

THE STRUGGLE

The Vampire Diaries Book 2

By

L. J. Smith

THE VAMPIRE DIARIES

The Struggle

Volume II

L. J. Smith

HarperTorch

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Books by L. J. SMITH

The Vampire Diaries

Volume I: The Awakening

Volume II: The Struggle

Volume III: The Fury

Volume IV: Dark Reunion

The Secret Circle trilogy

Volume I: The Initiation

Volume II: The Captive

Volume III: The Power

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To my dear friend and sister, Judy

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One

"Damon!"

Icy wind whipped Elena's hair around her face, tearing at her light sweater. Oak leaves swirled among the rows of granite headstones, and the trees lashed their branches together in frenzy. Elena's hands were cold, her lips and cheeks were numb, but she stood facing the screaming wind directly, shouting into it.

"Damon!"

This weather was a show of his Power, meant to frighten her away. It wouldn't work. The thought of that same Power being turned against Stefan woke a hot fury inside her that burned against the wind. If Damon had done anything to Stefan, if Damon had hurt him...

"Damn you, answer me!" she shouted at the oak trees that bordered the graveyard.

A dead oak leaf like a withered brown hand skittered up to her foot, but there was no answer. Above, the sky was gray as glass, gray as the tombstones that surrounded her. Elena felt rage and frustration sting her throat and she sagged. She'd been wrong. Damon wasn't here after all; she was alone with the screaming wind.

She turned—and gasped.

He was just behind her, so close that her clothes brushed his as she turned. At that distance, she should have sensed another human being standing there, should have felt his body warmth or heard him. But Damon, of course, wasn't human.

She reeled back a couple of steps before she could stop herself. Every instinct that had lain quiet while she shouted into the violence of the wind was now begging her to run.

She clenched her fists. "Where's Stefan?"

A line appeared between Damon's dark eyebrows. "Stefan who?"

Elena stepped forward and slapped him.

She had no thought of doing it before she did it, and afterward she could scarcely believe what she had done. But it was a good hard slap, with the full force of her body behind it, and it snapped Damon's head to one side. Her hand stung. She stood, trying to calm her breath, and watched him.

He was dressed as she had first seen him, in black. Soft black boots, black jeans, black sweater, and leather jacket. And he looked like Stefan. She didn't know how she could have missed that before. He had the same dark hair, the same pale skin, the same disturbing good looks. But his hair was straight, not wavy, and his eyes were black as midnight, and his mouth was cruel.

He turned his head slowly back to look at her, and she saw blood rising in the cheek she'd slapped.

"Don't lie to me," she said, her voice shaking. "I know who you are. I know *what* you are. You killed Mr. Tanner last night. And now Stefan's disappeared."

"Has he?"

"You know he has!"

Damon smiled and then turned it off instantly.

"I'm warning you; if you've hurt him—"

"Then, what?" he said. "What will you do, Elena? What *can* you do, against me?"

Elena fell silent. For the first time, she realized that the wind had died away. The day had gone deadly quiet around them, as if they stood motionless at the center of some great circle of power. It seemed as if everything, the leaden sky, the oaks and purple beeches, the ground itself, was connected to him, as if he drew Power from all of it. He stood with his head tilted back slightly, his eyes fathomless and full of strange lights.

"I don't know," she whispered, "but I'll find something. Believe me."

He laughed suddenly, and Elena's heart jerked and began pounding hard. God, he was beautiful. Handsome was too weak and colorless a word. As usual, the laughter lasted only a moment, but even when his lips had sobered it left traces in his eyes.

"I do believe you," he said, relaxing, looking around the graveyard. Then he turned back and held out a hand to her. "You're too good for my brother," he said casually.

Elena thought of slapping the hand away, but she didn't want to touch him again. "Tell me where he is."

"Later, possibly—for a price." He withdrew his hand, just as Elena realized that on it he wore a ring like Stefan's: silver and lapis lazuli. Remember that, she thought fiercely. It's important.

"My brother," he went on, "is a fool. He thinks that because you look like Katherine you're weak and easily led like her. But he's wrong. I could feel your anger from the other side of town. I can feel it now, a white light like the desert sun. You have strength, Elena, even as you are. But you could be so much stronger..."

She stared at him, not understanding, not liking the change of subject. "I don't know what you're talking about. And what has it got to do with Stefan?"

"I'm talking about Power, Elena." Suddenly, he stepped close to her, his eyes fixed on hers, his voice soft and urgent. "You've tried everything else, and nothing has satisfied you. You're the girl who has everything, but there's always been something just out of your reach, something you need desperately and can't have. That's what I'm offering you. Power. Eternal life. And feelings you've never felt before."

She *did* understand then, and bile rose in her throat. She choked on horror and repudiation. "No."

"Why not?" he whispered. "Why not try it, Elena? Be honest. Isn't there a part of you that wants to?" His dark eyes were full of a heat and intensity that held her transfixed, unable to look away. "I can waken things inside you that have been sleeping all your life. You're strong enough to live in the dark, to glory in it. You can become a queen of the shadows. Why not take that Power, Elena? Let me help you take it."

"No," she said, wrenching her eyes away from his. She wouldn't look at him, wouldn't let him do this to her. She wouldn't let him make her forget... make her forget...

"It's the ultimate secret, Elena," he said. His voice was as caressing as the fingertips that touched her throat. "You'll be happy as never before."

There was something terribly important she must remember. He was using Power to make her forget it, but she wouldn't let him make her forget...

"And we'll be together, you and I." The cool fingertips stroked the side of her neck, slipping under the collar of her sweater. "Just the two of us, forever."

There was a sudden twinge of pain as his fingers brushed two tiny wounds in the flesh of her neck, and her mind cleared.

Make her forget... *Stefan*.

That was what he wanted to drive out of her mind. The memory of Stefan, of his green eyes and his smile that always had sadness lurking behind it. But nothing could force Stefan out of her thoughts now, not after what they had shared. She pulled away from Damon, knocking those cool fingertips aside. She looked straight at him.

"I've already found what I want," she said brutally. "And who I want to be with forever."

