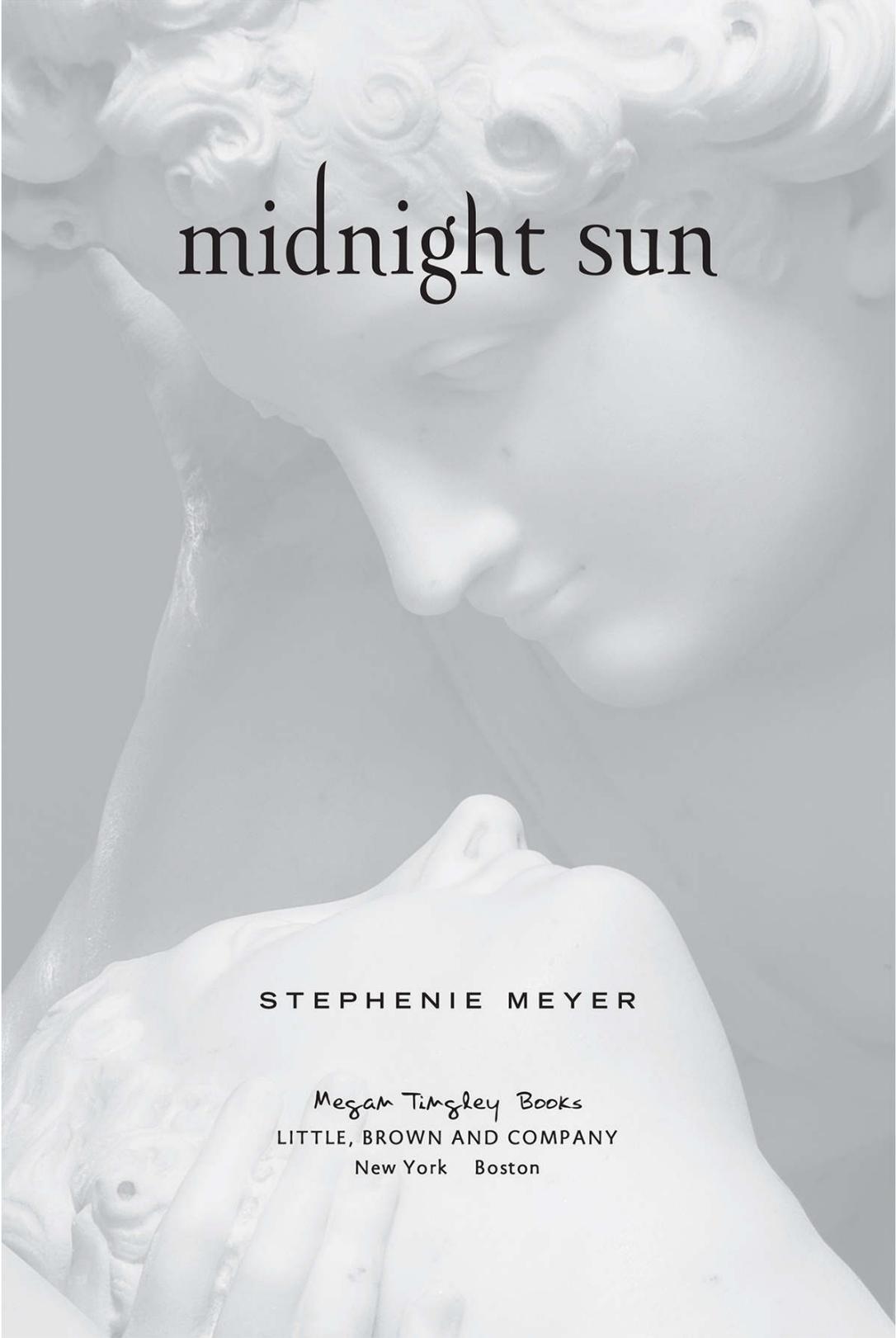


midnight sun



STEPHENIE MEYER

AUTHOR OF THE #1 BESTSELLING TWILIGHT SAGA



midnight sun

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This book is dedicated to all the readers who have been such a happy part of my life for the last fifteen years. When we first met, many of you were young teenagers with bright, beautiful eyes full of dreams for the future. I hope that in the years that have passed, you've all found your dreams and that the reality of them was even better than you'd hoped.

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

1. FIRST SIGHT

THIS WAS THE TIME OF DAY WHEN I MOST WISHED I WERE ABLE TO SLEEP.

