

THE AWAKENING



THE
VAMPIRE
DIARIES

New York Times bestselling series

L. J. SMITH

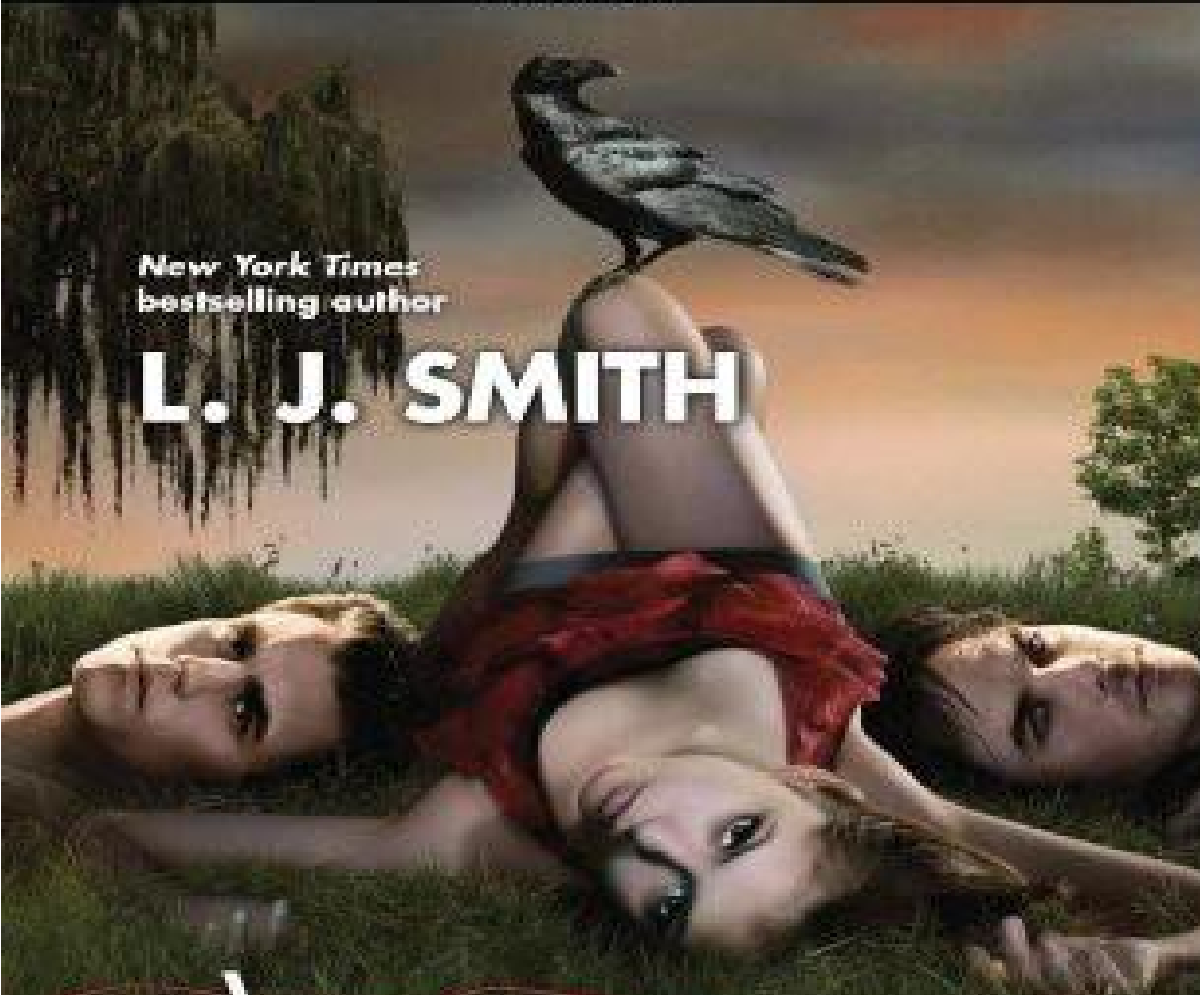
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Volume I

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“Are you having a good time?” Elena asked.

I am now. He didn’t say it, but she knew it was what he was thinking; she could see it in the way he stared at her. She had never been so sure of her power. Except that actually he didn’t look as if he were having a good time; he looked stricken, in pain, as if he couldn’t take one more minute of this.

The band was starting up, a slow dance. He was still staring at her, drinking her in. Those green eyes darkening, going black with desire. She had the sudden feeling that he might jerk her to him and kiss her hard, without ever saying a word.

“Would you like to dance?” she said softly. I’m playing with re, with something I don’t understand, she thought suddenly. And in that instant she realized that she was frightened. Her heart began to pound violently. It was as if those green eyes spoke to some part of her that was buried deep beneath the surface—and that part was screaming “danger” at her. Some instinct older than civilization was telling her to run, to ee.

September 4

Dear Diary,

Something awful is going to happen today.

I don't know why I wrote that. It's crazy. There's no reason for me to be upset and every reason for me to be happy, but ...

But here I am at 5:30 in the morning, awake and scared. I keep telling myself it's just that I'm all messed up from the time difference between France and here. But that doesn't explain why I feel so scared. So lost.

The day before yesterday, while Aunt Judith and Margaret and I were driving back from the airport, I had such a strange feeling. When we turned onto our street I suddenly thought, "Mom and Dad are waiting for us at home. I bet they'll be on the front porch or in the living room looking out the window. They must have missed me so much."