Blackness welled up in his eyes, a cold rage that swept through the air between them. Looking into those eyes, Elena thought of a cobra about to strike.

"Don't you be as stupid as my brother is," he said. "Or I might have to treat you the same way."

She was frightened now. She couldn't help it, not with cold pouring into her, chilling her bones. The wind was picking up again, the branches tossing. "Tell me where he is, Damon."

"At this moment? I don't know. Can't you stop thinking about him for an instant?"

"No!" She shuddered, hair lashing about her face again.

"And that's your final answer, today? Be very sure you want to play this game with me, Elena. The consequences are nothing to laugh about."

"I *am* sure." She had to stop him before he got to her again. "And you can't intimidate me, Damon, or haven't you noticed? The moment Stefan told me what you

were, what you'd done, you lost any power you might have had over me. I *hate* you. You disgust me. And there's nothing you can do to me, not any more."

His face altered, the sensuousness twisting and freezing, becoming cruel and bitterly hard. He laughed, but this laugh went on and on. "Nothing?" he said. "I can do *anything* to you, and to the ones you love. You have no idea, Elena, of what I can do. But you'll learn."

He stepped back, and the wind cut through Elena like a knife. Her vision seemed to be blurring; it was as if flecks of brightness filled the air in front of her eyes.

"Winter is coming, Elena," he said, and his voice was clear and chilling even over the howl of the wind. "An unforgiving season. Before it comes, you'll have learned what I can and can't do. Before winter is here, you'll have joined me. You'll be mine."

The swirling whiteness was blinding her, and she could no longer see the dark bulk of his figure. Now even his voice was fading. She hugged herself with her arms, head bent down, her whole body shaking. She whispered, "Stefan—"

"Oh, and one more thing," Damon's voice came back. "You asked earlier about my brother. Don't bother looking for him, Elena. I killed him last night."

Her head jerked up, but there was nothing to see, only the dizzying whiteness, which burned her nose and cheeks and clogged her eyelashes. It was only then, as the fine grains settled on her skin, that she realized what they were: snowflakes.

It was snowing on the first of November. Overhead, the sun was gone.

Two

An unnatural twilight hung over the abandoned graveyard. Snow blurred Elena's eyes, and the wind numbed her body as if she'd stepped into a current of ice water. Nevertheless, stubbornly, she did not turn around toward the modern cemetery and the road beyond it. As best she could judge, Wickery Bridge was straight in front of her. She headed for that.

The police had found Stefan's abandoned car by Old Creek Road. That meant he'd left it somewhere between Drowning Creek and the woods. Elena stumbled on the overgrown path through the graveyard, but she kept moving, head down, arms hugging her light sweater to her. She had known this graveyard all her life, and she could find her way through it blind.

By the time she crossed the bridge, her shivering had become painful. It wasn't snowing as hard now, but the wind was even worse. It cut through her clothes as if they were made of tissue paper, and took her breath away.

Stefan, she thought, and turned onto Old Creek Road, trudging northward. She didn't believe what Damon had said. If Stefan were dead she would *know*. He was alive, somewhere, and she had to find him. He could be anywhere out in this swirling whiteness; he could be hurt, freezing. Dimly, Elena sensed that she was no longer rational. All her thoughts had narrowed down to one single idea. Stefan. Find Stefan.

It was getting harder to keep to the road. On her right were oak trees, on her left, the swift waters of Drowning Creek. She staggered and slowed. The wind didn't seem quite so bad any more, but she did feel very tired. She needed to sit down and rest, just for a minute.

As she sank down beside the road, she suddenly realized how silly she had been to go out searching for Stefan. Stefan would come to her. All she needed to do was sit here and wait. He was probably coming right now.

Elena shut her eyes and leaned her head against her drawn-up knees. She felt much warmer now. Her mind drifted and she saw Stefan, saw him smile at her. His arms around her were strong and secure, and she relaxed against him, glad to let go of fear and tension. She was home. She was where she belonged. Stefan would never let anything hurt her.

But then, instead of holding her, Stefan was shaking her. He was ruining the beautiful tranquility of her rest. She saw his face, pale and urgent, his green eyes dark with pain. She tried to tell him to be still, but he wouldn't listen. *Elena, get up*, he said, and she felt the compelling force of those green eyes willing her to do it. *Elena, get up now—*

"Elena, get up!" The voice was high and thin and frightened. "Come on, Elena! Get up! We can't carry you!"

Blinking, Elena brought a face into focus. It was small and heart-shaped, with fair, almost translucent skin, framed by masses of soft red curls. Wide brown eyes, with

snowflakes caught in the lashes, stared worriedly into hers.

"Bonnie," she said slowly. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping me look for you," said a second, lower voice on Elena's other side. She turned slightly to see elegantly arched eyebrows and an olive complexion. Meredith's dark eyes, usually so ironic, were worried now, too. "Stand up, Elena, unless you want to become an ice princess for real."

There was snow all over her, like a white fur coat. Stiffly, Elena stood, leaning heavily on the two other girls. They walked her back to Meredith's car.

It should have been warmer inside the car, but Elena's nerve endings were coming back to life, making her shake, telling her how cold she really was. Winter is an unforgiving season, she thought as Meredith drove.

"What's going on, Elena?" said Bonnie from the back seat. "What did you think you were doing, running away from school like that? And how could you come out here?"

Elena hesitated, then shook her head. She wanted nothing more than to tell Bonnie and Meredith everything. To tell them the whole terrifying story about Stefan and Damon and what had really happened last night to Mr. Tanner—and about after. But she couldn't.

Even if they would believe her, it wasn't her secret to tell.

"Everyone's out looking for you," Meredith said. "The whole school's upset, and your aunt was nearly frantic."

"Sorry," said Elena dully, trying to stop her violent shivering. They turned onto Maple Street and pulled up to her house.

Aunt Judith was waiting inside with heated blankets. "I knew if they found you, you'd be half-frozen," she said in a determinedly cheerful voice as she reached for Elena. "Snow on the day after Halloween! I can hardly believe it. Where did you girls find her?"

"On Old Creek Road, past the bridge," said Meredith.

