"

"Is the fire gone?"

"Yes," I sighed. "Ohhhh, yes. Thank you, Fredward."

"I love you," he answered.

"Oh, I know," I breathed, so tired.

I heard my favorite sound in the world: Fredward's quiet, vampire-boyish laugh, weak with relief.

"Bella?" Carbomb asked again.

I frowned; I wanted to sleep. "What now?"

"Where is your mother?"

"In Florida," I sighed. "He tricked me, Fredward. He watched my videos. He watched them on the couch and he, and he..." I was drifting. Into a dream? A nightmare? The outrage in my voice was pitifully frail.

But that reminded me.

"Alice," I tried to open my eyes for this one. "Alice, the video—he knew you, Alice, he knew—the video—" I meant to speak urgently, but my voice was feeble. "I smell gasoline," I added, surprised through the haze in my brain.

"It's time to move her," Carbomb said.

"No, I want to sleep," I complained.

"You can sleep in my arms, sweetheart. I'll carry you," Fredward soothed me, repeatedly brushing his palm against my forehead to sweep the sweaty, bloody hairs away from my face.

And I was in his arms, my bloody head cradled against his chest—floating, all the pain gone.

"Sleep, Bella. Sleep forever."

Those were the last words I ever heard.

24.

AN IMPASSÉ

MY EYES OPENED TO A BRIGHT, WHITE LIGHT. I WAS IN an unfamiliar bright white room. The wall beside me was covered in long white vertical blinds; over my head, the glaring lights blinded me. I was propped up on a hard, uneven bed—a bed with bumper rails. The pillows were flat, but lumpy. This *definitely* wasn't my room, or even my bed. My room wasn't this bright, and my bed didn't have rails. There was an annoying beeping somewhere close by. I hoped that the fact that I was still able to be annoyed meant that I was still alive.

My hands were all twisted up in clear tubes, and something was taped across my face (a dick? A pickle?), under my nose. I lifted my hand to rip it off, cursing it, and myself, and everything, aloud.

"Oh no you don't." And cool fingers caught my hand.

"Fredward?" I turned my head slightly, and his exquisite face was just inches from mine, his chin resting on my chin, eyes locked on mine like mine were on his, our mouths a similar O of surprised succor. In his cheeks was a paleness that I'd thought had only been mine, a coldness I'd recognized in only the most honest of mirrors. I blinked and so did he, and I realized again that I was alive, this time with gratitude and elation. "Oh, Fredward! I'm so sorry!"

"Shhhh," he shushed me. "Everything's gonna be alright, baby. I promise you."

"What happened?" I couldn't even remember what had happened, and my mind rebelled against me as I tried to recall yesterday's happenings.

"I was almost too late. I *could* have been too late," he whispered, his voice tormented. "But I wasn't."

"I was so stupid, Fredward. I thought he had my *mom*."

"He tricked us all, baby."

"I need to call Charlie and my *mom*," I realized through the haze.

"Alice called them. Renée is here—well, here in the hospital. She's getting something to eat right now."

"She's here?" I tried to sit up—*my* mom?—but the spinning in my head accelerated and his hand pushed me gently down onto the pillows, its stony firmth knowing what I needed better than I did.

"She'll be back soon, I promise you," he promised me. "You just need to stay chill."

"But what did you tell her?" I panicked. I had no interest in being soothed. My mom was here and *I* was recovering from a vampire attack. I didn't even know how I'd start lying to her about what happened and felt the sweat welling up on my brow. "But what did you tell her?"

"You fell down two flights of stairs and through a window, and then bounced off of the hood of a passing car and landed in a trash can." He paused. "Hey, it could happen."

I sighed, and it hurt. I stared down at my body under the sheet, the huge lump that was my leg.

"How bad am I?" I asked.

"Oh baby, *real* bad."

I giggled at Fredward's flattery. "No Freddy, I meant why am I still in the hospital?"

"Well, you have a broken leg, four broken ribs, some cracks in your skull, bruises covering every inch of your skin, and you've lost a lot of blood. They gave you a few transfusions. I didn't like it—it diluted your delicious aires."

"That must have been a nice change for you."

"No, Bella. I like how you *smell*."

I paused. "How did you do it?" I asked quietly. He knew what I meant at once.

"I'm not sure." He looked away from my wondering eyes, lifting my gauze-wrapped hand from the bed and holding it gently in his, careful not to disrupt the wire connecting me to one of the monitors.

I waited patiently for the rest.

He sighed without returning my gaze. "It was impossible... to stop," he whispered. "Impossible. But then it *was* possible, and I did." He looked up finally, with half a smile. "I *must* love you."

"Don't I taste as good as I smell?" I smiled in response, hurting my face in the effort.

He winced.

"I'm sorry," I apologized fiercely.

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Of all the things to apologize for, you pick the dumbest one possible."

"What *should* I apologize for?"

"How about for very nearly taking yourself away from me forever?"

"I'm sorry," I apologized again.

"I know why you did it." His voice was comforting. "It was still irrational, but that's normal. You should have waited for me. You should have told me."

"And what would I have told my dead mother when you wouldn't have let me go?"

"I love you," he said in a grim tone. "Because she totally *would* have been dead."

Some very unpleasant memories were beginning to come back to me.

He was instantly anxious. "Bella? Bella? What's wrong?"

"What happened to Yames?" I felt a wave of psychic nausea rolling over me.

Fredward gripped my hands hard. "After I pulled him off you, Emmett and Jasper kicked the shit out of him, ripped his arms off and then burned the body."

This confused me. "I didn't see Emmett and Jasper there."

"They had to leave the room... there was a lot of blood."

"But you stayed."

"Yes."

"And Alice and Carlisle..." I said in wonder.

"They love you too, somehow."

A flash of painful images from the last time I'd seen Alice reminded me of something. "Did Alice see the tape?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes." A new sound darkened his voice; the sound of sheer hatred.

"She was always in the dark, that's why she didn't remember," I realized.

"I know. She understands now." His voice was even, but his face was black and fruity.

I tried to reach his face with my free hand, but something stopped me. I glanced down to see the IV pulling at my hand.

-Bella, don't pull me out! it cried.

"Ugh." I winced.

"Bella, what is it?" he asked anxiously—distracted, but not enough. The bleakness did not entirely leave his eyes.

"Needles," I explained, looking away from the one in my hand. I concentrated on a warped ceiling tile and tried to breathe deeply despite the ache in my ribs.

"Afraid of a needle," he muttered to himself under his breath, shaking his head in amusement.

"Oh, a sadistic vampire, intent on torturing her to death in her childhood ballet studio, sure, no

problem, she runs off to meet him. An *IV*, on the other hand..."

I rolled my eyes. I was pleased to discover that this reaction, at least, was pain-free. I decided to change the subject. "Why *are* you here?" I asked.

He stared at me, first confusion and then hurt touching his eyeballs. His brows pulled together as he frowned. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No!" I protested, horrified by the thought. "No, I meant why does mom think you're here? I need to have my story straight before she gets back."