I know. That sounds totally crazy.

But even when I saw the house and the empty front porch I still felt that way. I ran up the steps and I tried the door and knocked with the knocker. And when Aunt Judith unlocked the door I burst inside and just stood in the hallway listening, expecting to hear Mom coming down the stairs or Dad calling from the den.

Just then Aunt Judith let a suitcase crash down on the oor behind me and sighed a huge sigh and said, "We're home." And Margaret laughed. And the most horrible feeling I've ever felt in my life came over me. I've never felt so utterly and completely lost.

Home. I'm home. Why does that sound like a lie?

I was born here in Fell's Church. I've always lived in this house, always. This is my same old bedroom, with the scorch mark on the oorboards where Caroline and I tried to sneak cigarettes in 5th grade and nearly choked ourselves. I can look out the window and see the big quince tree Matt and the guys climbed up to crash my birthday slumber party two years ago. This is my bed, my chair, my dresser.

But right now everything looks strange to me, as if I don't belong here. It's me that's out of place. And the worst thing is that I feel there's somewhere I do belong, but just can't find it.

I was too tired yesterday to go to Orientation. Meredith picked up my schedule for me, but I didn't feel like talking to her on the phone. Aunt Judith told everyone who called that I had jet lag and was sleeping, but she watched me at dinner with a funny look on her face.

I've got to see the crowd today, though. We're supposed to meet in the parking lot before school. Is that why I'm scared? Am I frightened of them?

Elena Gilbert stopped writing. She stared at the last line she had written and then shook her head, pen hovering over the small book with the blue velvet cover. Then, with a sudden gesture, she lifted her head and threw pen

and look at the big bay window, where they bounced off harmlessly and landed on the upholstered window seat.

It was all so completely ridiculous.

Since when had she, Elena Gilbert, been scared of meeting people? Since when had she been scared of *anything*? She stood up and angrily thrust her arms into a red silk kimono. She didn't even glance at the elaborate Victorian mirror above the cherrywood dresser; she knew what she'd see. Elena Gilbert, cool and blond and slender, the fashion trendsetter, the high school senior, the girl every boy wanted and every girl wanted to be. Who just now had an unaccustomed scowl on her face and a pinch to her mouth.

A hot bath and some coffee and I'll calm down, she thought. The morning ritual of washing and dressing was soothing, and she dawdled over it, sorting through her new outfits from Paris. She finally chose a pale rose top and white linen shorts combo that made her look like a raspberry sundae. Good enough to eat, she thought, and the mirror showed a girl with a secret smile. Her earlier fears had melted away, forgotten.

"Elena! Where are you? You're going to be late for school!" The voice drifted faintly up from below.

Elena ran the brush one more time through silky hair and pulled it back with a deep rose ribbon. Then she grabbed her backpack and went down the stairs.

In the kitchen, four-year-old Margaret was eating cereal at the kitchen table, and Aunt Judith was burning something on the stove. Aunt Judith was the sort of woman who always looked vaguelyustered; she had a thin, mild face and light yawny hair pushed back untidily. Elena landed a peck on her cheek.

“Good morning, everybody. Sorry I don’t have time for breakfast.”

“But, Elena, you can’t just go o without eating. You need your protein —”

“I’ll get a doughnut before school,” said Elena briskly. She dropped a kiss on Margaret’s tow head and turned to go.

“But, Elena—”

“And I’ll probably go home with Bonnie or Meredith after school, so don’t wait dinner. Bye!”

“Elena—”

Elena was already at the front door. She closed it behind her, cutting o Aunt Judith’s distant protests, and stepped out onto the front porch.

And stopped.

All the bad feelings of the morning rushed over her again. The anxiety, the fear. And the certainty that something terrible was about to happen.

Maple Street was deserted. The tall Victorian houses looked strange and silent, as if they might all be empty inside, like the houses on an abandoned movie set. They looked as if they were empty of *people*, but full of strange watching things.

That was it; something was watching her. The sky overhead was not blue but milky and opaque, like a giant bowl turned upside down. The air was sti ing, and Elena felt sure that there were eyes on her.

She caught sight of something dark in the branches of the old quince tree in front of the house.

It was a crow, sitting as still as the yellow-tinged leaves around it. And it was the thing watching her.

She tried to tell herself that this was ridiculous, but somehow she *knew*. It was the biggest crow she had ever seen, plump and sleek, with rainbows shining in its black feathers. She could see every detail of it clearly: the greedy dark claws, the sharp beak, the single glittering black eye.

It was so motionless that it might have been a wax model of a bird sitting there. But as she stared at it, Elena felt herself flush slowly, heat coming in waves up her throat and cheeks. Because it was ... looking at her. Looking the way boys looked at her when she wore a bathing suit or a sheer blouse. As if it were undressing her with its eyes.

Before she realized what she was doing, she had dropped her backpack and picked up a stone from beside the driveway. "Get out of here," she said, and heard the shaking anger in her own voice. "Go on! Get *away!*" With the last word, she threw the stone.

There was an explosion of leaves, but the crow soared up unharmed. Its wings were huge, and they made enough racket for a whole flock of crows. Elena crouched, suddenly panicked as it swooped directly over her head, the wind of its wings ruffling her blond hair.

But it swooped up again and circled, a black silhouette against the paper-white sky. Then, with one harsh croak, it wheeled away toward the woods.