Aunt Judith's thin face lost color. "Near the graveyard? Where the attacks were? Elena, how *could* you?..." Her voice trailed off as she looked at Elena. "We won't say anything more about it right now," she said, trying to regain her cheerful manner. "Let's get you out of those wet clothes."

"I have to go back once I'm dry," said Elena. Her brain was working again, and one thing was clear: she hadn't really seen Stefan out there; it had been a dream. Stefan was still missing.

"You have to do nothing of the kind," said Robert, Aunt Judith's fiancé. Elena had scarcely noticed him standing off to one side until then. But his tone brooked no argument. "The police are looking for Stefan; you leave them to their job," he said.

"The police think he killed Mr. Tanner. But he didn't. You know that, don't you?" As Aunt Judith pulled her sodden outer sweater off, Elena looked from one face to

another for help, but they were all the same. "You *know* he didn't do it," she repeated, almost desperately.

There was a silence. "Elena," Meredith said at last, "no one wants to think he did. But— well, it looks bad, his running away like this."

"He didn't run away. He didn't! He *didn't*—"

"Elena, hush," said Aunt Judith. "Don't get yourself worked up. I think you must be getting sick. It was so cold out there, and you got only a few hours of sleep last night..." She laid a hand on Elena's cheek.

Suddenly it was all too much for Elena. Nobody believed her, not even her friends and family. At that moment, she felt surrounded by enemies.

"I'm not sick," she cried, pulling away.

"And I'm not crazy, either—whatever you think. Stefan didn't run away and he didn't kill Mr. Tanner, and I don't care if none of you believes me..." She stopped, choking. Aunt Judith was fussing around her, hurrying her upstairs, and she let herself be hurried. But she wouldn't go to bed when Aunt Judith suggested she must be tired. Instead, once she had warmed up, she sat on the living room couch by the fireplace, with blankets heaped around her. The phone rang all afternoon, and she heard Aunt Judith talking to friends, neighbors, the school. She assured all of them that Elena was fine. The... the tragedy last night had unsettled her a bit, that was all, and she seemed a little feverish. But she'd be good as new after a rest.

Meredith and Bonnie sat beside her. "Do you want to talk?" Meredith said in a low voice. Elena shook her head, staring into the fire. They were all against her. And Aunt Judith was wrong; she wasn't fine. She wouldn't be fine until Stefan was found.

Matt stopped by, snow dusting his blond hair and his dark blue parka. As he entered the room, Elena looked up at him hopefully. Yesterday Matt had helped save Stefan, when the rest of the school had wanted to lynch him. But today he returned her hopeful look with one of sober regret, and the concern in his blue eyes was only for her.

The disappointment was unbearable. "What are you doing here?" Elena demanded. "Keeping your promise to 'take care of me'?"

There was a flicker of hurt in his eyes. But Matt's voice was level. "That's part of it, maybe. But I'd try to take care of you anyway, no matter what I promised. I've been worried about you. Listen, Elena—"

She was in no mood to listen to anyone. "Well, I'm just fine, thank you. Ask anybody here. So you can stop worrying. Besides, I don't see why you should keep a promise to a *murderer*."

Startled, Matt looked at Meredith and Bonnie. Then he shook his head helplessly. "You're not being fair."

Elena was in no mood to be fair either. "I told you, you can stop worrying about me, and about my business. I'm fine, thanks."

The implication was obvious. Matt turned to the door just as Aunt Judith appeared with sandwiches.

"Sorry, I've got to go," he muttered, hurrying to the door. He left without looking back.

Meredith and Bonnie and Aunt Judith and

Robert tried to make conversation while they ate an early supper by the fire. Elena couldn't eat and wouldn't talk. The only one who wasn't miserable was Elena's little sister, Margaret. With four-year-old optimism, she cuddled up to Elena and offered her some of her Halloween candy.

Elena hugged her sister hard, her face pressed into Margaret's white-blond hair for a moment. If Stefan could have called her or gotten a message to her, he would have done it by now. Nothing in the world would have stopped him, unless he were badly hurt, or trapped somewhere, or...

She wouldn't let herself think about that last "or." Stefan was alive; he had to be alive. Damon was a liar.

But Stefan was in trouble, and she had to find him somehow. She worried about it all through the evening, desperately trying to come up with a plan. One thing was clear; she was on her own. She couldn't trust anyone.

It grew dark. Elena shifted on the couch and forced a yawn.

"I'm tired," she said quietly. "Maybe I am sick after all. I think I'll go to bed."

Meredith was looking at her keenly. "I was just thinking, Miss Gilbert," she said, turning to Aunt Judith, "that maybe Bonnie and I should stay the night. To keep Elena company."

"What a good idea," said Aunt Judith, pleased. "As long as your parents don't mind, I'd be glad to have you."

"It's a long drive back to Herron. I think I'll stay, too," Robert said. "I can just stretch out on the couch here." Aunt Judith protested that there were plenty of guest bedrooms upstairs, but Robert was adamant. The couch would do just fine for him, he said.

After looking once from the couch to the hall where the front door stood plainly in view, Elena sat stonily. They'd planned this between them, or at least they were all in on it now. They were making sure she didn't leave the house.

When she emerged from the bathroom a little while later, wrapped in her red silk kimono, she found Meredith and Bonnie sitting on her bed.

"Well, hello, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern," she said bitterly.

Bonnie, who had been looking depressed, now looked alarmed. She glanced at Meredith doubtfully.

"She knows who we are. She means she thinks we're spies for her aunt," Meredith interpreted. "Elena, you should realize that isn't so. Can't you trust us at

all?"

"I don't know. Can I?"

"Yes, because we're your *friends*." Before Elena could move, Meredith jumped off the bed and shut the door. Then she turned to face Elena. "Now, for once in your life, listen to me, you little idiot. It's true we don't know what to think about Stefan. But, don't you see, that's your own fault. Ever since you and he got together, you've been shutting us out. Things have been happening that you haven't told us about. At least you haven't told us the whole story. But in spite of that, in spite of everything, we still trust you. We still care about you. We're still behind you, Elena, and we want to help. And if you can't see that, then you *are* an idiot."

Slowly, Elena looked from Meredith's dark, intense face to Bonnie's pale one. Bonnie nodded.