High school.

Or was *purgatory* the right word? If there *were* any way to atone for my sins, this ought to count toward the tally in some measure. The tedium was not something I grew used to; every day seemed more impossibly monotonous than the last.

Perhaps this could even be considered my form of sleep—if sleep was defined as the inert state between active periods.

I stared at the cracks running through the plaster in the far corner of the cafeteria, imagining patterns into them that were not there. It was one way to tune out the voices that babbled like the gush of a river inside my head.

Several hundred of these voices I ignored out of boredom.

When it came to the human mind, I'd heard it all before and then some. Today, all thoughts were consumed with the trivial drama of a new addition to the small student body. It took so little to work them up. I'd seen the new face repeated in thought after thought from every angle. Just an ordinary human girl. The excitement over her arrival was tiresomely predictable—it was the same reaction as one would get from flashing a shiny object at a group of toddlers. Half the sheep-like males were already imagining themselves infatuated with her, just because she was something new to look at. I tried harder to tune them out.

Only four voices did I block out of courtesy rather than distaste: my family, my two brothers and two sisters, who were so used to the lack of privacy in my presence that they rarely worried about it. I gave them what I could. I tried not to listen if I could help it.

Try as I may, still... I knew.

Rosalie was thinking, as usual, about herself—her mind was a stagnant pool with few surprises. She'd caught sight of her profile in the reflection

off someone's glasses, and she was mulling over her own perfection. No one else's hair was closer to true gold, no one else's shape was quite so perfectly an hourglass, no one else's face was such a flawless, symmetrical oval. She didn't compare herself to the humans here; that juxtaposition would have been laughable, absurd. She thought of others like us, none of them her equal.

Emmett's usually carefree expression was crumpled with frustration. Even now, he ran one enormous hand through his ebony curls, twisting the hair into his fist. Still fuming over the wrestling match he'd lost to Jasper during the night. It would take all his limited patience to make it to the end of the school day to orchestrate a rematch. Hearing Emmett's thoughts never felt intrusive, because he never thought one thing that he would not say aloud or put into action. Perhaps I only felt guilty reading the others' minds because I knew there were things inside that they wouldn't want me to know. If Rosalie's mind was a stagnant pool, then Emmett's was a lake with no shadows, glass clear.

And Jasper was... suffering. I suppressed a sigh.

Edward. Alice called my name in her head and had my attention at once.

It was just the same as having my name called aloud. I was glad my given name had fallen out of style in the last few decades—it had been annoying in the past; anytime anyone thought of any Edward, my head would turn automatically.

My head didn't turn now. Alice and I were good at these private conversations. It was rare that anyone caught us. I kept my eyes on the lines in the plaster.

How is he holding up? she asked me.

I frowned, just a small change in the set of my mouth. Nothing that would tip the others off. I could easily be frowning out of boredom.

Jasper had been still for too long. He wasn't performing human ticks the way we all must, constantly in motion so as not to stand out, like Emmett pulling at his hair, Rosalie crossing her legs first one way then the next, Alice tapping her toes against the linoleum, or me, moving my head to stare at different patterns in the wall. Jasper looked paralyzed, his lean form ramrod straight, even his honey hair seeming not to react to the air wafting from the vents.

Alice's mental tone was alarmed now, and I saw in her mind that she

was watching Jasper in her peripheral vision. *Is there any danger?* She searched ahead into the immediate future, skimming through visions of monotony for the source behind my frown. Even as she did so, she remembered to tuck one tiny fist under her sharp chin and blink regularly. She brushed a tuft of her short, jagged black hair out of her eyes.

I turned my head slowly to the left, as if looking at the bricks of the wall, sighed, and then turned to the right, back to the cracks in the ceiling. The others would assume I was playing human. Only Alice knew I was shaking my head.

She relaxed. *Let me know if it gets too bad.*

I moved only my eyes, up to the ceiling above, and back down.

Thanks for doing this.

I was glad I couldn't answer her aloud. What would I say? *My pleasure?* It was hardly that. I didn't enjoy tuning in to Jasper's struggles. Was it really necessary to experiment this way? Wouldn't the safer path be to just admit that he might never be able to handle his thirst as well as the rest of us could, and not push his limits? Why flirt with disaster?

It had been two weeks since our last hunting trip. That was not an immensely difficult time span for the rest of us. A little uncomfortable occasionally—if a human walked too close, if the wind blew the wrong way. But humans rarely walked too close. Their instincts told them what their conscious minds would never understand: We were a danger that must be avoided.