Elena straightened up slowly, then glanced around, self-conscious. She couldn't believe what she had just done. But now that the bird was gone, the

sky felt ordinary again. A little wind made the leaves utter, and Elena took a deep breath. Down the street a door opened and several children poured out, laughing.

She smiled at them, and took another breath, relief sweeping through her like sunlight. How could she have been so silly? This was a beautiful day, full of promise, and nothing bad was going to happen.

Nothing bad was going to happen—except that she was going to be late getting to school. The whole crowd would be waiting for her in the parking lot.

You could always tell everyone you stopped to throw stones at a Peeping Tom, she thought, and almost giggled. Now, *that* would give them something to think about.

Without a backward glance at the quince tree, she began to walk as quickly as she could down the street.

The crow crashed through the top of the massive oak, and Stefan's head jerked up reflexively. When he saw it was only a bird, he relaxed.

His eyes dropped to the limp white form in his hands, and he felt his face twist in regret. He hadn't meant to kill it. He would have hunted something larger than a rabbit if he'd known how hungry he was. But, of course, that was the very thing that frightened him: never knowing how strong the hunger would be, or what he might have to do to satisfy it. He was lucky that this time he'd killed only a rabbit.

He stood beneath the ancient oak trees, sunlight filtering down onto his curly hair. In jeans and a T-shirt, Stefan Salvatore looked exactly like a normal high school student.

He wasn't.

Deep in the woods, where no one would see him, he'd come to feed. Now he licked at his gums and lips painstakingly to make sure there was no stain on them. He didn't want to take any chances. This masquerade was going to be hard enough to pull off as it was.

For a moment he wondered, again, if he should just give it all up. Perhaps he should go back to Italy, back to his hiding place. What made him think that he could rejoin the world of daylight?

But he was tired of living in shadows. He was tired of the darkness, and of the things that lived in it. Most of all, he was tired of being alone.

He wasn't sure why he'd chosen Fell's Church, Virginia. It was a young town, by his standards; the oldest buildings had been put up only a century and a half ago. But memories and ghosts of the Civil War still lived here, as real as the supermarkets and fast-food joints.

Stefan appreciated respect for the past. He thought he might come to like the people of Fell's Church. And perhaps—just perhaps—he might find a place among them.

He'd never be accepted completely, of course. A bitter smile curved his lips at the idea. He knew better than to hope for *that*. There would never be a place where he could belong completely, where he could truly be himself.

Unless he chose to belong to the shadows ...

He slapped the thought away. He'd renounced the darkness; he'd left the shadows behind him. He was blotting all those long years out and starting afresh, today.

Stefan realized he was still holding the rabbit. Gently, he laid it down on the bed of brown oak leaves. Far away, too far for human ears to pick up, he recognized the noises of a fox.

Come along, brother hunter, he thought sadly. Your breakfast is waiting.

As he slung his jacket over his shoulder, he noticed the crow that had disturbed him earlier. It was still perched in the oak tree, and it seemed to be watching him. There was wrongness about it.

He started to send a probing thought toward it, to examine the bird, and stopped himself. Remember your promise, he thought. You don't use the Powers unless it is absolutely necessary. Not unless there is no other choice.

Moving almost silently among the dead leaves and dry twigs, he made his way toward the edge of the woods. His car was parked there. He glanced back, once, and saw that the crow had left the branches and dropped down on the rabbit.

There was something sinister in the way it spread its wings over the limp white body, something sinister and triumphant. Stefan's throat tightened, and he almost strode back to chase the bird away. Still, it had as much right to eat as the fox did, he told himself.

As much right as he did.

If he encountered the bird again, he'd look into its mind, he decided. Just now, he tore his eyes from the sight of it and hurried on through the woods,

jaw set. He didn't want to be late arriving at Robert E. Lee High School.

Elena was surrounded the instant she stepped into the high school parking lot. Everyone was there, the whole crowd she hadn't seen since late June, plus four or five hangers-on who hoped to gain popularity by association. One by one she accepted the welcoming hugs of her own group.

Caroline had grown at least an inch and was slinkier and more like a *Vogue* model than ever. She greeted Elena coolly and stepped back again with her green eyes narrowed like a cat's.

Bonnie hadn't grown at all, and her curly red head barely came up to Elena's chin as she wrapped her arms around Elena. Wait a minute—*curls?* thought Elena. She pushed the smaller girl back.

“Bonnie! What did you do to your hair?”

“Do you like it? I think it makes me look taller.” Bonnie tucked up the already wavy bangs and smiled, her brown eyes sparkling with excitement, her little heart-shaped face alight.

Elena moved on. “Meredith. You haven't changed at all.”

This hug was equally warm on both sides. She had missed Meredith more than anyone, Elena thought, looking at the tall girl. Meredith never wore any makeup; but then, with perfect olive skin and heavy black lashes, she didn't need any. Right now she had one elegant eyebrow raised as she studied Elena.

“Well, your hair is two shades lighter from the sun.... But where’s your tan? I thought you were living it up on the French Riviera.”

“You know I never tan.” Elena held up her hands for her own inspection. The skin was awless, like porcelain, but almost as fair and translucent as Bonnie’s.

“Just a minute; that reminds me,” Bonnie interjected, snatching one of Elena’s hands. “Guess what I learned from my cousin this summer?” Before anyone could speak, she informed them triumphantly: “Palm reading!”

There were groans, and some laughter.

“Laugh while you can,” said Bonnie, not at all disturbed. “My cousin told me I’m psychic. Now, let me see ...” She peered into Elena’s palm.