"It's true," she said, blinking hard as if to keep back tears. "Even if you don't like us, we still like *you*."

Elena felt her own eyes fill and her stern expression crumple. Then Bonnie was off the bed, and they were all hugging, and Elena found she couldn't help the tears that slid down her face.

"I'm sorry if I haven't been talking to you," she said. "I know you don't understand, and I can't even explain why I can't tell you everything. I just *can't*. But there's one thing I can tell you." She stepped back, wiping her cheeks, and looked at them earnestly. "No matter how bad the evidence against Stefan looks, *he didn't kill Mr. Tanner*. I know he didn't, because I know who did. And it's the same person who attacked Vickie, and the old man under the bridge. And—" She stopped and thought a moment. "—and, oh, Bonnie, I think he killed Yangtze, too."

"*Yangtze*?" Bonnie's eyes widened. "But why would he want to kill a dog?"

"I don't know, but he was there that night, in your house. And he was... angry. I'm sorry, Bonnie."

Bonnie shook her head dazedly. Meredith said, "Why don't you tell the police?"

Elena's laugh was slightly hysterical. "I can't. It's not something they can deal with. And that's another thing I can't explain. You said you still trusted me; well, you'll just have to trust me about that."

Bonnie and Meredith looked at each other, then at the bedspread, where Elena's nervous fingers were picking a thread out of the embroidery. Finally Meredith said, "All right. What can we do to help?"

"I don't know. Nothing, unless..." Elena stopped and looked at Bonnie. "Unless," she said, in a changed voice, "you can help me find Stefan."

Bonnie's brown eyes were genuinely bewildered. "Me? But what can I do?" Then, at Meredith's indrawn breath, she said, "Oh. *Oh*."

"You knew where I was that day I went to the cemetery," said Elena. "And you even predicted Stefan's coming to school."

"I thought you didn't believe in all that psychic stuff," said Bonnie weakly.

"I've learned a thing or two since then. Anyway, I'm willing to believe *anything* if it'll help find Stefan. If there's any chance at all it will help."

Bonnie was hunching up, as if trying to make her already tiny form as small as possible. "Elena, you don't understand," she said wretchedly. "I'm not trained; it's not something I can control. And—and it's not a game, not any more. The more you use those powers, the more they use *you*. Eventually they can end up using you all the time, whether you want it or not. It's *dangerous*."

Elena got up and walked to the cherry wood dresser, looking down at it without seeing it. At last she turned.

"You're right; it's not a game. And I believe you about how dangerous it can be. But it's not a game for Stefan, either. Bonnie, I think he's out there, somewhere, terribly hurt. And there's nobody to help him; nobody's even looking for him, except his enemies. He may be dying right now. He—he may even be..." Her throat closed. She bowed her head over the dresser and made herself take a deep breath, trying to steady herself. When she looked up, she saw Meredith was looking at Bonnie.

Bonnie straightened her shoulders, sitting up as tall as she could. Her chin lifted and her mouth set. And in her normally soft brown eyes, a grim light shone as they met Elena's.

"We need a candle," was all she said.

The match rasped and threw sparks in the darkness, and then the candle flame burned strong and bright. It lent a golden glow to Bonnie's pale face as she bent over it.

"I'm going to need both of you to help me focus," she said. "Look into the flame, and think about Stefan. Picture him in your mind. No matter what happens, keep on looking at the flame. And whatever you do, don't say anything."

Elena nodded, and then the only sound in the room was soft breathing. The flame flickered and danced, throwing patterns of light over the three girls sitting cross-legged around it. Bonnie, eyes closed, was breathing deeply and slowly, like someone drifting into sleep.

Stefan, thought Elena, gazing into the flame, trying to pour all her will into the thought. She created him in her mind, using all her senses, conjuring him to her. The roughness of his woolen sweater under her cheek, the smell of his leather jacket, the strength of his arms around her. Oh, Stefan...

Bonnie's lashes fluttered and her breathing quickened, like a sleeper having a bad dream. Elena resolutely kept her eyes on the flame, but when Bonnie broke the silence a chill went up her spine.

At first it was just a moan, the sound of someone in pain. Then, as Bonnie tossed her head, breath coming in short bursts, it became words.

"Alone..." she said, and stopped. Elena's nails bit into her hand. "Alone... in the

dark," said Bonnie. Her voice was distant and tortured.

There was another silence, and then Bonnie began to speak quickly.

"It's dark and cold. And I'm alone. There's something behind me... jagged and hard. Rocks. They used to hurt—but not now. I'm numb now, from the cold. So cold..." Bonnie twisted, as if trying to get away from something, and then she laughed, a dreadful laugh almost like a sob. "That's... funny. I never thought I'd want to see the sun so much. But it's always dark here. And cold. Water up to my neck, like ice. That's funny, too. Water everywhere—and me dying of thirst. So thirsty... hurts..."

Elena felt something tighten around her heart. Bonnie was inside Stefan's thoughts, and who knew what she might discover there? Stefan, tell us where you are, she thought desperately. Look around; tell me what you see.

"Thirsty. I need... life?" Bonnie's voice was doubtful, as if not sure how to translate some concept. "I'm weak. He said I'll always be the weak one. He's strong ... a killer. But that's what I am, too. I killed Katherine; maybe I deserve to die. Why not just let go?..."

"No!" said Elena before she could stop herself. In that instant, she forgot everything but Stefan's pain. "Stefan—"

"Elena!" Meredith cried sharply at the same time. But Bonnie's head fell forward, the flow of words cut off. Horrified, Elena realized what she had done.

"Bonnie, are you all right? Can you find him again? I didn't mean to..."

Bonnie's head lifted. Her eyes were open now, but they looked at neither the candle nor Elena. They stared straight ahead, expressionless. When she spoke, her voice was distorted, and Elena's heart stopped. It wasn't Bonnie's voice, but it was a voice Elena recognized. She'd heard it coming from Bonnie's lips once before, in the graveyard.

"Elena," the voice said, "don't go to the bridge. It's Death, Elena. Your death is waiting there." Then Bonnie slumped forward.