Jasper was very dangerous right now.

It did not happen often, but every now and then I would be struck by the obliviousness of the humans around us. We were all so accustomed to it, we always expected it, but occasionally it seemed more glaring than usual. None of them noticed us here, lounging at the battered cafeteria table, though an ambush of tigers sprawled in our places would be less lethal than we were. All they saw were five odd-looking people, close enough to human to pass. It was hard to imagine surviving with senses so incredibly dull.

At that moment, a small girl paused at the end of the closest table to ours, stopping to talk to a friend. She tossed her short, sandy hair, combing her fingers through it. The heaters blew her scent in our direction. I was used to the way that scent made me feel—the dry ache in my throat, the

hollow yearn in my stomach, the automatic tightening of my muscles, the excess flow of venom in my mouth.

This was all quite normal, usually easy to ignore. It was harder just now, with the reactions stronger, doubled, as I monitored Jasper.

Jasper was letting his imagination get away from him. He was picturing it—picturing himself getting up from his seat next to Alice and going to stand beside the little girl. Thinking of leaning down and in, as if he were going to whisper in her ear, and letting his lips touch the arch of her throat. Imagining how the hot flow of her pulse beneath the weak barrier of her skin would feel under his mouth...

I kicked his chair.

He met my gaze, his black eyes resentful for a second, and then looked down. I could hear shame and rebellion war in his head.

“Sorry,” Jasper muttered.

I shrugged.

“You weren’t going to do anything,” Alice murmured to him, soothing his mortification. “I could see that.”

I fought back the frown that would give her lie away. We had to stick together, Alice and I. It wasn’t easy, being the freaks among those who were already freaks. We protected each other’s secrets.

“It helps a little if you think of them as people,” Alice suggested, her high, musical voice racing too fast for human ears to understand, if any had been close enough to hear. “Her name is Whitney. She has a baby sister she adores. Her mother invited Esme to that garden party, do you remember?”

“I know who she is,” Jasper said curtly. He turned away to stare out one of the small windows that were spaced just under the eaves around the long room. His tone ended the conversation.

He would have to hunt tonight. It was ridiculous to take risks like this, trying to test his strength, to build his endurance. Jasper should just accept his limitations and work within them.

Alice sighed silently and stood, taking her tray of food—her prop, as it were—with her and leaving him alone. She knew when he’d had enough of her encouragement. Though Rosalie and Emmett were more flagrant about their relationship, it was Alice and Jasper who knew each other’s every need as well as their own. As if they could read minds, too—but only each other’s.

Edward.

Reflex reaction. I turned to the sound of my name being called, though it wasn't being called, just thought.

My eyes locked for half a second with a pair of large, chocolate-brown human eyes set in a pale, heart-shaped face. I knew the face, though I'd never seen it myself before this moment. It had been foremost in every human head today. The new student, Isabella Swan. Daughter of the town's chief of police, brought to live here by some new custody situation. Bella. She'd corrected everyone who'd used her full name.

I looked away, bored. It took me a second to realize that she had not been the one to think my name.

Of course she's already crushing on the Cullens, I heard the first thought continue.

Now I recognized the "voice."

Jessica Stanley—it had been a while since she'd bothered me with her internal chatter. What a relief it had been when she'd gotten over her misplaced fixation. It used to be nearly impossible to escape her constant, ridiculous daydreams. I'd wished, at the time, that I could explain to her *exactly* what would have happened if my lips, and the teeth behind them, had gotten anywhere near her. That would have silenced those annoying fantasies. The thought of her reaction almost made me smile.

Fat lot of good it will do her, Jessica went on. *She's really not even pretty. I don't know why Eric is staring so much... or Mike.*

She flinched mentally on the latter name. Her new obsession, the generically popular Mike Newton, was completely oblivious to her. Apparently, he was not as oblivious to the new girl. Another child reaching for the shiny object. This put a mean edge to Jessica's thoughts, though she was outwardly cordial to the newcomer as she explained to her the commonly held knowledge about my family. The new student must have asked about us.

Everyone's looking at me today, too, Jessica thought smugly. *Isn't it lucky Bella has two classes with me? I'll bet Mike will want to ask me what she's—*

I tried to block the inane chatter out of my head before the petty and the trivial could drive me mad.