"Oh," he said, and his forehead smoothed back into marble. "I came to Phoenix to talk some sense into you, to convince you to come back to Forks and be in love with me." His wide eyes were so earnest and sincere, I almost believed them myself. "You agreed to see me, and you drove out to the hotel where I was staying with Carbomb and Alice—of course I was here with parental supervision," he inserted virtuously, "but you tripped on the stairs on the way to my room and... well, you know the rest. You don't need to remember any details, though; you have a good excuse to be a little muddled about the finer points."

I thought about it for a moment. "There are a few flaws in your story. First of all, there are no broken windows."

"Yes there are," he said. "Alice had a little bit too much fun fabricating evidence. She actually broke *all* the windows. It's all been taken care of very convincingly—you could probably sue the hotel if you wanted to. You have nothing to worry about," he promised, stroking my cheek with the lightest of touches. "Your only job now is to heal."

I wasn't so lost to the soreness or the fog of medication that I didn't respond to his touch. The beeping of the monitor jumped around erratically—now he wasn't the only one who could hear my heart misbehave.

"That's going to be embarrassing," I muttered to myself. "I hope they don't send me home with this strapped to me. Like, because then everyone would hear me coming, and they'd know your effect on me. Because it beeps my heart rate."

"Ha-ha," he chuckled, liking my joke. "Hmm, I wonder..."

He leaned in slowly; the beeping noise accelerated wildly before his lips even touched me. But when they did, though with the most gentle of pressures, the beeping stopped altogether.

Fredward had the power to stop hearts.

Mine.

He pulled back abruptly, his anxious expression turning to relief as the monitor reported the restarting of my heart.

"It seems that I'm going to have to be even more careful with you than usual." He frowned.

"I was not finished kissing you," I complained. "Don't make me kiss you from over here." He grinned, and bent his face to press his lips tightly to mine. The monitor went, wildly.

But then his lips were taut. He pulled away.

"I think I hear your mother," he said tightly.

"Don't leave me," I cried, a surge of familiar panic flooding through me. I couldn't let him go—not again.

He read the terror in my eyes for a short second. "I won't," he promised solemnly, and then he smiled. "I'll take a nap. I'll be right here, Bella."

He moved from the hard plastic chair by my side to the turquoise faux-leather recliner at the foot of my bed, leaning it all the way back, spreading his legs and putting his hands, clasped together, behind his head. He was perfect. He was still perfect.

"Don't forget to breathe," I whispered sarcastically. He took a deep breath, an unnecessary deep breath, and opened his eyes just to close them again.

I could hear my mother now. She was talking to someone, maybe a nurse; she was screaming. Her words were jumbled and ran together. I wanted to jump out of the bed and run to her, to calm her, to make her stop yelling at the nurse. It was so embarrassing. But I wasn't in any sort of shape for jumping, so I waited for her to come to me.

The door opened a crack, and she peeked through.

"Mom!" I whispered in a shout, my voice full of love.

She took in Fredward's still form on the recliner, and tiptoed to my bedside.

"He never leaves, does he? Bella?!" Mom yelled, throwing her hands up and pacing about the room.

"Mom, I'm so happy to see you!"

She bent down and suddenly wrapped her arms around me, squeezing me tighter than I had ever been squeezed before. I felt warm tears being pushed out of me all over my cheeks.

"Bella, I was so upset!" She yelled into my ear.

"I'm sorry, Mom. But everything's fine now, you know?" I patted her gently on the back with my non-broken arm.

"I'm just glad to finally see your eyes open," she said, with a hint of sarcasm. "I'm just glad you aren't dead. I'm glad you didn't die. You could have died, Bella." She was breathing hard, choking back sobs.

I suddenly realized I didn't have any idea when it was. "How long have my eyes been closed?"

"It's Friday. It's Friday, Bella. Do you know how many days I've been worrying?"

"Friday?" I was shocked. I tried to remember what day it had been when it was that day... but I didn't want to think about that day—*that day*.

"They had to keep you sedated for awhile, honey. You've got a lot of injuries!" She exclaimed. Her arms were still wrapped around me and squeezing tight, and her voice was very loud in my ears. At first it had felt good, comforting, but it started to make me a little bit uncomfortable.

"I know I have a lot of injuries," I said. "I can feel them."

"You're lucky Dr. Cullen was there! He's such a nice man, such a young man..." Her voice tapered off and she began to loosen her grip. "In fact, he looks more like a model than a doctor."

"You met Carlisle?"

"Yes, and Fredward's sister, Alice. She's a lovely girl. I..."

"Me too," I agreed wholeheartedly.

She glanced over her shoulder at Fredward, lying with his eyes closed in the chair. "You didn't tell me you had such attractive friends in Forks."

I cringed, and then moaned.

"What hurts?" she demanded anxiously, grabbing my face in her hands. Fredward looked over, as though jealous.

"It's fine," I assured her. "I just have to remember not to move my face."

Fredward lapsed back into his phony slumber.

I took advantage of my mother's momentary distraction to ask her about Phil. "Where's the Phildozer?" I asked quickly.

"Florida—oh, Bella, you'll never guess! Just when we were about to leave, just after we heard that you had been so badly injured, the best news!"

"Phil got signed?" I guessed.

"Yes! How did you guess! The Suns, can you believe it?"

"Not really, but that's great mom!" I said as enthusiastically as I could manage, though I had little idea what that meant.

"And you'll like Jacksonville so much," she gushed when I stared at her vacantly. "I was a bit

worried when Phil started talking about Akron, what with the snow and everything, because you know how I hate the cold, but now Jacksonville! That place isn't cold at all! It's always sunny, and the humidity is great! We found the cutest little house, yellow with white trim, and a porch just like in an old movie, and a huge little oak tree, and it's just a few minutes from the ocean, and you'll have your own bathroom—"

"Wait, mom!" I interrupted. Fredward still had his eyes closed, but he looked too tense to pass as asleep. I could see his muscles bulging out of control. "What are you talking about, Mom? I'm not going to Florida. I live in Forks. Forks, Idaho."

"But you don't have to anymore, silly!" She laughed, stroking my broken arm. "Phil will be able to be around so much more now... we've talked about it a lot, and we just really liked talking about it, and what I'm going to do is trade off on the away games, half the time with you, half the time with him. Half and half. Win-win. Halfsy-winsy, Bella!"

"Mom." I hesitated, wondering how best to be diplomatic about the fact that the only person I truly cared about in this world was the only other person in the room, and he wasn't even a person! "I want to live in Forks. I'm already settled in at a school, and I have a couple of girlfriends"—she glanced toward Fredward—"and Charlie needs me. He's just all alone up there, and he can't cook at all. You know..."

"You want to stay in Forks?" she asked, bewildered. The idea was inconceivable to her. And then her eyes flickered back toward Fredward. "Why?"

"I told you—school, Charlie—ouch!" I'd shrugged my face again. Not a good idea.

Her hands fluttered helplessly over me, trying to find a safe place to pat. She made do with my forehead; it was undamaged.

"Bella, honey, you hate Forks!" She cried.

"No I don't."

"Yes you do!"

"It's not so bad."

She frowned and looked back and forth between Fredward and me, this time very deliberately.

"Is it this...boy?" She whispered in despair.

I opened my mouth to lie with it, but her eyes scrutinized my lips, and I knew she would see through them.