Elena grabbed her shoulders and shook. "Bonnie!" she almost screamed. "Bonnie!"

"What... oh, don't. Let go." Bonnie's voice was weak and shaken, but it was her own. Still bent over, she put a hand to her forehead.

"Bonnie, are you all right?"

"I think so... yes. But it was so strange." Her tone sharpened and she looked up, blinking. "What was that, Elena, about being a killer?"

"You remember that?"

"I remember everything. I can't describe it; it was awful. But what did that mean?"

"Nothing," said Elena. "He's hallucinating, that's all."

Meredith broke in. "He? Then you really think she tuned in to Stefan?"

Elena nodded, her eyes sore and burning as she looked away. "Yes. I think that was Stefan. It had to be. And I think she even told us where he is. Under Wickery Bridge, in the water."

Three

Bonnie stared. "I don't remember anything about the bridge. It didn't feel like a bridge."

"But you said it yourself, at the end. I thought you remembered..." Elena's voice died away. "You don't remember that part," she said flatly. It was not a question.

"I remember being alone, somewhere cold and dark, and feeling weak... and thirsty. Or was it hungry? I don't know, but I needed... something. And I almost wanted to die. And then you woke me up."

Elena and Meredith exchanged a glance. "And after that," Elena said to Bonnie, "you said one more thing, in a strange voice. You said not to go near the bridge."

"She told *you* not to go near the bridge."

Meredith corrected. "You in particular, Elena. She said Death was waiting."

"I don't care what's waiting," said Elena. "If that's where Stefan is, that's where I'm going."

"Then that's where we're all going," said Meredith.

Elena hesitated. "I can't ask you to do that," she said slowly. "There might be danger—of a kind you don't know about. It might be best for me to go alone."

"Are you kidding?" Bonnie said, sticking her chin out. "We *love* danger. I want to be young and beautiful in my grave, remember?"

"Don't," said Elena quickly. "You were the one who said it wasn't a game."

"And not for Stefan, either," Meredith reminded them. "We're not doing him much good standing around here."

Elena was already shrugging out of her kimono, moving toward the closet. "We'd better all bundle up. Borrow anything you want to keep warm," she said.

When they were more or less dressed for the weather, Elena turned to the door. Then she stopped.

"Robert," she said. "There's no way we can get past him to the front door, even if he's asleep."

Simultaneously, the three of them turned to look at the window.

"Oh, wonderful," said Bonnie.

As they climbed out into the quince tree, Elena realized that it had stopped snowing. But the bite of the air on her cheek made her remember Damon's words. Winter is an unforgiving season, she thought, and shivered.

All the lights in the house were out, including those in the living room. Robert must have gone to sleep already. Even so, Elena held her breath as they crept past the darkened windows. Meredith's car was a little way down the street. At the last

minute, Elena decided to get some rope, and she soundlessly opened the back door to the garage. There was a swift current in Drowning Creek, and wading would be dangerous.

The drive to the end of town was tense. As they passed the outskirts of the woods, Elena remembered the way the leaves had blown at her in the cemetery. Particularly oak leaves.

"Bonnie, do oak trees have any special significance? Did your grandmother ever say anything about them?"

"Well, they were sacred to the Druids. All trees were, but oak trees were the most sacred. They thought the spirit of the trees brought them power."

Elena digested that in silence. When they reached the bridge and got out of the car, she gave the oak trees on the right side of the road an uneasy glance. But the night was clear and strangely calm, and no breeze stirred the dry brown leaves left on the branches.

"Keep your eyes out for a crow," she said to Bonnie and Meredith.

"A crow?" Meredith said sharply. "Like the crow outside Bonnie's house the night Yangtze died?"

"The night Yangtze was killed. Yes." Elena approached the dark waters of Drowning Creek with a rapidly beating heart. Despite its name, it was not a creek, but a swiftly flowing river with banks of red native clay. Above it stood Wickery Bridge, a wooden structure built nearly a century ago. Once, it had been strong enough to support wagons; now it was just a footbridge that nobody used because it was so out of the way. It was a barren, lonely, unfriendly place, Elena thought. Here and there patches of snow lay on the ground.

Despite her brave words earlier, Bonnie was hanging back. "Remember the last time we went over this bridge?" she said.

Too well, Elena thought. The last time they had crossed it, they were being chased by... something... from the graveyard. Or someone, she thought.

"We're not going over it yet," she said. "First we've got to look under it on this side."

"Where the old man was found with his throat torn open," Meredith muttered, but she followed.

The car headlights illuminated only a small portion of the bank under the bridge. As Elena stepped out of the narrow wedge of light, she felt a sick thrill of foreboding. Death was waiting, the voice had said. Was Death down here?

Her feet slipped on the damp, scummy stones. All she could hear was the rushing of the water, and its hollow echo from the bridge above her head. And, though she strained her eyes, all she could see in the darkness was the raw riverbank and the wooden trestles of the bridge.

"Stefan?" she whispered, and she was almost glad that the noise of the water

drowned her out. She felt like a person calling "who's there?" to an empty house, yet afraid of what might answer.

"This isn't right," said Bonnie from behind her.

"What do you mean?"

Bonnie was looking around, shaking her head slightly, her body taut with concentration. "It just feels wrong. I don't—well, for one thing I didn't hear the river before. I couldn't hear anything at all, just dead silence."

Elena's heart dropped with dismay. Part of her knew that Bonnie was right, that Stefan wasn't in this wild and lonely place. But part of her was too scared to listen.

"We've got to make sure," she said through the constriction in her chest, and she moved farther into the darkness, feeling her way along because she couldn't see. But at last she had to admit that there was no sign that any person had recently been here. No sign of a dark head in the water, either. She wiped cold muddy hands on her jeans.

"We can check the other side of the bridge," said Meredith, and Elena nodded mechanically. But she didn't need to see Bonnie's expression to know what they'd find. This was the wrong place.

"Let's just get out of here," she said, climbing through vegetation toward the wedge of light beyond the bridge. Just as she reached it, Elena froze.

Bonnie gasped. "Oh, God—"

"Get back," hissed Meredith. "Up against the bank."