“Hurry up or we’re going to be late,” said Elena a bit impatiently.

“All right, all right. Now, this is your life line—or is it your heart line?” In the crowd, someone snickered. “Quiet; I’m reaching into the void. I see ... I see ...” All at once, Bonnie’s face went blank, as if she were startled. Her brown eyes widened, but she no longer seemed to be staring at Elena’s hand. It was as if she were looking *through* it—at something frightening.

“You will meet a tall, dark stranger,” Meredith murmured from behind her. There was a flurry of giggles.

“Dark, yes, and a stranger ... but not tall.” Bonnie’s voice was hushed and faraway.

“Although,” she continued after a moment, looking puzzled, “he *was* tall, once.” Her wide brown eyes lifted to Elena’s in bewilderment. “But that’s

impossible ... isn't it?" She dropped Elena's hand, almost inging it away. "I don't want to see any more."

"Okay, show's over. Let's go," Elena told the others, vaguely irritated. She'd always felt psychic tricks were just that—tricks. So why was she annoyed? Just because that morning she'd almost freaked out herself...

The girls started toward the school building, but the roar of a nely tuned motor stopped them all in their tracks.

"Well, now," Caroline said, staring. "Quite a car."

"Quite a Porsche," Meredith corrected dryly.

The sleek black 911 Turbo purred through the parking lot, searching for a space, moving as lazily as a panther stalking prey.

When the car came to a stop, the door opened, and they glimpsed the driver.

"Oh, my God," Caroline whispered.

"You can say that again," breathed Bonnie.

From where she stood, Elena could see he had a lean, at-muscled body. Faded jeans he probably had to peel o at night, tight T-shirt, and a leather jacket of unusual cut. His hair was wavy—and dark.

He wasn't tall, though. Just average height.

Elena let out her breath.

“Who *is* that masked man?” said Meredith. And the remark was apt—dark sunglasses completely covered the boy’s eyes, shielding his face like a mask.

“That masked *stranger*,” someone else said, and a babble of voices rose up.

“Do you see that jacket? That’s Italian, as in Roma.”

“How would you know? You’ve never been farther than Rome, New York, in your life!”

“Uh-oh. Elena’s got that look again. The hunting look.”

“Short-Dark-and-Handsome had better be careful.”

“He isn’t short; he’s perfect!”

Through the chatter, Caroline’s voice suddenly rang out. “Oh, come on, Elena. You’ve already got Matt. What more do you want? What can you do with two that you can’t do with one?”

“The same thing—only longer,” drawled Meredith, and the group dissolved into laughter.

The boy had locked his car and was walking toward school. Casually, Elena started after him, the other girls right behind her in a close-knit pack. For an instant, annoyance bubbled up inside her. Couldn’t she go *anywhere* without a parade on her heels? But Meredith caught her eye, and she smiled in spite of herself.

“*Noblesse oblige*,” Meredith said softly.

“What?”

“If you’re going to be queen of the school, you have to put up with the consequences.”

Elena frowned at this as they entered the building. A long corridor stretched before them, and a figure in jeans and leather jacket was disappearing through the office doorway up ahead. Elena slowed her pace as she walked up to the office, finally stopping to glance thoughtfully at the messages on the cork bulletin board by the door. There was a large window here, through which the entire office was visible.

The other girls were openly gazing through the window, and giggling. “Nice rear view.” “That is *de nitely* an Armani jacket.” “You think he’s from out of state?”

Elena was straining her ears for the boy’s name. There seemed to be some kind of trouble in there: Mrs. Clarke, the admissions secretary, was looking at a list and shaking her head. The boy said something, and Mrs. Clarke lifted her hands in a “What can I say?” gesture. She ran a finger down the list and shook her head again, conclusively. The boy started to turn away, then turned back. And when Mrs. Clarke looked up at him, her expression changed.

The boy’s sunglasses were now in his hand. Mrs. Clarke seemed startled by something; Elena could see her blink several times. Her lips opened and closed as if she were trying to speak.

Elena wished she could see more than the back of the boy’s head. Mrs. Clarke was fumbling through piles of paper now, looking dazed. At last she found a form of some kind and wrote on it, then turned it around and pushed it toward the boy.

The boy wrote briefly on the form—signing it, probably—and returned it. Mrs. Clarke stared at it a second, then fumbled through a new pile of papers,

nally handing what looked like a class schedule to him. Her eyes never left the boy as he took it, inclined his head in thanks, and turned to the door.

Elena was wild with curiosity by now. What had just happened in there? And what did this stranger's face look like? But as he emerged from the office, he was settling his sunglasses in place again. Disappointment coursed through her.

Still, she could see the rest of his face as he paused in the doorway. The dark curly hair framed features so fine that they might have been taken from an old Roman coin or medallion. High cheekbones, classical straight nose ... and a mouth to keep you awake at night, Elena thought. The upper lip was beautifully sculpted, a little sensitive, a whole lot sensual. The chatter of the girls in the hallway had stopped as if someone had thrown a switch.

Most of them were turning away from the boy now, looking anywhere but at him. Elena held her place by the window and gave a little toss to her head, pulling the ribbon out of her hair so that it fell loose around her shoulders.

Without looking to either side, the boy moved on down the hallway. A chorus of sighs and whispers faded up the moment he was out of earshot.

Elena didn't hear any of it.

He'd walked right by her, she thought, dazed. Right by without a glance.