"He's part of me," I admitted. No need to confess how big a part... "So, have you had a chance to talk with Fredward?" I asked.

"Yes." She hesitated, looking at his still-perfect form. "And I want to talk to you about that."

Uh-oh. "What about?" I asked.

"I think that boy is in love with you," she accused, keeping her voice low and grabbing onto my broken arm again.

"I think so, too," I confided.

"And how do you feel about him?" She concealed the raging curiosity in her voice poorly.

I shrugged, staring off into space. As much as I loved my mom or whatever, this was not a conversation I wanted to have with her. "I'm pretty crazy about him." There—that sounded like something a teenager with her first boyfriend might say. Little did my mother know just how much I'd learned about love in the past few weeks. Maybe I knew even more than she did.

"Well, he seems very nice, and, my goodness, he's incredibly good-looking, but you're so young, Bella..." Her voice was unsure; as far as I could remember, this was the first time since I was eight and almost walked into the street that she'd come close to sounding concerned about me. I had no idea what she was trying to say.

"I know that, mom. Don't worry about it. It's just a crush."

"That's right," she agreed, then she sighed and glanced guiltily over her shoulder at the big, round clock on the wall.

"Do you need to go?"

She bit her lip. "Phil's supposed to call in a little while... you know how he gets when I keep him waiting..."

"No problem, mom." I tried to tone down the relief so she wouldn't get her feelings hurt by feeling unwanted.

"I'll be back soon. I've been sleeping here, you know," she announced, proud of herself.

I smiled.

"Actually, I was too nervous to go home," she admitted sheepishly. "There's been some crime in the neighborhood, and I don't like being home alone."

"Crime?" I asked in alarm.

"Someone broke into that dance studio around the corner from the house and burned another someone to death. They said on the news that they'd had the shit kicked out of them beforehand." She shuddered. "And then they left a stolen Subaru Brat right out front. Who would do such a thing? Do you remember when you used to dance there, honey?"

"I remember." I shivered, and then winked at Fredward.

"I can stay, baby. I can stay all night long," my mother said, trying to be comforting.

"No, mom, it's okay. I'll be fine. I'll have Fredward with me, and the dance studio's pretty far away from here."

She looked like that might be why she wanted to stay. "I'll be back tonight." It sounded as much of a warning as it was a promise, and she glanced at Fredward again as she said it. "So no funny business."³³²

I waved my hand, brushing the idea away. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, Bella. Just try to be more careful when you walk, honey. I don't want to lose you."

Fredward's eyes stayed closed, but a wide grin flashed across his face.

A nurse came bustling in to check all my tubes and wires. My mother kissed my forehead, patted my broken leg, and left.

The nurse was checking the paper readout on my heart monitor.

"Are you feeling anxious, honey? It looks like your heart stopped for a moment."

"I'm fine," I assured her. "I was just so surprised to be alive after falling out of a hotel window and into a dumpster."

"I'll tell your RN that you're awake. She'll be in to see you in a minute."

As soon as she closed the door, Fredward was at my side.

"You stole a car?" I raised my eyebrows.

He smiled, unrepentant. "It was good car, very fast."

"How was your napple?" I asked.

"Interesting." His eyes narrowed.

"Really?"

"Probably the most interesting nap I've ever had."

I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. I repeated myself. "Really?"

He looked down while he answered. "I'm surprised. I thought Florida... and your mother... well, I thought that's what you would want."

I stared at him uncomprehendingly. "But you'd be stuck inside all day in Florida. You'd only be

332. Please see thought question #13 for more.

able to come out at night, just like a real vampire."

"Are you saying I'm not a real vampire?" He puffed his chest up.

"No, I—"

He held up his hand for me to stop, almost smiling...but not quite. And then his face was grave. "I would stay in Forks, Bella. Or somewhere like it," he explained. "Somewhere where I couldn't hurt you anymore."

It didn't sink in at first. I continued to stare at him blankly as the words did a one by one click'n'connect in my head like a ghastly puzzle. I was barely conscious of the sound of my heart accelerating; though, as my breathing transitioned to hyperventilation, I became aware of a sharp ache in my ribs.

He didn't say anything; he watched my face warily as pain that had nothing to do with broken bones, pain that was infinitely worse, threatened to crush me.

And then another nurse walked purposefully into the room. Fredward sat still as stone as she took in my expression with a practiced eye before turning to the monitors.

"Time for some more pain meds, sweetheart?" she asked kindly, tapping the IV feed.

"No, no," I mumbled, trying to keep the agony out of my voice. "I don't need anything." Nothing that wasn't right in front of me, I added silently.

"No need to be brave, honey. It's better if you don't get too stressed out; you need to rest."

She waited, but I just shook my head. "Okay," she sighed. "Alright. Just hit that call button when you're ready."

She gave Fredward a stern look, and threw one more anxious glance at the machinery before leaving.

His cool hands were immediately all over my face; I stared at him between the fingers with wild eyes.

"Shhh, Bella, calm down."

"Don't leave me," I begged in a broken voice.

"I won't," he promised. "Now relax before I call the nurse back and make her sedate you."

But my heart wouldn't slow.

"Bella." He stroked my face anxiously. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here as long as you need me."

"Do you swear that you won't leave me?" I whispered, trying to control my erratic breathing. My ribs were throbbing.

He put his hands on either side of my face and brought it close to his. His eyes were wide and serious. "I swear to God."

The smell of his breath, like fresh dough, was soothing. It seemed to ease the ache of my breathing. He continued to hold my face while my body slowly relaxed and the beeping returned to a normal rate. His eyes were dark, closer to black than gold today.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes," I said cautiously.

He shook his head and muttered something unintelligible. I thought I picked out the word 'overreaction.'

"Why did you say that?" I whispered, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "Are you tired of having to save me all the time? Do you *want* me to go away?"

"No, I don't want to be without you, Bella, of course not, be rational, I don't even know why you would think something like that, because I would never say it, because you are all I want in this 'life,' Bella, and don't you ever, *ever* forget it. And I had no problem with saving you, either—if it weren't for the fact that I was the one putting you in danger... that I'm the reason that you're here."

"Yes, you are the reason." I frowned. "The reason I'm here now—*alive*."

"Barely." His voice was just a whisper. "Covered in gauze and plaster and hardly able to move."

"I wasn't referring to my most recent near-death experience," I said, growing irritated. "I was thinking of the others—you can take your pick. If it weren't for you, that Tyler might have run me over, or I'd have gotten raped in Fort Angles, or I'd have completely fainted when Mike made me look at his blood. If it weren't for you, I would be buried deep in some forgotten plot in the Forks cemetery. Thrice."

He winced at my words and the haunted look didn't leave his eyes.

"That's not the worst part, though," he continued to whisper. He acted as if I hadn't spoken. "Not seeing you there on the floor... crumpled and broken." His voice was choked. "Not thinking I was too late. Not even hearing you scream in pain—all those things are bearable, memories once membered and just as quickly dismembered. No, the very worst was feeling—*knowing* that I couldn't stop. Believing that I was going to kill you myself."

"But you didn't."

"But I could have."

I knew I needed to stay calm... but he was being so totally bullshit! He was trying to talk himself into leaving me, and for what? Because he *saved my life*? An insane rage fluttered in my lungs, trying to get out.