"Jessica Stanley is giving the new Swan girl all the dirty laundry on the

Cullen clan,” I murmured to Emmett as a distraction.

He chuckled under his breath. *I hope she’s making it good*, he thought.

“Rather unimaginative, actually. Just the barest hint of scandal. Not an ounce of horror. I’m a little disappointed.”

And the new girl? Is she disappointed in the gossip as well?

I listened to hear what this new girl, Bella, thought of Jessica’s story. What did she see when she looked at the strange, chalky-skinned family that was universally avoided?

It was my responsibility to know her reaction. I acted as a lookout, for lack of a better word, for my family. To protect us. If anyone ever grew suspicious, I could give us early warning and an easy retreat. It happened occasionally—some human with an active imagination would see in us the characters of a book or a movie. Usually they got it wrong, but it was better to move on somewhere new than to risk scrutiny. Rarely, extremely rarely, someone would guess right. We didn’t give them a chance to test their hypothesis. We simply disappeared, to become no more than a frightening memory.

That hadn’t happened for decades.

I heard nothing, though I listened close beside where Jessica’s frivolous internal monologue continued to gush. It was as if there were no one sitting beside her. How peculiar. Had the girl moved? That didn’t seem likely, as Jessica was still babbling at her. I looked up, feeling off-balance. Checking on my extra “hearing”—it wasn’t something I ever had to do.

Again, my gaze locked onto those wide brown eyes. She was sitting right where she had been before and looking at us—a natural thing to be doing, I supposed, as Jessica was still regaling her with the local gossip about the Cullens.

Thinking about us, too, would be natural.

But I couldn’t hear a whisper.

Warm, inviting red stained her cheeks as she looked down, away from the embarrassing gaffe of getting caught staring at a stranger. It was good that Jasper was still gazing out the window. I didn’t like to imagine what that easy pooling of blood would do to his control.

The emotions had been as clear on her face as if they were spelled out in words: surprise, as she unknowingly absorbed the signs of the subtle differences between her kind and mine; curiosity, as she listened to Jessica’s

tale; and something more... Fascination? It wouldn't be the first time. We were beautiful to them, our intended prey. Then, finally, the embarrassment.

And yet, though her thoughts had been so clear in her odd eyes—odd because of the depth to them—I could hear only silence from the place she was sitting. Just... silence.

I felt a moment of unease.

This was nothing I'd ever encountered. Was there something wrong with me? I felt exactly the same as I always did. Worried, I listened harder.

All the voices I'd been blocking were suddenly shouting in my head.

... wonder what music she likes... maybe I could mention my new CD..., Mike Newton was thinking, two tables away—focused on Bella Swan.

Look at him staring at her. Isn't it enough that he has half the girls in school waiting for him to... Eric Yorkie's thoughts were caustic, and also revolving around the girl.

... so disgusting. You'd think she was famous or something... Even Edward Cullen staring.... Lauren Mallory was so jealous that her face, by all rights, should be dark jade in color. *And Jessica, flaunting her new best friend. What a joke...* Vitriol continued to spew from the girl's thoughts.

... I bet everyone has asked her that. But I'd like to talk to her. What's something more original? Ashley Dowling mused.

... maybe she'll be in my Spanish..., June Richardson hoped.

... tons left to do tonight! Trig, and the English test. I hope my mom... Angela Weber, a quiet girl whose thoughts were unusually kind, was the only one at the table who wasn't obsessed with this Bella.

I could hear them all, hear every insignificant thing they were thinking as it passed through their minds. But nothing at all from the new student with the deceptively communicative eyes.

And of course, I could hear what the girl said when she spoke to Jessica. I didn't have to read minds to be able to hear her low, clear voice on the far side of the long room.

"Which one is the boy with the reddish-brown hair?" I heard her ask, sneaking another look at me from the corner of her eye, only to glance quickly away when she saw that I was still staring.

If I'd had time to hope that hearing the sound of her voice would help me pinpoint the tone of her thoughts, I was instantly disappointed. Usually, people's thoughts came to them in a similar pitch to their physical voices.

But this quiet, shy voice was unfamiliar, not one of the hundreds of thoughts bouncing around the room, I was sure of that. Entirely new.

Oh, good luck, idiot! Jessica thought before answering the girl's question. "That's Edward. He's gorgeous, of course, but don't waste your time. He doesn't date. Apparently none of the girls here are good-looking enough for him." She snorted quietly.