Dimly, she realized the bell was ringing. Meredith was tugging her arm.

"What?"

"I said here's your schedule. We've got trig on the second floor right now. Come on!"

Elena allowed Meredith to propel her down the corridor, up a flight of stairs, and into a classroom. She slid into an empty seat automatically and

fixed her eyes on the teacher at the front without really seeing her. The shock still hadn't worn off.

He'd walked right by. Without a glance. She couldn't remember how long it had been since a boy had done that. They all looked, at least. Some whistled. Some stopped to talk. Some just stared.

And that had always been true with Elena.

After all, what was more important than boys? They were the mark of how popular you were, of how beautiful you were. And they could be useful for all sorts of things. Sometimes they were exciting, but usually that didn't last long. Sometimes they were creeps from the beginning.

Most boys, Elena reflected, were like puppies. Adorable in their place, but expendable. A very few could be more than that, could become real friends. Like Matt.

Oh, Matt. Last year she'd hoped that he was the one she was looking for, the boy who could make her feel ... well, something more. More than the rush of triumph at making a conquest, the pride in showing your new acquisition off to the other girls. And she *had* come to feel a strong affection for Matt. But over the summer, when she'd had time to think, she'd realized it was the affection of a cousin or sister.

Ms. Halpern was passing out trigonometry books. Elena took hers mechanically and wrote her name inside, still wrapped in thought.

She liked Matt more than any other boy she'd known. And that was why she was going to have to tell him it was over.

She hadn't known how to tell him in a letter. She didn't know how to tell him now. It wasn't that she was afraid he'd kick up a fuss; he just wouldn't understand. She didn't really understand herself.

It was as if she were always reaching for ... something. Only, when she thought she'd got it, it wasn't there. Not with Matt, not with any of the boys she'd had.

And then she had to start all over again. Fortunately, there was always fresh material. No boy had ever resisted her successfully, and no boy had ever ignored her. Until now.

Until now. Remembering that moment in the hall, Elena found that her fingers were clenched on the pen she held. She still couldn't believe he'd brushed by her that way.

The bell rang and everyone ooded out of the classroom, but Elena paused in the doorway. She bit her lip, scanning the river of students

owing through the hall. Then she spotted one of the hangers-on from the parking lot.

“Frances! Come here.”

Frances came eagerly, her plain face brightening.

“Listen, Frances, you remember that boy this morning?”

“With the Porsche and the—er—assets? How could I forget?”

“Well, I want his class schedule. Get it from the office if you can, or copy it from him if you have to. But do it!”

Frances looked surprised for a moment, then grinned and nodded. “Okay, Elena. I’ll try. I’ll meet you at lunch if I can get it.”

“Thanks.” Elena watched the girl go.

“You know, you really are crazy,” Meredith’s voice said in her ear.

“What’s the use of being queen of the school if you can’t pull a little rank sometimes?” returned Elena calmly. “Where do I go now?”

“General Business. Here, take it yourself.” Meredith thrust a schedule at her. “I’ve got to run for chemistry. Later!”

General Business and the rest of the morning passed in a blur. Elena had hoped to catch another glimpse of the new student, but he was in none of her classes. Matt *was* in one, and she felt a pang as his blue eyes met hers with a smile.

At the lunch bell, she nodded greetings right and left as she walked to the cafeteria. Caroline was outside, posed casually against a wall with chin up, shoulders back, hips forward. The two boys she was talking to fell silent and nudged each other as Elena approached.

“Hi,” Elena said briefly to the boys; and to Caroline: “Ready to go in and eat?”

Caroline's green eyes barely ickered toward Elena, and she pushed glossy auburn hair out of her face. "What, at the *royal table*?" she said.

Elena was taken aback. She and Caroline had been friends since kindergarten, and they had always competed with each other good-naturedly. But lately something had happened to Caroline. She'd begun to take the rivalry more and more seriously. And now Elena was surprised at the bitterness in the other girl's voice.

"Well, it's hardly as if you were a commoner," she said lightly.

"Oh, you're so right about that," said Caroline, turning to face Elena fully. Those green cat-eyes were slitted and smoky, and Elena was shocked by the hostility she saw there. The two boys smiled uneasily and edged away.

Caroline didn't seem to notice. "A lot of things changed while you were gone this summer, Elena," she continued. "And just maybe your time on the throne is running out."

Elena had ushered; she could feel it. She struggled to keep her voice steady. "Maybe," she said. "But I wouldn't buy a scepter just yet if I were you, Caroline." She turned and went into the lunchroom.

It was a relief to see Meredith and Bonnie, and Frances beside them. Elena felt her cheeks cool as she selected her lunch and went to join them. She wouldn't let Caroline upset her; she wouldn't think of Caroline at all.

"I got it," said Frances, waving a piece of paper as Elena sat down.

"And I have some good stu ," said Bonnie importantly. "Elena, listen to this. He's in my biology class, and I sit right across from him. And his name is Stefan, Stefan Salvatore, and he's from Italy, and he's boarding with old Mrs.

Flowers on the edge of town.” She sighed. “He is so romantic. Caroline dropped her books, and he picked them up for her.”

Elena made a wry face. “How clumsy of Caroline. What else happened?”

“Well, that’s all. He didn’t really talk to her. He’s ver-r-ry mysterious, you see. Mrs. Endicott, my biology teacher, tried to get him to take o his glasses, but he wouldn’t. He has a medical condition.”