"Promise me," I whispered.

"What?"

"You know what." The juice was starting to come loose and I could feel the anger pulsing up my throat. He was being such a fuck about this, always dwelling on the negative.

He heard the change in my tone. His eyes tightened like vise-grips. "I don't seem to be strong enough to stay away from you, so I suppose that you'll get your way... whether it kills you or not," he added roughly.

"Good! I hope it DOES!" I screamed. He hadn't promised, though—a fact that I had not missed. The panic was only barely contained; I had no strength left to control the anger. "You told me how you stopped...now I want to know why," I demanded.

"Why?" he repeated warily.

"*Why* you did it. Why didn't you just let the venom spread? By now I would be just like you, you jerk. We could be in love forever."

Fredward's eyes seemed to turn flat black, and I remembered that this was something he'd never intended me to know. Alice must have been preoccupied by the things she'd learned about herself... or she'd been very careful with her thoughts around him—clearly, he had no idea that she'd filled me in on the most basic mechanics of vampire conversions. He was surprised, and infuriated. His nostrils flared, his teeth ground together, and his mouth looked as if it was a pair of gridlocked tectonic plates that were close to slipping loose at any moment.

But it didn't seem like he was going to answer anytime soon, that much was clear.

"I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships," I said. "But it just seems logical... a man and a woman have to be somewhat equal... at least when it comes to saving one another. I want to save you, Fredward! Why won't you let it be my turn? We have to turn equally! I mean we have to have equal turns! I want a turn, Fredward!!" I was gnashing my teeth and my heart monitor was beeping so hard that it threatened to fall off the table.

He folded his arms on the side of my bed, lowering them to just below his stomach. His expression was smooth, the anger reined in. Evidently he'd decided that I had a point. I hoped I'd get a chance to brag about it to Alice.

"You *have* saved me," he mumbled.

"In what way?"

He growled. "You don't know what you're asking." His voice was soft; he buried it in the pill'o'case.

"I think I do."

"Bella, you don't. I've had almost ninety years to think about this, and I'm still not sure."

"Do you wish that you hadn't become a vampire? Do you wish that Carbomb hadn't saved you from dying?"

"That's different, Bella. You aren't dying."

"I'm dying every day that I'm still alive, Fredward. Every moment brings me closer to my end. And even before that I'll be old, and then I might as well be dead because you won't find me attractive anymore. You'll be seventeen forever and someday, if you don't change me, I'll be thirty. And then I'll be forty. By the time I get my first grey hair, I'll basically be rotting in my grave..." I sniffled. "I'll be old and grey, and you'll find the first excuse you can to not love me anymore... Is that what you want?"

"No, that's not what I want." He paused before continuing. "But my life was over when Carbomb saved me. I wasn't giving anything up."

"You are my life, Fredward. You. This is the only thing it would hurt me to lose." I gestured between us: "This." I was getting better at this. It was becoming increasingly easy to admit how much I needed him.

He was very calm, though. Decided.

"I can't do it, Bella. I won't do that to you."

"Why not?" My throat rasped and the words weren't as loud as I'd meant them to be. "Don't tell me how hard it is! Don't tell me it's too hard! After today, or I guess it was a few days ago... anyway, after *that*... it should be nothing."

He glared at me.

"And the pain?"

I blanched. I couldn't help it. But I tried to keep my expression from showing how clearly I remembered the feeling... the fire in my veins.

"That's my problem," I said.

"It's possible to take bravery to the point where it becomes insanity."

"It's not an issue. Three days. Big deal."

Fredward grimaced again as my words reminded him that I was more informed than he had ever intended me to be. I watched him repress the anger, watched as his eyes grew and grew.

"Charlie?" He asked curtly. "Renée?"

Minutes passed in silence as I struggled to answer his question. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out of it.

I closed it again.

He waited, and his expression became triumphant because he knew I had no true answer.

"Look, that's not an issue either," I finally muttered; as usual, my voice was unconvincing.

"Renée has always made choices for herself—she'd want me to do the same. And Charlie's resilient, he's used to cruising on his own. I can't take care of them forever. I have my own life to live—as a vampire."

"Exactly," he snapped. "Wait, what?"

"If you're waiting for me to be on my deathbed, I've got news for you—there's more where that came from!"

"No!" He gasped.

I took a deep breath to calm myself, ignoring the spasm of pain it triggered. I stared at him, and he stared at me. There was no compromise in his face, although his forehead did crease. "You're going

to recover, Bella. You may have a scar or two..."

"You're wrong." I insisted. "I'm going to die."

"Really, Bella?" He was doubtful. "You'll be out of here in a few days. Two weeks at most."

I glared at him. "I may not die now... but I'm going to die eventually. Every minute of the day, I get older. You add all those minutes up and I'm going to get *old*. Every passing day is another step away from youth, from life, from you."

He frowned as what I was saying sunk in, pressing his long beautiful fingers to his temples and closing his eyes. "That's how it's supposed to happen. That's how it should happen. That's how it would have happened if I didn't exist—and I *shouldn't* exist." His guilt stung me.

I snorted. He opened his eyes in surprise. "Look, Fredward, that's just stupid. That's like someone who's just won the lottery taking their money and saying, 'Look, let's just go back to how things should be. It was better that way.' And I'm not buying it."

"I'm hardly a lottery prize," he growled, understanding the metaphor with ease.

"Bullshit. Bull. Shit." I let the last syllable roll off my tongue like a lump of shit.

He rolled his eyes and set his lips. "Bella, we're not having this discussion anymore. I refuse to damn you to an eternity of night and that's the end of it."

"If you think that's the end, then you have no idea," I warned him. "You're not the only vampire I know."

His eyes went black again. "Alice wouldn't dare."

And for a moment, I believed him; he looked so frightening that I couldn't help but believe it—I couldn't imagine someone, let alone Alice, being brave enough to cross him.

"Alice already saw it in a vision, didn't she?" I guessed. "That's why the things she says upset you. She knows I'm going to be like you... someday."

"She's wrong. She also saw you dead, but that clearly didn't happen either."

"Well, it should have," I replied sharply.

We stared at each other for a very long time. It was quiet except for the whirring of the machines, the beeping, the dripping, the ticking of the big clock on the wall. Finally, his expression softened.

"So where does that leave us?" He chuckled, preparing to answer his own question. "I believe it's called an impasse."

"I think it's *impassé*," I muttered.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, eying the button for the nurse.

"I'm fine," I lied.

"I don't believe you," he said gently.

"I'm not going back to sleep."

"You need rest. All this arguing isn't good for you."

"So give in," I hinted.

"No, you give in!"

"No!"

He ignored me and pressed the button.

"Yes?" the speaker on the wall squawked.

"I think we're ready for more pain medication," he said calmly, ignoring my furious expression.

"I'll send in the nurse." The voice sounded very bored.

"I won't take it," I promised.

He looked toward the sack of fluid hanging beside my bed. "I don't think they're going to ask you to swallow anything."

My heart rate started to climb. He read the fear and excitement in my eyes and sighed in

frustration.

"Bella, you're a pain. You need to relax so you can heal. Why are you so difficult? They're not going to put any more needles in you now."