Clearly silhouetted against the car headlights above was a black figure. Elena, staring with a wildly beating heart, could tell nothing about it except that it was male. The face was in darkness, but she had a terrible feeling.

It was moving toward them.

Ducking out of sight, Elena cowered back against the muddy riverbank under the bridge, pressing herself as flat as possible. She could feel Bonnie shaking behind her, and Meredith's fingers sank into her arm.

They could see nothing from here, but suddenly there was a heavy footfall on the bridge. Scarcely daring to breathe, they clung to one another, faces turned up. The heavy footsteps rang across the wooden planks, moving away from them.

Please let him keep going, thought Elena. Oh, please...

She sank her teeth into her lip, and then Bonnie whimpered softly, her icy hand clutching Elena's. The footsteps were coming back.

I should go out there, Elena thought. It's me he wants, not them. He said as much. I should go out there and face him, and maybe he'll let Bonnie and Meredith leave. But the fiery rage that had sustained her that morning was in ashes now. With all her strength of will, she could not make her hand let go of Bonnie's, could not tear herself away.

The footsteps sounded right above them. Then there was silence, followed by a slithering sound on the bank.

No, thought Elena, her body charged with fear. He was coming down. Bonnie moaned and buried her head against Elena's shoulder, and Elena felt every muscle tense as she saw movement—feet, legs—appear out of the darkness. *No...*

"What are you *doing* down there?"

Elena's mind refused to process this information at first. It was still panicking, and she almost screamed as Matt took another step down the bank, peering under the bridge.

"Elena? What are you *doing*?" he said again.

Bonnie's head flew up. Meredith's breath exploded in relief. Elena herself felt as if her knees might give way.

"Matt," she said. It was all she could manage.

Bonnie was more vocal. "What do you think *you're* doing?" she said in rising tones. "Trying to give us a heart attack? What are you out here for at this time of night?"

Matt thrust a hand into his pocket, rattling change. As they emerged from under the bridge, he stared out over the river. "I followed you."

"You *what*?" said Elena.

Reluctantly, he swung to face her. "I followed you," he repeated, shoulders tense. "I figured you'd find a way to get around your aunt and go out again. So I sat in my car across the street and watched your house. Sure enough, you three came climbing out the window. So I followed you here."

Elena didn't know what to say. She was angry, and of course, he had probably done it only to keep his promise to Stefan. But the thought of Matt sitting out there in his battered old Ford, probably freezing to death and without any supper... it gave her a strange pang she didn't want to dwell on.

He was looking out at the river again. She stepped closer to him and spoke quietly.

"I'm sorry, Matt," she said. "About the way I acted back at the house, and—and about—" She fumbled for a minute and then gave up. About everything, she thought hopelessly.

"Well, I'm sorry for scaring you just now." He turned back briskly to face her, as if that settled the matter. "Now could you please tell me what you think you're doing?"

"Bonnie thought Stefan might be here."

"Bonnie did *not*," said Bonnie. "Bonnie said right away that it was the wrong place. We're looking for somewhere quiet, no noises, and closed in. I felt... surrounded," she explained to Matt.

Matt looked back at her warily, as if she might bite. "Sure you did," he said.

"There were rocks around me, but not like these river rocks."

"Uh, no, of course they weren't." He looked sideways at Meredith, who took pity on him.

"Bonnie had a vision," she said.

Matt backed up a little, and Elena could see his profile in the headlights. From his expression, she could tell he didn't know whether to walk away or to round them all up and cart them to the nearest insane asylum.

"It's no joke," she said. "Bonnie's psychic, Matt. I know I've always said I didn't believe in that sort of thing, but I've been wrong. You don't know how wrong. Tonight, she—she tuned in to Stefan somehow and got a glimpse of where he is."

Matt drew a long breath. "I see. Okay..."

"Don't patronize me! I'm not stupid, Matt, and I'm telling you this is for real. She was there, with Stefan; she knew things only he would know. And she saw the place he's trapped in."

"Trapped," said Bonnie. "That's it. It was definitely nothing open like a river. But there was water, water up to my neck. *His* neck. And rock walls around, covered with thick moss. The water was ice cold and still, and it smelled bad."

"But what did you see?" Elena said.

"Nothing. It was like being blind. Somehow I knew that if there was even the faintest ray of light I would be able to see, but I couldn't. It was black as a tomb."

"As a tomb..." Thin chills went through Elena. She thought about the ruined church on the hill above the graveyard. There was a tomb there, a tomb she thought had opened once.

"But a tomb wouldn't be that wet," Meredith was saying.

"No... but I don't get any sense of where it *could* be then," Bonnie said. "Stefan wasn't really in his right mind; he was so weak and hurt. And so thirsty—"

Elena opened her mouth to stop Bonnie from going on, but just then Matt broke in.

"I'll tell you what it sounds like to me," he said.

The three girls looked at him, standing slightly apart from their group like an eavesdropper. They had almost forgotten about him.

"Well?" said Elena.

"Exactly," he said. "I mean, it sounds like a well."

Elena blinked, excitement stirring in her. "Bonnie?"

"It *could* be," said Bonnie slowly. "The size and the walls and everything would be right. But a well is open; I should have been able to see the stars."

"Not if it were covered," said Matt. "A lot of the old farmhouses around here have wells that are no longer in use, and some farmers cover them to make sure little kids don't fall in. My grandparents do."

Elena couldn't contain her excitement any longer. "That could be it. That *must* be it. Bonnie, remember, you said it was *always* dark there."

"Yes, and it did have a sort of underground feeling." Bonnie was excited, too, but Meredith interrupted with a dry question.

"How many wells do you think there are in Fell's Church, Matt?"

"Dozens, probably," he said. "But covered? Not as many. And if you're suggesting somebody dumped Stefan in this one, then it can't be any place where people would see it. Probably somewhere abandoned..."

"And his car was found on this road," said Elena.

"The old Francher place," said Matt.

They all looked at one another. The Francher farmhouse had been ruined and deserted for as long as anybody could remember. It stood in the middle of the woods, and the woods had taken it over nearly a century ago.

"Let's go," added Matt simply.

Elena put a hand on his arm. "You believe—?"