“What kind of medical condition?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s terminal and his days are numbered. Wouldn’t that be romantic?”

“Oh, very,” said Meredith.

Elena was looking over Frances’s sheet of paper, biting her lip. “He’s in my seventh period, European History. Anybody else have that class?”

“I do,” said Bonnie. “And I think Caroline does, too. Oh, and maybe Matt; he said something yesterday about how it was just his luck, getting Mr. Tanner.”

Marvelous, Elena thought, picking up a fork and stabbing at her mashed potatoes. It looked as if seventh period was going to be *extremely* interesting.

Stefan was glad the school day was almost over. He wanted to get out of these crowded rooms and corridors, just for a few minutes.

So many minds. The pressure of so many thought patterns, so many mental voices surrounding him, was making him dizzy. It had been years since he had been in a swarm of people like this.

One mind in particular stood out from the others. She had been among those watching him in the main corridor of the school building. He didn't know what she looked like, but her personality was powerful. He felt sure he'd recognize it again.

So far, at least, he'd survived the first day of the masquerade. He'd used the Powers only twice, and then sparingly. But he was tired, and, he admitted ruefully, hungry. The rabbit hadn't been enough.

Worry about that later. He found his last classroom and sat down. And immediately he felt the presence of that mind again.

It glowed at the edge of his consciousness, a golden light, soft and yet vibrant. And, for the first time, he could locate the girl it was coming from. She was seated right in front of him.

Even as he thought it, she turned around and he saw her face. It was all he could do not to gasp in shock.

Katherine! But of course it couldn't be. Katherine was dead; no one knew that better than he did.

Still, the resemblance was uncanny. That pale golden hair, so fair it almost seemed to shimmer. That creamy skin, which had always made him think of swans, or alabaster,ushing faintly pink over the cheekbones. And the eyes ... Katherine's eyes had been a color he had never seen before; darker than sky blue, as rich as the lapis lazuli in her jeweled headband. This girl had those same eyes.

And they were fixed directly on his as she smiled.

He looked down from the smile quickly. Of all things, he did not want to think about Katherine. He didn't want to look at this girl who reminded him of her, and he didn't want to feel her presence any longer. He kept his eyes on the desk, blocking his mind as strongly as he knew how. And at last, slowly, she turned around again.

She was hurt. Even through the blocks, he could feel that. He didn't care. In fact, he was glad of it, and he hoped it would keep her away from him. Other than that, he had no feelings about her at all.

He kept telling himself this as he sat, the droning voice of the teacher pouring over him unheard. But he could smell a subtle hint of some perfume—violets, he thought. And her slender white neck was bowed over her book, the fair hair falling on either side of it.

In anger and frustration he recognized the seductive feeling in his teeth—more a tickling or a tingling than an ache. It was hunger, a specific hunger. And not one he was about to indulge.

The teacher was pacing about the room like a ferret, asking questions, and Stefan deliberately xed his attention on the man. At rst he was puzzled, for although none of the students knew the answers, the questions kept coming. Then he realized that that was the man's purpose. To shame the students with what they didn't know.

Just now he'd found another victim, a small girl with clusters of red curls and a heart-shaped face. Stefan watched in distaste as the teacher badgered her with questions. She looked wretched as he turned away from her to address the entire class.

“You see what I mean? You think you're pretty hot stu ; you're seniors now, ready to graduate. Well, let me tell you, some of you aren't ready to graduate

kindergarten. Like this!” He gestured toward the red-haired girl. “No idea about the French Revolution. Thinks Marie Antoinette was a silent

Im star.”

Students all around Stefan were shifting uncomfortably. He could feel the resentment in their minds, and the humiliation. And the fear. They were all afraid of this thin little man with eyes like a weasel, even the husky boys who were taller than he was.

“All right, let’s try another era.” The teacher swung back to the same girl he’d been questioning. “During the Renaissance—” He broke o . “You *do* know what the Renaissance is, don’t you? The period between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which Europe rediscovered the great ideas of ancient Greece and Rome? The period that produced so many of Europe’s greatest artists and thinkers?” When the girl nodded confusedly, he continued. “During the Renaissance, what would students your age be doing at school? Well? Any idea at all? Any guesses?”

The girl swallowed hard. With a weak smile she said, “Playing football?”

At the ensuing laughter, the teacher’s face darkened. “Hardly!” he snapped, and the classroom quieted. “You think this is a joke? Well, in those days, students your age would already be pro cient in several languages. They would also have mastered logic, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and grammar. They would be ready to go on to a university, in which every course was taught in Latin. Football would be absolutely the last thing on—”

“Excuse me.”

The quiet voice stopped the teacher in mid-harangue. Everyone turned to stare at Stefan.

“What? What did you say?”

“I said, excuse me,” Stefan repeated, removing his glasses and standing up. “But you’re wrong. Students in the Renaissance were encouraged to participate in games. They were taught that a healthy body goes with a healthy mind. And they certainly played team sports, like cricket, tennis—and even football.” He turned to the red-haired girl and smiled, and she smiled back gratefully. To the teacher, he added, “But the most important things they learned were good manners and courtesy. I’m sure your book will tell you that.”

Students were grinning. The teacher’s face was red with blood, and he was sputtering. But Stefan continued to hold his eyes, and after another minute it was the teacher who looked away.

The bell rang.