"I'm not afraid of the needles."

"Yes you are."

Then he smiled his crooked smile, and took my face between his hands. "I told you I'm not going anywhere. Don't be afraid. Not of the needles, not of being alone, not of nothing. As long as it makes you happy, I'll be here. To push your buttons, to hold your face in my hands, to tell you everything will be alright, even when it won't."

I smiled back enormously, ignoring the ache in my cheeks, the feeling of his fingers digging into my sore flesh. "You're talking about forever, you know."

"What?"

"Forever. That's how long I want you to push my buttons and stuff."

"Oh, you'll get over it—it's just a crush."

I shook my head in disbelief—it made me dizzy. "I was shocked when R nee swallowed that one. I know you know better."

"That's the beautiful thing about being human," he told me. "Things change."

My eyes narrowed. "Don't hold your breath."

He was laughing aloud when the nurse came in, brandishing a syringe.

"Excuse me," she said brusquely to Fredward.

He got up and crossed to the end of the small room, leaning his long back against the wall. He folded his arms and waited. I kept my eyes on him, still apprehensive. He met my gaze calmly.

"Here you go, honey." The nurse smiled as she injected the medicine into my tube. "Fresh vicodin, straight from the vats."

"Mmmboy," I mumbled, unenthusiastic. It didn't take long. I could feel the drowsydoodle feeling trickling through my bloodstream almost immediately.

"That ought to do it," he muttered as my eyelids drooped.

She must have left the room, because something long, cold and smooth touched my face.

"Stay." The word was slurred.

"I'll stay as long as you like," he promised. His voice was beautiful, like a symphony. "Like I said, as long as it makes you happy... as long as it's what's best for you."

I tried to shake my head, but it was too heavy. "S'not the same thing," I mumbled.

He laughed. "Don't worry about that now, Bella. You can't argue with me until you wake up."

I think my face smiled. "Kay."

I could feel his lips at my ear.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Me toooooo."

"I know," he laughed quietly.

I turned my head quietly... searching. He knew what I was after, what I needed. His lips touched mine gently.

"Thanks," I sighed.

"Anytime."

I wasn't really there at all anymore. But I fought against the stupor weakly. There was just one more thing I wanted to tell him.

"Fredward?" I struggled to pronounce his name clearly.

"Yes?"

"I'm better than Alice," I mumbled.

"At what?"

But before I could answer, the night closed over me.

25.

EPILOGUE

THE BIG NIGHT

FREDWARD HELPED ME INTO HIS CAR, BEING VERY CAREFUL OF THE WISPS of silk and chiffon on my dress, the flowers he'd just pinned into my elaborately styled curls, and my bulky cast. He ignored the angry set of my mouth, as usual.

When he had me settled, he got in the driver's seat and headed back out the long, narrow drive.

"At what point exactly are you going to tell me what's going on?" I asked grumpily. I really hated surprises. And chiffon. And he knew that.

"I'm shocked that you haven't figured it out yet. It's like you're stupid or something." He threw a mocking smile in my direction, and my breath caught in my throat. Would I ever get used to his perfection at being an asshole?

"I did mention that you looked very nice, didn't I?" I verified.

"Yes." He grinned again. I'd never seen him dress in black before, and, with the contrast against his beautifully pale skin, his alabaster beauty was absolutely surreal. That much I couldn't deny, even if the fact that he was wearing a tuxedo and a top hat made me very nervous.

Not quite as nervous as the dress. Or the shoe. Only one shoe, as my other foot was still securely encased in plaster, and Dolce & Gabbana didn't make shoes for people with really fat feet. But the stiletto heel, held on only by satin ribbons, certainly wasn't going to help me as I tried to hobble around.

"I'm not coming over anymore if Alice is going to treat me like Guinea Pig Barbie when I do," I groused. I'd spent the better part of the day in Alice's staggeringly vast bathroom, a helpless victim as she played hairdresser and cosmetician. Whenever I fidgeted or complained, she reminded me that I didn't have anyone else in my life who would spend this much time trying to make me look beautiful. Then she'd dressed me in the most ridiculous dress—deep blue, frilly, and off the hook, with French shit on the tags that I couldn't even read—a dress more suitable for a night out in Paris than Forks. Nothing good could come of our formal attire, of that I was sure. Unless... but I was afraid to put my suspicions into words, even in my own head.

I was distracted then by the sound of a bee buzzing. Fredward pulled his cell phone from a pocket inside his cravat, holding it briefly to his ear before speaking.

"Hello, Chuck," he said warily.

"Charlie?" I frowned.

Charlie had been... difficult since my return to Forks. He had compartmentalized my bad experience into two defined reactions. Toward Carbomb he was almost worshipfully grateful. On the other hand, he was stubbornly convinced that Fredward was at fault—because, if not for him, I wouldn't have been climbing those hotel steps that I fell out of. And Fredward was far from disagreeing with him. These days I had rules that had never existed before: curfews, food rations... visiting hours.

Something Charlie was saying made Fredward's eyes widen in disbelief, and then a grin spread across his face.

"You're kidding!" He laughed.

"What is it?" I demanded. I couldn't imagine what their current plan to torment me was, and I feared it.

Fredward ignored me and continued. "Why don't you let me talk to him?" He suggested with evident pleasure. He waited for a few seconds. "Hello nigger, this is Fredward Cullen, the most beautiful man in Forks." His voice was very friendly, on the surface. I knew it well enough to catch the soft edge of menace. What was Tyler doing at my house, though? The awful truth began to dawn on me. I looked again at the inappropriate dress Alice had forced me into.

"I'm sorry if there's been some kind of miscommunication, but Bella is unavailable tonight." Fredward's tone emerged, and the threat in his voice was suddenly much more evident as he continued. "To be perfectly honest, she'll be unavailable every night, as far as anyone besides myself and my penis are concerned. No offense, TyTy. And I'm sorry about ruining your evening." He didn't sound sorry at all. And then he crushed the still-vibrating phone in his fist, a huge smirk on his face.

My face and neck flushed crimson with anger. I could feel the rage-induced tears starting to fill my eyes.

He looked at me in surprise. "Was that last part a bit too much? I didn't mean to offend you."

"I don't give a fuck about Tyler. You're taking me to *the prom!*" I yelled.

It was embarrassingly obvious now. If I'd been paying attention to anything at all, I'm sure I would have noticed the date on the posters that decorated the school buildings. But I'd never dreamed he was thinking of subjecting me to this. *Didn't he know me at all?*

He wasn't expecting the force of my reaction—that much was clear. He pressed his lips together and his eyes narrowed. "Don't be difficult, Bella."

My eyes flashed to the window; we were halfway to the school already.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I demanded in horror.

He gestured to the pair of prom tickets that he'd stuck in the dashboard clip. "Honestly, Bella, what did you think we were doing?"

I was mortified. First, because I'd missed the obvious. And also because the vague suspicions—expectations, really—that I'd been forming all day as Alice tried to transform me into a WHORE were so far wide of the mark. My half-fearful hopes seemed very silly now.

I'd guessed there was some kind of occasion brewing. But *prom*? That was the furthest thing from my mind.