He looked away a moment. "I don't know what to believe," he said at last. "But I'm coming."

They split up and took both cars, Matt with Bonnie in the lead, and Meredith following with Elena. Matt took a disused little cart track into the woods until it petered out.

"From here we walk," he said.

Elena was glad she'd thought of bringing rope; they'd need it if Stefan were really in the Francher well. And if he wasn't...

She wouldn't let herself think about that.

It was hard going through the woods, especially in the dark. The underbrush was thick, and dead branches reached out to snatch at them. Moths fluttered around them, brushing Elena's cheek with unseen wings.

Eventually they came to a clearing. The foundations of the old house could be seen, building stones tied to the ground now by weeds and brambles. For the most part, the chimney was still intact, with, hollow places where concrete had once held it together, like a crumbling monument.

"The well would be somewhere out back," Matt said.

It was Meredith who found it and called the others. They gathered around and looked at the flat, square block of stone almost level with the ground.

Matt stooped and examined the dirt and weeds around it. "It's been moved

recently," he said.

That was when Elena's heart began pounding in earnest. She could feel it reverberating in her throat and her fingertips. "Let's get it off," she said in a voice barely above a whisper.

The stone slab was so heavy that Matt couldn't even shift it. Finally all four of them pushed, bracing themselves against the ground behind it, until, with a groan, the block moved a fraction of an inch. Once there was a tiny gap between stone and wall, Matt used a dead branch to lever the opening wider. Then they all pushed again.

When there was an aperture large enough for her head and shoulders, Elena bent down, looking in. She was almost afraid to hope.

"Stefan?"

The seconds afterward, hovering over that black opening, looking down into darkness, hearing only the echoes of pebbles disturbed by her movement, were agonizing. Then, incredibly, there was another sound.

"Who—? Elena?"

"Oh, Stefan!" Relief made her wild. "Yes! I'm here, we're here, and we're going to get you out. Are you all right? Are you hurt?" The only thing that stopped her from tumbling in herself was Matt grabbing her from behind. "Stefan, hang on, we've got a rope. Tell me you're all right."

There was a faint, almost unrecognizable sound, but Elena knew what it was. A laugh. Stefan's voice was thready but intelligible. "I've—been better," he said. "But I'm—alive. Who's with you?"

"It's me. Matt," said Matt, releasing Elena. He bent over the hole himself. Elena, nearly delirious with elation, noted that he wore a slightly dazed look. "And Meredith and Bonnie, who's going to bend some spoons for us next. I'm going to throw you down a rope... that is, unless Bonnie can levitate you out." Still on his knees, he turned to look at Bonnie.

She slapped the top of his head. "Don't joke about it! Get him up!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Matt, a little giddily. "Here, Stefan. You're going to have to tie this around you."

"Yes," said Stefan. He didn't argue about fingers numb with cold or whether or not they could haul his weight up. There was no other way.

The next fifteen minutes were awful for Elena. It took all four of them to pull Stefan out, although Bonnie's main contribution was saying, "come on, come on," whenever they paused for breath. But at last Stefan's hands gripped the edge of the dark hole, and Matt reached forward to grab him under the shoulders.

Then Elena was holding him, her arms locked around his chest. She could tell just how wrong things were by his unnatural stillness, by the limpness of his body. He'd used the last of his strength helping to pull himself out; his hands were cut and

bloody. But what worried Elena most was the fact that those hands did not return her desperate embrace.

When she released him enough to look at him, she saw that his skin was waxen, and there were black shadows under his eyes. His skin was so cold that it frightened her.

She looked up at the others anxiously.

Matt's brow was furrowed with concern. "We'd better get him to the clinic fast. He needs a doctor."

"No!" The voice was weak and hoarse, and it came from the limp figure Elena cradled.

She felt Stefan gather himself, felt him slowly raise his head. His green eyes fixed on hers, and she saw the urgency in them.

"No... doctors." Those eyes burned into hers. "Promise... Elena."

Elena's own eyes stung and her vision blurred. "I promise," she whispered. Then she felt whatever had been holding him up, the current of sheer willpower and determination, collapse. He slumped in her arms, unconscious.

Four

"But he's got to have a doctor. He looks like he's dying!" said Bonnie.

"He can't. I can't explain right now. Let's just get him home, all right? He's wet and freezing out here. Then we can discuss it."

The job of getting Stefan through the woods was enough to occupy everyone's mind for a while. He remained unconscious, and when they finally laid him out in the back seat of Matt's car they were all bruised and exhausted, in addition to being wet from the contact with his soaking clothes. Elena held his head in her lap as they drove to the boarding house. Meredith and Bonnie followed.

"I see lights on," Matt said, pulling in front of the large rust-red building. "She must be awake. But the door's probably locked."

Elena gently eased Stefan's head down and slipped out of the car, and saw one of the windows in the house brighten as a curtain was pushed aside. Then she saw a head and shoulders appear at the window, looking down.

"Mrs. Flowers!" she called, waving. "It's Elena Gilbert, Mrs. Flowers. We've found Stefan, and we need to get in!"

The figure at the window did not move or otherwise acknowledge her words. Yet from its posture, Elena could tell it was still looking down on them.

"Mrs. Flowers, we have Stefan," she called again, gesturing to the lighted interior of the car. "Please!"

"Elena! It's unlocked already!" Bonnie's voice floated to her from the front porch, distracting Elena from the figure at the window. When she looked back up, she saw the curtains falling into place, and then the light in that upstairs room snapped off.

It was strange, but she had no time to puzzle over it. She and Meredith helped Matt lift Stefan and carry him up the front steps.

Inside, the house was dark and still. Elena directed the others up the staircase that stood opposite the door, and onto the second-floor landing. From there they went into a bedroom, and Elena had Bonnie open the door of what looked like a closet. It revealed another stairway, very dim and narrow.

"Who would leave their—front door unlocked—after all that's happened recently?" Matt grunted as they hauled their lifeless burden. "She must be crazy."

"She *is* crazy," Bonnie said from above, pushing the door at the top of the staircase open. "Last time we were here she talked about the weirdest—" Her voice broke off in a gasp.