I turned my head away to hide my smile. Jessica and her classmates had no idea how lucky they were that none of them particularly appealed to me.

Beneath the transient humor, I felt a strange impulse, one I did not clearly understand. It had something to do with the vicious edge to Jessica's thoughts that the new girl was unaware of.... I felt the strangest urge to step in between them, to shield Bella Swan from the darker workings of Jessica's mind. What an odd thing to feel. Trying to ferret out the motivations behind the impulse, I examined the new girl one more time, through Jessica's eyes now. My staring had attracted too much attention.

Perhaps it was just some long-buried protective instinct—the strong for the weak. Somehow, this girl looked more fragile than her new classmates. Her skin was so translucent it was hard to believe it offered her much defense from the outside world. I could see the rhythmic pulse of blood through her veins under the clear, pale membrane.... But I should not concentrate on that. I was good at this life I'd chosen, but I was just as thirsty as Jasper and there was no point in inviting temptation.

There was a faint crease between her eyebrows that she seemed unaware of.

It was unbelievably frustrating! I could easily see that it was a strain for her to sit there, to make conversation with strangers, to be the center of attention. I could sense her shyness from the way she held her frail-looking shoulders, slightly hunched, as if she was expecting a rebuff at any moment. And yet I could only see, could only sense, could only imagine. There was nothing but silence from the very unexceptional human girl. I could hear nothing. Why?

"Shall we?" Rosalie murmured, interrupting my focus.

I turned my mind away from the girl with a sense of relief. I didn't want to continue to fail at this—failure was a rare thing for me, and even more irritating than it was uncommon. I didn't want to develop any interest in her hidden thoughts simply because they were hidden. No doubt when I did

decipher them—and I *would* find a way to do so—they would be just as petty and trivial as any human’s. Not worth the effort I would expend to reach them.

“So, is the new one afraid of us yet?” Emmett asked, still waiting for my response to his earlier question.

I shrugged. He wasn’t interested enough to press for more information.

We got up from the table and walked out of the cafeteria.

Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper were pretending to be seniors; they left for their classes. I was playing a younger role than they. I headed off for my junior-level Biology lesson, preparing my mind for the tedium. It was doubtful Mr. Banner, a man of no more than average intellect, would manage to pull out anything in his lecture that would surprise someone holding two medical degrees.

In the classroom, I settled into my chair and let my books—props, again; they held nothing I didn’t already know—spill across the table. I was the only student who had a table to himself. The humans weren’t smart enough to *know* that they feared me, but their innate survival instincts were enough to keep them away.

The room slowly filled as they trickled in from lunch. I leaned back in my chair and waited for the time to pass. Again, I wished I were able to sleep.

Because I’d been thinking about the new girl, when Angela Weber escorted her through the door, her name intruded on my attention.

Bella seems just as shy as me. I’ll bet today is really hard for her. I wish I could say something... but it would probably just sound stupid.

Yes! Mike Newton thought, turning in his seat to watch the girls enter.

Still, from the place where Bella Swan stood, nothing. The empty space where her thoughts should be vexed and unnerved me.

What if it *all* went away? What if this was just the first symptom of some kind of mental decline?

I’d often wished that I could escape the cacophony. That I could be normal—as far as that was possible for me. But now I felt panicked at the thought. Who would I be without what I could do? I’d never heard of such a thing. I would see if Carlisle had.

The girl walked down the aisle beside me, headed to the teacher’s desk. Poor girl; the seat next to me was the only one available. Automatically, I

cleared what would be her side of the table, shoving my books into a pile. I doubted she would feel very comfortable there. She was in for a long semester—in this class, at least. Perhaps, though, sitting beside her, I'd be able to flush out her thoughts' hiding place... not that I'd ever needed close proximity before. Not that I would find anything worth listening to.

Bella Swan walked into the flow of heated air that blew toward me from the vent.

Her scent hit me like a battering ram, like an exploding grenade. There was no image violent enough to encompass the force of what happened to me in that moment.

Instantly, I was transformed. I was nothing close to the human I'd once been. No trace of the shreds of humanity I'd managed to cloak myself in over the years remained.

I was a predator. She was my prey. There was nothing else in the whole world but that truth.

There was no room full of witnesses—they were already collateral damage in my mind. The mystery of her thoughts was forgotten. Her thoughts meant nothing, for she would not go on thinking them much longer.

I was a vampire, and she had the sweetest blood I'd smelled in more than eighty years.