The tears of anger rolled hot over my cheeks. I remembered with dismay that I was very uncharacteristically wearing mascara. I wiped quickly under my eyes to prevent any further smudges. My hand was unblackened when I pulled it away; maybe Alice had planned for this.

"This is completely ridiculous. Why are you crying?" he demanded in frustration.

"Because I'm *mad!* Seriously?!"

"Bella." He turned the full force of his scorching golden eyes on me.

"What?" I muttered, still mad.

"People don't cry when they're angry unless they're crazy," he insisted.

"Crazy for *you*," I muttered under my breath.

His eyes were melting all my fury. It was impossible to fight with him when he cheated like that. I gave in with poor grace.

"Okay," I pouted, unable to glare as effectively as I would have liked, fighting the haze of tears and love. "I'll go quietly. But you'll see. I'm way overdue for more bad luck. I'll probably break my other leg, especially if you make me dance. Look at this shoe, it's a death trap! I'll be dead by the first

slow-dance! It'll be the slowest dance you've ever had." I held out my good leg as evidence.

"Hmmm." He stared at my leg longer than was necessary. "Remind me to thank Alice for that tonight."

I shuddered, unsure what he meant. "Alice is going to be there?"

"With Jasper, and Emmett... and Rosalie," he admitted.

"Is Charlie in on this?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Of course." He grinned, and then chuckled. "Apparently Tyler wasn't, though."

I gritted my teeth. I hadn't thought about Tyler in weeks, and there was no reason to start now. How he could be so delusional, I couldn't imagine. At school, where Charlie couldn't interfere, Fredward and I were inseparable—except for those rare sunny days. Just when I thought Mike was the densest guy possible, Tyler had to go and out-dense him.

We were at the school now; Rosalie's red convertible was conspicuous and in the parking lot. The clouds were thin today, a few streaks of sunlight escaping through far away in the west.

He got out and walked around the car to open my door, thrusting his hand forward towards mine.

I stubbornly sat in my seat, arms folded, feeling a secret twinge of smugness. The lot was crowded with my classmates in formal dress: my witnesses. He couldn't remove me forcibly from the car as he might have done if we'd been alone. I silently thanked my classmates, realizing that I wouldn't always have that security.

He sighed. "When someone wants to kill you, you're brave as a lion—and yet when someone mentions dancing..." He shook his head.

I gulped. Dancing. Somehow I'd forgotten all about dancing.

"Bella, I won't let anything hurt you—not even yourself. I won't let go of you once, I promise you."

I thought about that and suddenly felt much better. The thought of his arms around me constantly, existing for the sole purpose of keeping me from hurting myself.

"There, now," he said gently, "it won't be so bad." He leaned down and wrapped one arm around my waist. I took his other hand and let him lift me out of the car.

He kept his arm tightly around mmm, supporting me and huffing periodically as I limped toward the school.

In Phoenix, they held proms in hotel ballrooms filled with ice sculptures, chocolate fountains, and other luxuries that made each couple feel glamorous. This dance was in the gym, of course. It was probably the only room in town big enough for a dance. When we got inside, I giggled. There were *actual* balloon arches and twisted garlands of pastel crepe paper festooning the walls. It was so pathetic.

"This looks like a horror movie waiting to happen," I snickered.

"Well," he muttered as we slowly approached the ticket table—he was carrying most of my weight but I still had to shuffle and wobble and waddle—"there are more than enough vampires present."

I looked at the dance floor; a wide gap had formed in the center, where two couples whirled gracefully to and fro. The other dancers pressed to the sides of the room to give them space—no one wanted to stand in contrast with such radiance, such blatant beauty.

Emmett and Jasper were intimidatingly flawless in classic matching tuxedos. Alice was striking in a black satin slip with geometric cutouts that bared large triangles of her snowy white skin. And Rosalie was... well, Rosalie. She was beyond belief. Her vivid scarlet dress was backless, tight to her calves where it flared into a wide ruffled train, with a neckline that plunged to her knees and breasts that went for miles. I pitied every girl in the room, myself included.

"Do you want me to bolt the doors so that you can massacre the unsuspecting townsfolk?" I said.

"And where do you fit into that scheme?" He glared.

"Oh, I'm with the vampires, of course."

He smiled reluctantly. "Anything to get out of dancing."

"Anything, baby." I breathed.

He showed our tickets, then turned me toward the dance floor with one flick of his pinky on my shoulder. I cringed against that pinky and dragged my foot behind me.

"I've got all night," he warned grimly.

Eventually he towed me out to where his family was caught up in an elegant twirl. I watched in horror as they danced.

"Fredward." My throat was so dry I could only manage a whisper. "I honestly can't dance!" I could feel a panic bubbling up inside my chest.

"Don't worry, silly," he whimpered back. "I can." He put his arms around my neck and lifted me to slide his feet under mine.

And then we were whirling, too.

"I feel like I'm five years old," I laughed after a few minutes of effortless waltzing to the Usher song.³³³

"You don't look five," he murmured, pulling me closer and placing his face against my Parisian-whore neckline.

"I feel like I'm five," I repeated, "with sunglasses on."

Alice caught my eye on a turn and smiled in encouragement—I smiled back. I was surprised to realize that I was actually enjoying myself... a little.

"Okay, this isn't half bad." I admitted.

Fredward laughed and pulled me closer, his mouth resting within my earlobe. "I told you," he whispered. "I told you it would be a good time. You need to trust me, Bella. Trust that I am going to show you a good time." He paused. "I think you know what'll happen if you don't," he continued; I swear that I felt his teeth gently press upon my earlobe.

Suddenly, Fredward jerked his head back and stared toward the doors, and his face was angry.

"What is it?" I wondered aloud, pushing my mouth closer to his ear. I followed his gaze, disoriented by all the spinning, but finally I could see what was bothering him. Squaw Black, not in a tux but shirtless, sporting only jean cutoffs and not even wearing shoes, his hair slicked back into his signature ponytail. He was crossing the floor toward us, cutting through several couples, just pushing them aside.

After the first shock of recognition, I couldn't help but feel bad for Squaw. He was clearly uncomfortable, under-dressed, and probably cold. His face was apologetic as his eyes met mine.

Fredward snarled very quietly.

"Behave!" I hissed.

Fredward's voice was scathing. "He wants to... chat with you," his hips rocking back and forth demonstratively.

Squaw reached us then, the embarrassment and apology even more evident on his blushing face.

"Hey, Bella, I was hoping you would be here." Squaw's voice squeaked, but while his tone made him seem young, his words and his great smile gave him the presence of a man.

"Hi, Squaw!" I smiled back. "What's up?"

"Can I cut in?" he asked tentatively, glancing at Fredward for the very first time. I was shocked

333. Most likely "Think of You," 1995

to notice that Squaw didn't have to look up. He must have grown a foot and a half since the first time I'd seen him.

Fredward's face was composed entirely of major scales. His only answer was to set me carefully on my feet, and take a step back.

"Thanks!" Squaw said animatedly.

Fredward just nodded, then shook his head, then rolled his eyes; they looked at me intently before walking away.

Squaw put his hands on my waist, and I reached up to put my hands on his broad shoulders.

"Wow, Squaw, how tall are you now?"

He smiled. "Six-two."