Stefan put his glasses on quickly and gathered his books. He’d already drawn more attention to himself than he should, and he didn’t want to have to look at the blond girl again. Besides, he needed to get out of here quickly; there was a familiar burning sensation in his veins.

As he reached the door, someone shouted, “Hey! Did they really play football back then?”

He couldn’t help throwing a grin over his shoulder. “Oh, yes. Sometimes with the severed heads of prisoners of war.”

* * *

Elena watched him as he went. He'd deliberately turned away from her. He'd snubbed her on purpose, and in front of Caroline, who'd been watching like a hawk. Tears burned in her eyes, but at that moment only one thought burned in her mind.

She'd have him, even if it killed her. If it killed both of them, she'd have him.

3

The first light of dawn was streaking the night sky with pink and palest green. Stefan watched it from the window of his room in the boarding house. He had rented this room specifically because of the trapdoor in the ceiling, a trapdoor that opened onto the widow's walk on the roof above. Just now that door was open, and a cool damp wind blew down the ladder below it. Stefan was fully dressed, but not because he was up early. He had never been to sleep.

He'd just returned from the woods, and a few scraps of wet leaf clung to the side of his boot. He brushed them off fastidiously. The comments of the students yesterday had not escaped him, and he knew they had been staring at his clothes. He had always dressed in the best, not merely out of vanity, but because it was the right thing to do. His tutor had often said it: *An aristocrat should dress as befits his position. If he does not, he is showing contempt for others.* Everyone had a place in the world, and his place had once been among the nobility. Once.

Why was he dwelling on these things? Of course, he should have realized that playing the role of a student was likely to bring his own student days back. Now the memories came thick and fast, as if he were skimming through the pages of a journal, his eyes catching an entry here and there. One ached before him vividly now: his father's face when Damon had announced he was quitting the University. He would never forget that. He had never seen his father so angry....

"What do you mean, you are not going back?" Giuseppe was usually a fair man, but he had a temper, and his elder son brought out the violence in him.

Just now that son was dabbing at his lips with a sa ron-colored silk handkerchief. “I would have thought even you could understand such a simple sentence, Father. Shall I repeat it in Latin for you?”

“Damon—” Stefan began tightly, appalled at this disrespect. But his father interrupted.

“You are telling me that I, Giuseppe, Conte di Salvatore, will have to face my friends knowing that my son is a *scioparto*? A ne’er-do-well? An idler who makes no useful contribution to Florence?” Servants were edging away as Giuseppe worked himself into a rage.

Damon did not even blink. “Apparently. If you can call those who fawn on you in the hopes that you will lend them money your friends.”

“*Sporco parassito!*” cried Giuseppe, rising from his chair. “Is it not bad enough that when you are at school you waste your time and my money? Oh, yes, I know all about the gambling, the jousting, the women. And I know that if it were not for your secretary and your tutors you would be failing every course. But now you mean to disgrace me utterly. And why? Why?” His large hand whipped up to grasp Damon’s chin. “So that you may return to your hunting and hawking?”

Stefan had to give his brother credit; Damon did not wince. He stood, almost lounging in his father’s grip, every inch the aristocrat, from the elegantly plain cap on his dark head to his ermine-trimmed cloak to his soft leather shoes. His upper lip was curved in a line of pure arrogance.

You’ve gone too far this time, thought Stefan, watching the two men whose eyes were locked together. Even you won’t be able to charm your way out this time.

But just then there was a light step in the study doorway. Turning, Stefan had been dazzled by eyes the color of lapis lazuli, framed with long golden lashes. It was Katherine. Her father, Baron von Swartzschild, had brought her from the cold lands of the German princes to the Italian countryside, hoping it would help her recover from a prolonged illness. And since the day she had arrived, everything had changed for Stefan.

“I beg your pardon. I did not mean to intrude.” Her voice was soft and clear. She made a slight motion as if to leave.

“No, don’t go. Stay,” Stefan said quickly. He wanted to say more, to catch her hand—but he didn’t dare. Not with his father here. All he could do was gaze into those jewel-like blue eyes that were raised to his.

“Yes, stay,” Giuseppe said, and Stefan saw that his father’s thunderous expression had lightened and that he had released Damon. He stepped forward, straightening the heavy folds of his long fur-trimmed gown. “Your father should be returning from his business in the city today, and he will be delighted to see you. But your cheeks are pale, little Katherine. You are not ill again, I hope?”

“You know I am always pale, sir. I do not use rouge like your bold Italian girls.”

“You don’t need it,” said Stefan before he could stop himself, and Katherine smiled at him. She was so beautiful. An ache began in his chest.

His father continued, “And I see all too little of you during the day. You seldom give us the pleasure of your company until twilight.”

“I have my studies and devotions in my own rooms, sir,” said Katherine quietly, her lashes dropping. Stefan knew this was not true, but he said

nothing; he would never betray Katherine's secret. She looked up at his father again. "But I am here now, sir."

"Yes, yes, that is true. And I must see that tonight we have a very special meal for your father's return. Damon ... we will speak later." As Giuseppe motioned to a servant and strode out, Stefan turned to Katherine in delight. It was seldom they could speak to each other without the presence of his father or of Gudren, her stolid German maid.

But what Stefan saw then was like a blow to his stomach. Katherine was smiling—the little secret smile that she had often shared with him. But she was not looking at him. She was looking at Damon.

Stefan hated his brother at that moment, hated Damon's dark beauty and grace and the sensuality that drew women to him like moths to a flame. He wanted, in that instant, to strike Damon, to smash that beauty to pieces. Instead he had to stand and watch as Katherine moved slowly toward his brother, step by step, her golden brocade gown whispering on the tiled

floor.