I hadn't imagined that such a scent could exist. If I'd known it did, I would have gone searching for it long ago. I would have scoured the planet for her. I could imagine the taste....

Thirst burned through my throat like fire. My mouth felt baked and desiccated, and the fresh flow of venom did nothing to dispel that sensation. My stomach twisted with the hunger that was an echo of the thirst. My muscles coiled to spring.

Not a full second had passed. She was still taking the same step that had put her downwind from me.

As her foot touched the ground, her eyes slid toward me, a movement she clearly meant to be stealthy. Her gaze met mine, and I saw myself reflected in the mirror of her eyes.

The shock of the face I saw there saved her life for a few thorny moments.

She didn't make it easier. When she processed the expression on my

face, blood flooded her cheeks again, turning her skin the most delicious color I'd ever seen. The scent was a thick haze in my brain. I could barely think through it. My instincts raged, resisting control, incoherent.

She walked more quickly now, as if she understood the need to escape. Her haste made her clumsy—she tripped and stumbled forward, almost falling into the girl seated in front of me. Vulnerable, weak. Even more than usual for a human.

I tried to focus on the face I'd seen in her eyes, a face I recognized with revulsion. The face of the monster inside me—the face I'd beaten back with decades of effort and uncompromising discipline. How easily it sprang to the surface now!

The scent swirled around me again, scattering my thoughts and nearly propelling me out of my seat.

No.

My hand gripped under the edge of the table as I tried to hold myself in my chair. The wood was not up to the task. My hand crushed through the strut and came away with a palmful of splintered pulp, leaving the shape of my fingers carved into the remaining wood.

Destroy evidence. That was a fundamental rule. I quickly pulverized the edges of the shape with my fingertips, leaving nothing but a ragged hole and a pile of shavings on the floor, which I scattered with my foot.

Destroy evidence. Collateral damage...

I knew what had to happen now. The girl would have to come sit beside me, and I would have to kill her.

The innocent bystanders in this classroom, eighteen other children and one man, could not be allowed to leave, having seen what they would soon see.

I flinched at the thought of what I must do. Even at my very worst, I had never committed this kind of atrocity. I had never killed innocents. And now I planned to slaughter twenty of them at once.

The face of the monster in my reflection mocked me.

Even as part of me shuddered away from him, another part was planning what would happen next.

If I killed the girl first, I would have only fifteen or twenty seconds with her before the humans in the room reacted. Maybe a little longer if at first they did not realize what I was doing. She would not have time to scream or

feel pain; I would not kill her cruelly. That much I could give this stranger with her horribly desirable blood.

But then I would have to stop them from escaping. I wouldn't have to worry about the windows, too high up and small to provide an escape for anyone. Just the door—block that and they were trapped.

It would be slower and more difficult, trying to take them all down when they were panicked and scrambling, moving in chaos. Not impossible, but there would be much more noise. Time for lots of screaming. Someone would hear... and I'd be forced to kill even more innocents in this black hour.

And her blood would cool while I murdered the others.

The scent punished me, closing my throat with dry aching....

So the witnesses first, then.

I mapped it out in my head. I was in the middle of the room, the row farthest from the front. I would take my right side first. I could snap four or five of their necks per second, I estimated. It would not be noisy. The right side would be the lucky side; they would not see me coming. Moving around the front and back down the left side, it would take me, at most, five seconds to end every life in this room.

Long enough for Bella Swan to see, briefly, what was coming for her. Long enough for her to feel fear. Long enough, maybe, if shock didn't freeze her in place, for her to work up a scream. One soft scream that would not bring anyone running.

I took a deep breath, and the scent was a fire that raced through my dry veins, burning out from my chest to consume every better impulse that I was capable of.

She was just turning now. In a few seconds, she would sit down inches away from me.

The monster in my head exulted.

Someone slammed shut a folder on my left. I didn't look up to see which of the doomed humans it was, but the motion sent a wave of ordinary, unscented air wafting across my face.

For one short second, I was able to think clearly. In that precious instant, I saw two faces in my head, side by side.

One was mine, or rather had been: the red-eyed monster that had killed so many people that I'd stopped counting. Rationalized, justified murders. I

had been a killer of killers, a killer of other, less powerful monsters. It was a god complex, I acknowledged that—deciding who deserved a death sentence. It was a compromise with myself. I had fed on human blood, but only by the loosest definition. My victims were, in their various dark pastimes, barely more human than I was.