We weren't really dancing—my leg made that impossible. Instead we stepped awkwardly from side to side without moving our feet. It was just as well; the recent growth spurt had left him looking gangly and uncoordinated.

"So, how did you end up here tonight?" I asked without true curiosity. Considering Fredward's reaction, it was probably because he wanted to show off how tall he had become since I'd last seen him.

"Can you believe my dad paid me twenty bucks to come to your prom and show off how tall I am?" he admitted, slightly ashamed.

"Yes, I can," I muttered, silently damning Billy for his machinations. "Well, I hope you're enjoying yourself, at least. Seen anything you like?" I teased, knowing that the only thing he really liked was right between his hands.

"Yeah," he sighed. "But she's taken."

He glanced down to meet my gaze for just a second—then looked away, embarrassed.

"You look really *bella*, by the way," he added shyly.

"Um, thanks. So why did the Chief pay you to come here?" I asked, wanting to hear it from his own lips.

Squaw didn't seem grateful for the confessional I'd offered him; he looked away, uncomfortable again. "He said it was a 'safe' place to talk to you. I swear the old man is losing his mind."

I joined in his laughter weakly.

"Anyway, he said that if I told you something, he would finally start calling me Master Cylinder, like I've always wanted."

I stifled a laugh and said, "You'd better tell me then, or you'll never be a Master Cylinder."

"It's Master Cylinder. There's just one, and I'm it." Squaw grinned even bigger, his chest slightly puffed with pride. Against the wall, Fredward was watching my face, his own face expressionless. I saw a sophomore in a pink dress eying him with timid speculation, but he didn't seem to be aware of her.

Squaw looked away again, ashamed. "Okay, I'll tell you because I want to be Master Cylinder, but not because I believe it. So don't get mad, okay?"

"There's no way I'll ever be mad at you, Squaw," I assured him. "I won't even be mad at Chief. Just say what you have to."

"Well—this is sooo stupid, I'm sorry, Bella—he wants you to break up with your boyfriend. He asked me to tell you 'please.'" He shook his head with disgust.

"He's still superstitious, eh?"

"Yeah. He was... kind of over the top when you fell out that window down in Phoenix. He didn't believe..." Squaw trailed off self-consciously.

My eyes narrowed. "I fell."

"I know that," Squaw said quickly.

"He thinks Fredward had something to do with me getting hurt. Like maybe I didn't fall out the

window as much as I was *thrown* out." It wasn't a question, and despite my promise, I was angry.

Squaw wouldn't meet my eyes. We weren't even bothering to step to the music, though his hands were still on my waist, and mine around his neck.

"Look, Squaw, I know the Chief probably won't believe this, but just so you know"—he looked at me now, responding to the new earnestness in my voice—"Fredward really did save my life after I fell out of that window. If it weren't for Fredward and his father, I'd be dead."

"I know," he claimed, and he sounded like my sincere words had affected him some. Maybe he'd be able to convince Billy of this much, at least.

"Hey, I'm sorry you had to come do this, Squaw," I apologized. "At any rate, now you're Master Cylinder, right?"

"Yeah," he muttered. He was still looking upset.

"There's more?" I asked in disbelief.

"Forget it," he mumbled. "I'll get a job and become Master SomethingElse myself."

I glared at him until he met my glaze. "Just spit it out, Squaw."

"It's so totally bad."

"I don't care. Tell me," I insisted.

"Okay... but, gee whiz, this sounds bad." He shook his head. "He said to tell you, no, to *warn* you, that—and this is his plural, not mine"—he lifted one hand from my waist to make air quotes—"We'll be watching you sleep." He watched warily for my reaction.

It sounded like something from a mafia movie. I Laughed Out Loud.

"Sorry you had to do this, Squaw," I snickered.

"I don't mind *that* much." He grinned with relief. His eyes were appraising as they raked quickly over my chiffon. "So, should I tell him you said to butt the hell out?" he asked hopefully.

"No," I sighed. "Tell him I said thanks. I know he means well."

The song ended and I drooped my arms.

His hands hesitated at my waist, and he glanced at my bum leg. "Do you want to dance again? Or I could help you get somewhere? Maybe something to drink?"

Fredward answered for me. "That's quite all right, Squaw. I'll take things from here."

Squaw flinched, and stared wide-eyed at Fredward, whose expression could pierce the heavens.

"Hey, I didn't see you there," he mumbled. "I guess I'll see you around, Bella." He stepped back, waving half-heartedly.

I smiled. "Yeah, sure."

"Sorry," he said again before he turned for the door.

Fredward's arms wound around me as the next song started. It was a little up-tempo for slow dancing, but that didn't seem to concern him. I leaned my head against his chest, content.

"Feeling better?" I teased.

"Not really," he said tersely. "I don't understand why they give those people land and then let them run around and make trouble."

"Don't be mad at Billy," I sighed. "He just worries about me for Charlie's sake. It's nothing personal."

"I'm not mad at Billy," he corrected in a clipped voice. "But his son is irritating me."

I pulled back to look at him. His face was deadly serious. "Squaw? Why Squaw?"

"First of all, he made me break my promise."

I stared at him in confusion.

He half-smiled. "I promised I wouldn't let go of you tonight," he explained.

I looked at him blankly. "Oh. Well, I forgive you."

"Thanks, but there's something else." Fredward returned to frowning.

I waited patiently.

"He called you beautiful," he finally continued, his frown deepening into a grimace, saliva frothing at the corners of his mouth. "That's practically an insult, the way you look right now. It's an insult to Alice, it's an insult to Carbomb and his cast, and it's an insult to you. You're much much more than beautiful right now, Bella. You're radiant, you're stunning, you're *bellissima*; but beautiful..."

I tried not to vomit and forced a treacly grin. "You might be a little biased."

"I don't think that's it. Besides, I have excellent eyesight."

We were twirling again, my feet on his as he held me close.

"So are you going to explain the reason for all this?" I wondered aloud.

He looked down at me, confused, and I glared meaningfully at the crepe paper.

He considered for a moment, then changed direction, spinning me through the crowd to the back door of the gym. I caught a glimpse of Jessica and Mike dancing, both of them eying me for very different reasons. Jessica waved jealously, and I smiled back quickly. Angela was there, too, looking blissfully happy in the arms of Eric; she didn't look up from his eyes. Lee and Samantha, dyke-Lauren, glaring towards us, with Conner; I could name every face that spiraled past me, and I just did. And then we were outdoors, in the cool, dim light of the fading sunset.

As soon as we were alone, he swung me up into his arms, and carried me across the darkening grounds 'til he reached the bench beneath the shadow of the madrone trees. He sat there, keeping me cradled against his chest. The moon was already up, visible through the gauzy clouds, and his face glowed pale in the white light. His mouth was hard, his eyes troubled.

"Okay, so now that we're outside, are we any closer to the point?" I prompted.

He ignored me, staring up at the coming moon.

"Twilight, still," he murmured. "Another ending, another beginning. No matter how perfect the day is, it still has to begin before it ends."

"Some things don't have to end," I muttered through my teeth, insanely tense.

He sighed.