And even as he watched, Damon held out a hand to Katherine, and smiled the cruel smile of triumph....

Stefan turned away from the window sharply.

Why was he reopening old wounds? But, even as he thought it, he drew out the slender gold chain he wore under his shirt. His thumb and forefinger caressed the ring that hung from it, then he held it up to the light.

The little circlet was exquisitely worked in gold, and ve centuries had not dimmed its luster. It was set with one stone, a lapis the size of his little

ngernail. Stefan looked at it, then at the heavy silver ring, also set with lapis, on his own hand. In his chest was a familiar tightness.

He could not forget the past, and he didn't really wish to. Despite everything that had happened, he cherished Katherine's memory. But there was one memory he must truly not disturb, one page of the journal he must not turn. If he had to relive that horror, that ... abomination, he would go mad. As he had been mad that day, that nal day, when he had looked upon his own damnation ...

Stefan leaned against the window, his forehead pressed to its coolness. His tutor had had another saying: *Evil will never nd peace. It may triumph, but it will never nd peace.*

Why had he even come to Fell's Church?

He had hoped to nd peace here, but that was impossible. He would never be accepted, he would never rest. Because he was evil. He could not change what he was.

Elena was up even earlier than usual that morning. She could hear Aunt Judith pottering about in her room, getting ready for her shower. Margaret was still fast asleep, curled up like a little mouse in her bed. Elena passed her younger sister's half-open door noiselessly and continued down the hallway to let herself out of the house.

The air was fresh and clear this morning; the quince tree was inhabited only by the usual jays and sparrows. Elena, who had gone to bed with a throbbing headache, lifted her face to the clean blue sky and breathed deeply.

She felt much better than she had yesterday. She'd promised to meet Matt before school, and though she wasn't looking forward to it she was sure it was going to be all right.

Matt lived only two streets away from the high school. It was a simple frame house, like all the others on that street, except that maybe the swing on the porch was a little shabbier, the paint a little more peeled. Matt was already standing outside, and for a moment her heart picked up at the sight of him as it used to.

He *was* good-looking. There was no doubt about that. Not in the stunning, almost disturbing way that—that some people were, but in a healthy American way. Matt Honeycutt was all-American. His blond hair was cropped short for the football season, and his skin was sunburnt from working outdoors on his grandparents' farm. His blue eyes were honest and straightforward. And just today, as he held out his arms to hug her gently, they were a little sad.

“You want to come inside?”

“No. Let's just walk,” Elena said. They went side by side without touching. Maples and black walnut trees lined this street, and the air still had a morning hush. Elena watched her feet on the wet sidewalk, feeling suddenly uncertain. She didn't know how to start after all.

“So you still haven't told me about France,” he said.

“Oh, it was great,” said Elena. She glanced sideways at him. He was looking at the sidewalk, too. “Everything about it was great,” she continued, trying to put some enthusiasm in her voice. “The people, the food, everything. It was really ...” Her voice trailed off, and she laughed nervously.

“Yeah, I know. Great,” he nished for her. He stopped and stood looking down at his scuffed tennis shoes. Elena recognized them from last year. Matt’s family barely got by; maybe he hadn’t been able to afford new shoes. She looked up to find those steady blue eyes on her face.

“You know, *you* look pretty great right now,” he said.

Elena opened her mouth in dismay, but he was speaking again.

“And I guess you have something to tell me.” She stared at him, and he smiled, a crooked, rueful smile. Then he held out his arms again.

“Oh, *Matt*,” she said, hugging him hard. She stepped back to look into his face. “Matt, you are the nicest guy I’ve ever met. I don’t deserve you.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re dumping me,” said Matt as they started walking again. “Because I’m too good for you. I should have realized that before.”

She punched him in the arm. “No, that isn’t why, and I am not dumping you. We’re going to be friends, right?”

“Oh, sure. Oh, absolutely.”

“Because that’s what I’ve realized we are.” She stopped, looking up at him again. “Good friends. Be honest, now, Matt, isn’t that how you really feel about me?”

He looked at her, then rolled his eyes heavenward. “Can I take the Fifth on that?” he said. As Elena’s face fell, he added, “It doesn’t have anything to do with that new guy, does it?”

“No,” Elena said after a hesitation, and then added quickly, “I haven’t even met him yet. I don’t know him.”

“But you want to. No, don’t say it.” He put an arm around her and gently turned her. “Come on, let’s head toward school. If we have time, I’ll even buy you a doughnut.”

As they walked, something thrashed in the walnut tree above them. Matt whistled and pointed. “Look at that! Biggest crow I’ve ever seen.”

Elena looked, but it was already gone.

School that day was merely a convenient place for Elena to review her plan.

She had woken up this morning knowing what to do. And today she gathered as much information as she could on the subject of Stefan Salvatore. Which wasn’t hard, because everyone at Robert E. Lee was talking about him.

It was common knowledge that he’d had some sort of run-in with the admissions secretary yesterday. And today he’d been called to the principal’s office. Something about his papers. But the principal had sent him back to class (after, it was rumored, a long-distance call to Rome—or was it Washington?), and everything seemed to be settled now. Officially, at least.

When Elena arrived for Euro History class that afternoon, she was greeted by a low whistle in the hall. Dick Carter and Tyler Smallwood were loitering