The other face was Carlisle's.

There was no resemblance between the two faces. They were bright day and blackest night.

There was no reason for a resemblance to exist. Carlisle was not my father in the basic biological sense. We shared no common features. The similarity in our coloring was a product of what we were; every vampire was corpse-pale. The similarity in the color of our eyes was another matter—a reflection of a mutual choice.

And yet, though there was no basis for a resemblance, I'd imagined that my face had begun to reflect his, to an extent, in the last seventy-odd years that I had embraced his choice and followed in his steps. My features had not changed, but it seemed to me as though some of his wisdom had marked my expression, a little of his compassion could be traced in the set of my mouth, and hints of his patience were evident on my brow.

All those tiny improvements were lost in the monster's face. In a few moments, there would be nothing left in me that would reflect the years I'd spent with my creator, my mentor, my father in all the ways that counted. My eyes would glow red as a devil's; all likeness would be lost forever.

In my head, Carlisle's kind eyes did not judge me. I knew that he would forgive me for this horrible act. Because he loved me. Because he thought I was better than I was.

Bella Swan sat down in the chair next to me, her movements stiff and awkward—no doubt with fear—and the scent of her blood bloomed in an inescapable cloud around me.

I would prove my father wrong about me. The misery of this fact hurt almost as much as the fire in my throat.

I leaned away from her in revulsion—disgusted by the monster aching to take her.

Why did she have to come here? Why did she have to *exist*? Why did she have to ruin the little peace I had in this nonlife of mine? Why had this aggravating human ever been born? She would ruin me.

I turned my face away from her as a sudden fierce, irrational hatred washed through me.

I didn't want to be the monster! I didn't want to kill this roomful of harmless children! I didn't want to lose everything I'd gained in a lifetime of sacrifice and denial!

I wouldn't.

She couldn't make me.

The scent was the problem, the hideously appealing scent of her blood. If there was only some way to resist... if only another gust of fresh air could clear my head.

Bella Swan shook out her long, thick mahogany hair in my direction.

Was she insane?

No, there was no helpful breeze. But I didn't *have* to breathe.

I stopped the flow of air through my lungs. The relief was instantaneous, but incomplete. I still had the memory of the scent in my head, the taste of it on the back of my tongue. I wouldn't be able to resist even that for long.

Every life in this room was in danger while she and I were in it together. I should run. I *wanted* to run, to get away from the *heat* of her next to me, and the punishing pain of the burning, but I wasn't one hundred percent sure that if I unlocked my muscles to move, even just to stand, I wouldn't lash out and commit the slaughter I'd already planned.

But perhaps I could resist for an hour. Would one hour be enough time to gain control to move without striking? I doubted, then forced myself to commit. I would *make* it enough. Just enough time to get out of this room full of victims, victims that perhaps didn't have to *be* victims. If I could resist for one short hour.

It was an uncomfortable feeling, not breathing. My body did not need oxygen, but it went against my instincts. I relied on scent more than my other senses in times of stress. It led the way in the hunt; it was the first warning in case of danger. I did not often come across something as dangerous as I was, but self-preservation was just as strong in my kind as it was in the average human.

Uncomfortable, but manageable. More bearable than smelling *her* and not sinking my teeth through that fine, thin, see-through skin to the hot, wet, pulsing—

An hour! Just one hour. I must not think of the scent, the taste.

The silent girl kept her hair between us, leaning forward so that it spilled across her forehead. I couldn't see her face to try to read the emotions in her clear, deep eyes. Was she trying to hide those eyes from me? Out of fear? Shyness? To keep her secrets?

My former irritation at being stymied by her soundless thoughts was weak and pale in comparison to the need—and the hate—that possessed me now. For I hated this frail girl beside me, hated her with all the fervor with which I clung to my former self, my love of my family, my dreams of being something better than what I was. Hating her, hating how she made me feel—it helped a little. Yes, the irritation I'd felt before was weak, but it, too, helped a little. I clung to any thought that distracted me from imagining what she would *taste* like....

Hate and irritation. Impatience. Would the hour never pass?

And when the hour ended... she would walk out of this room. And I would do what?

If I could control the monster, make him see that the delay would be worth it... I could introduce myself. *Hello, my name is Edward Cullen. May I walk you to your next class?*

She would say yes. It would be the polite thing to do. Even already fearing me, as I was sure she did, she would follow convention and walk beside me. It should be easy enough to lead her in the wrong direction. A spur of the forest reached out like a finger to touch the back corner of the parking lot. I could tell her I'd forgotten a book in my car....