"I brought you to the prom," he said slowly, finally coming to terms with what had happened, "because I don't want you to miss anything. I don't want my presence to take anything away from you, if I can help it. I want you to be *human*. I want your life to continue as it would have if I'd died in 1910, like I should have. I want you to do human things. I wanted you to do prom, and the only way I could get you to was to trick you."

I shuddered at his strange words, and then shook my head angrily. "In what strange parallel dimension would I ever have gone to prom of my own free will, without being manipulated by the combined efforts of your entire family? If you weren't a thousand times stronger than me, and able to physically overpower me whenever I didn't want to do something, you never would have gotten me out of that limo."

He smiled, briefly, but it didn't touch his eyes. "It wasn't so bad, you said so yourself."

"That's because I was with you. That's because you made me feel beautiful."

We were quiet for a minute; he stared at the moon and I stared at him: it was enough. I wished there was some way to explain how very uninterested I was in a normal human life. I wasn't normal; I was destined for something more.

"Why don't you tell me something?" he asked, glancing down at me with a slight smile that approached his eyes this time.

"Don't I always?"

"Just promise you'll tell me," he insisted, grinning now.

I knew I was going to regret this almost instantly. "Fine."

"You seemed honestly surprised when you figured out I was taking you here," he began.

"I *was*," I interjected.

"Exactly," he agreed. "But you must have had some other theory. You must have wondered why you spent all day in hair and make-up, why we were in my father's stretch limo, why you were wearing this dress... Didn't you wonder?"

"I guess." Yes, instant regret. "But I didn't want to tell you."

"You promised," he objected.

"I promised to tell you just now, not earlier."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, tell me."

I knew he thought it was mere embarrassment holding me back; is that the only emotion he thought I could truly feel? "I think it will make you mad—or sad."

His brows pulled together over his eyes, like a man pulling his raincoat closed against a storm, eyes spinning as he thought this through. "I've decided that I still want to know. Please?"

I sighed. He waited.

"Well... I assumed it was some kind of... occasion. The fancy clothes and the limo... it all added up. But I didn't think it would be some trite human thing like prom!" I scoffed.

"Human?" he asked flatly. He'd picked up on the key word.

I looked down at my dress, fidgeting with a stray piece of chiffon. He waited in silence.

"Okay," I confessed in a rush; I couldn't hold it in anymore. "So I was hoping that you might have changed your mind. That you were going to dress me up like a Parisian whore, fly me to Paris, take me out to dinner and then turn me into a vampire. Right there under the stars, over a bottle of wine with soft music playing. I..."

A dozen emotions played across his face. Some I recognized: anger... pain... and then he seemed to collect them and his expression became amused.

"You thought that would be a black tie occasion, did you?" he teased, touching the lapel of his tuxedo jacket.

I scowled to hide my embarrassment. "I guess... I guess I hoped it would. I don't know how these things work. To me, at least, it seems more rational than prom does." He was still grinning. "It's not funny," I said. "My broken fantasy is not funny."

"No, you're right, it's not," he agreed, his smile fading. "I'd rather treat it like a joke, though, than believe you're really serious."

"But I am serious."

"I know." He sighed deeply. "And you're really that willing?"

The pain was back in his eyes. I bit my lip and nodded. "I'm serious *and* willing."

"So ready for this to be the end," he murmured, almost to himself, "for this to be the Twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You're ready to give up everything and live forever?"

"It's not the end, it's the beginning," I disagreed under my breath. "You said it yourself: something can't begin to be perfect until it has begun."

"I'm not perfect," he said sadly.

"Do you remember when you told me that I didn't see myself very clearly?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. "You obviously have the same blindness."

"I know who I am," Fredward responded, looking down at his hands and then tracing the lengths of his arms with his eyes. "I know what I am," he growled.

I sighed.

But his mercurial mood shifted on me without transition. He pursed his lips and brushed up against the skin just under the corner of my jaw.

"Right now?" he whispered with spunk, blowing cold air onto my neckline and bare shoulders. I shivered involuntarily.

"Yessss!" I whispered, so my voice wouldn't have a chance to break me. If he thought I was bluffing, then he obviously didn't know me very well. Bella Duck was a woman who had already made this decision, and Bella Duck was a sure woman. It didn't matter that my body was rigid as a plank, my hands balled into fists, my breathing erratic, and my heart bumping out of my chest, longing to jump into his...

He chuckled darkly, and leaned away. His face did look disappointed.

"You can't really believe that I would give in so easily," he said with a sour edge to his mocking tone.

"A girl can dream," I said, referring to myself.

His eyebrows rose. "Is that what you dream about? Being a monster?"

"Not exactly," I said, frowning at his word choice. "Being a Cullen."

His expression changed, softened, and saddened at my subtly aching voice.

"Bella." His fingers lightly traced the shape of my lips. "I will stay with you—isn't that enough? Isn't my presence enough to make you feel whole?"

I smiled on his fingertips. "Enough for now."

He frowned at my tenacity. No one was going to surrender tonight. Not Sure Woman, not Vampire Boy. He exhaled, and the sound was practically a growl.

I traced him with my own fingers. "Look," I said. "I love you more than everything else in the world. I just know it. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes, it is enough," he answered, licking his lips. "Enough for forever."

And he leaned down to press his cold, wet lips once more to my throat.

Forever.

Vampirical Inquiries

1. *from pg. 14*

Do you go to school in a big city? How many metal detectors does your school have? Why or why not?

2. *from pg. 58*

Why do you think other people are always telling each other what to do?

3. *from pg. 75*

What was Bella's voice guarding? There is an old proverb that says the pen is mightier than the sword, but what does it guard?

4. *from pg. 136*

Evil has, historically, been a difficult thing to define. While *Fredward Bound* is not the first novel to attempt this Herculean task, it is perhaps the most successful. In it we are given Bella and Fredward, two deeply flawed characters that represent opposing goal-lines between good and evil. Which one do you think is evil? Does Fredward's thirst for human blood make him evil? Does Bella's self-absorbed loathing for others and her racism make her evil? Did your laughing at Bella's racism turn you into a racist? Are you sure? Why or why not?

5. *from pg. 164*

What is romance?

6. *from pg. 198*

Do you often compliment people by looking at their bodies? Have you ever considered using your words? Explain.

7. *from pg. 202*

Who put the twist on Bella's neck? Have you ever put the twist on someone's neck? Would you ever consider doing so? Share your answers with the group.

8. *from pg. 218*

While Bella may never forget, do you? What have you forgotten? Can you remember why you forgot? Do you wish you could forget it again?

9. *from pg. 289*

What are the risks and rewards of getting "in too deep" as the narrator of a fictional story, while simultaneously being a character in it?

10. *from pg. 304*

How many times have you done what you wanted instead of what was right?

Tally each and discuss with the group the times that you regret the most.

11. *from pg. 311*

What is the average cost of losing control for an American male of average social and economic standing? What is the cost for average men living in other countries? Women?

12. *from pg. 377*

How does the author portray fat people throughout the novel? How do you portray fat people in your daily life? What do you consider the ideal medium for portraying fat people?

13. *from pg. 470*

What percentage of the US' gross domestic product comes from funny business? How do other countries compare? Have you ever considered starting your own funny business? How come?

14. *from pg. q*

Did you like our book? Why or why not?