Would anyone notice that I was the last person she'd been seen with? It was raining, as usual. Two dark raincoats heading in the wrong direction wouldn't pique too much interest or give me away.

Except that I was not the only student who was aware of her today—though no one was as blisteringly aware as I. Mike Newton, in particular, was conscious of every shift in her weight as she fidgeted in her chair—she was uncomfortable so close to me, just as anyone would be, just as I'd expected before her scent had destroyed all charitable concern. Mike Newton would notice if she left the classroom with me.

If I could last an hour, could I last two?

I flinched at the pain of the burning.

She would go home to an empty house. Police Chief Swan worked an eight-hour day. I knew his house, as I knew every house in the tiny town.

His home was nestled right up against thick woods, with no close neighbors. Even had she time to scream, which she would not, there would be no one to hear.

That would be the responsible way to deal with this. I'd gone more than seven decades without human blood. If I held my breath, I could last two hours. And when I had her alone, there would be no chance of anyone else getting hurt. *And no reason to rush through the experience*, the monster in my head agreed.

It was sophistry to think that by saving the nineteen humans in this room with effort and patience, I would be less of a monster when I killed this innocent girl.

Though I hated her, I was absolutely aware that my hatred was unjust. I knew that what I really hated was myself. And I would hate us both so much more when she was dead.

I made it through the hour in this way—imagining the best ways to kill her. I tried to avoid imagining the actual *act*. That might be too much for me. So I planned strategy and nothing more.

Once, toward the very end, she peeked up at me through the fluid wall of her hair. I could feel the unjustified hatred burning out of me as I met her gaze—see the reflection of it in her frightened eyes. Blood painted her cheek before she could hide in her hair again, and I was nearly undone.

But the bell rang. And we—how cliché—were saved. She, from death. I, for just a short time, from being the nightmarish creature I feared and loathed.

Now I had to move.

Even focusing all my attention on the simplest of actions, I couldn't walk as slowly as I should; I darted from the room. If anyone had been looking, they might have suspected that there was something not right about my exit. No one was paying attention to me; all thoughts still swirled around the girl who was condemned to die in little more than an hour's time.

I hid in my car.

I didn't like to think of myself as having to hide. How cowardly that sounded. But I didn't have enough discipline left to be around humans now. Focusing so much of my efforts on not killing *one* of them left me no resources to resist the others. What a waste that would be. If I were to give

in to the monster, I might as well make it worth the defeat.

I played a CD that usually calmed me, but it did little for me now. No, what helped most was the cool, wet air that drifted with the light rain through my open windows. Though I could remember the scent of Bella Swan's blood with perfect clarity, inhaling this clean air was like washing out the inside of my body from its infection.

I was sane again. I could think again. And I could fight again. I could fight what I didn't want to be.

I didn't have to go to her home. I didn't have to kill her. Obviously, I was a rational, thinking creature, and I had a choice. There was always a choice.

It hadn't felt that way in the classroom... but I was away from her now.

I didn't *have* to disappoint my father. I didn't have to cause my mother stress, worry... pain. Yes, it would hurt my adopted mother, too. And she was so gentle, so tender and loving. Causing someone like Esme pain was truly inexcusable.

Perhaps, if I avoided this girl very, very carefully, there was no need for my life to change. I had things ordered the way I liked them. Why should I let some aggravating and delicious nobody ruin that?

How ironic that I'd wanted to protect this human girl from the paltry, toothless threat of Jessica Stanley's snide thoughts. I was the last person who would ever stand as a protector for Isabella Swan. She would never need protection from anything more than she needed it from me.

Where was Alice? I suddenly wondered. Hadn't she seen me killing the Swan girl in a multitude of ways? Why hadn't she come to my aid—to stop me or help me clean up the evidence, whichever? Was she so absorbed with watching for trouble with Jasper that she'd missed this much more horrific possibility? Or was I stronger than I thought? Would I really not have done anything to the girl?

No. I knew that wasn't true. Alice must be concentrating very hard on Jasper.

I searched in the direction I knew my sister would be, in the small building used for English classes. It did not take me long to locate her familiar "voice." And I was right. Her every thought was turned to Jasper, watching his small choices with minute scrutiny.

I wished I could ask her advice, but at the same time, I was glad she