"What is it?" said Elena. But as they reached the threshold of Stefan's room, she saw for herself.

She'd forgotten the condition the room had been in the last time she'd seen it. Trunks filled with clothing were upended or lying on their sides, as if they'd been

thrown by some giant hand from wall to wall. Their contents were strewn about the floor, along with articles from the dresser and tables. Furniture was overturned, and a window was broken, allowing a cold wind to blow in. There was only one lamp on, in a corner, and grotesque shadows loomed against the ceiling. "*What happened?*" said Matt.

Elena didn't answer until they had stretched Stefan out on the bed. "I don't know for certain," she said, and this was true, if just barely. "But it was already this way last night. Matt, will you help me? He needs to get dry."

"I'll find another lamp," said Meredith, but Elena spoke quickly.

"No, we can see all right. Why don't you try to get a fire going?"

Spilling from one of the gaping trunks was a terry cloth robe of some dark color. Elena took it, and she and Matt began to strip off Stefan's wet and clinging clothes. She worked on getting his sweater off, but one glimpse of his neck was enough to freeze her in place.

"Matt, could you—could you hand me that towel?"

As soon as he turned, she tugged the sweater over Stefan's head and quickly wrapped the robe around him. When Matt turned back and handed her the towel, she wound it around Stefan's throat like a scarf. Her pulse was racing, her mind working furiously.

No wonder he was so weak, so lifeless. Oh, God. She had to examine him, to see how bad it was. But how could she, with Matt and the others here?

"I'm going to get a doctor," Matt said in a tight voice, his eyes on Stefan's face. "He needs help, Elena."

Elena panicked. "Matt, no... please. He—he's afraid of doctors. I don't know what would happen if you brought one here." Again, it was the truth, if not the whole truth. She had an idea of what might help Stefan, but she couldn't do it with the others there. She bent over Stefan, rubbing his hands between her own, trying to think.

What could she do? Protect Stefan's secret at the cost of his life? Or betray him in order to save him? *Would* it save him to tell Matt and Bonnie and Meredith? She looked at her friends, trying to picture their response if they were to learn the truth about Stefan Salvatore.

It was no good. She couldn't risk it. The shock and horror of the discovery had nearly sent Elena herself reeling into madness. If she, who loved Stefan, had been ready to run from him screaming, what would these three do? And then there was Mr. Tanner's murder. If they knew what Stefan was, would they ever be able to believe him innocent? Or, in their heart of hearts, would they always suspect him?

Elena shut her eyes. It was just too dangerous. Meredith and Bonnie and Matt were her friends, but this was one thing she couldn't share with them. In all the world, there was no one she could trust with this secret. She would have to keep it alone.

She straightened up and looked at Matt. "He's afraid of doctors, but a nurse might be all right." She turned to where Bonnie and Meredith were kneeling before the fireplace. "Bonnie, what about your sister?"

"Mary?" Bonnie glanced at her watch. "She has the late shift at the clinic this week, but she's probably home by now. Only—"

"Then that's it. Matt, you go with Bonnie and ask Mary to come here and look at Stefan. If she thinks he needs a doctor, I won't argue any more."

Matt hesitated, then exhaled sharply. "All right. I still think you're wrong, but—let's go, Bonnie. We're going to break some traffic laws."

As they went to the door, Meredith remained standing by the fireplace, watching Elena with steady dark eyes.

Elena made herself meet them. "Meredith... I think you should all go."

"Do you?" Those dark eyes remained on hers unwaveringly, as if trying to pierce through and read her mind. But Meredith did not ask any other questions. After a moment she nodded, and followed Matt and Bonnie without a word.

When Elena heard the door at the bottom of the staircase close, she hastily righted a lamp that lay overturned by the bedside and plugged it in. Now, at last, she could take stock of Stefan's injuries.

His color seemed worse than before; he was literally almost as white as the sheets below him. His lips were white, too, and Elena suddenly thought of Thomas Fell, the founder of Fell's Church. Or, rather, of Thomas Fell's statue, lying beside his wife's on the stone lid of their tomb. Stefan was the color of that marble.

The cuts and gashes on his hands showed livid purple, but they were no longer bleeding. She gently turned his head to look at his neck.

And there it was. She touched the side of her own neck automatically, as if to verify the resemblance. But Stefan's marks were not small punctures. They were deep, savage tears in the flesh. He looked as if he had been mauled by some animal that had tried to rip out his throat.

White-hot anger blazed through Elena again. And with it, hatred. She realized that despite her disgust and fury, she had not really hated Damon before. Not really. But now... now, she *hated*. She loathed him with an intensity of emotion that she had never felt for anyone else in her life. She wanted to hurt him, to make him pay. If she'd had a wooden stake at that moment, she would have hammered it through Damon's heart without regret.

But just now she had to think of Stefan. He was so terrifyingly still. That was the hardest thing to bear, the lack of purpose or resistance in his body, the emptiness. That was it. It was as if he had vacated this form and left her with an empty vessel.

"Stefan!" Shaking him did nothing. With one hand on the center of his cold chest, she tried to detect a heartbeat. If there was one, it was too faint to feel.

Keep calm, Elena, she told herself, pushing back the part of her mind that wanted

to panic. The part that was saying, "What if he's dead? What if he's really dead, and nothing you can do will save him?"

Glancing about the room, she saw the broken window. Shards of glass lay on the floor beneath it. She went over and picked one up, noting how it sparkled in the firelight. A pretty thing, with an edge like a razor, she thought. Then, deliberately, setting her teeth, she cut her finger with it.

The pain made her gasp. After an instant, blood began welling out of the cut, dripping down her finger like wax down a candlestick. Quickly, she knelt by Stefan and put her finger to his lips.

With her other hand, she clasped his unresponsive one, feeling the hardness of the silver ring he wore. Motionless as a statue herself, she knelt there and waited.

She almost missed the first tiny flicker of response. Her eyes were fixed on his face, and she caught the minute lifting of his chest only in her peripheral vision. But then the lips beneath her finger quivered and parted slightly, and he swallowed reflexively.

"That's it," Elena whispered. "Come on, Stefan."

His eyelashes fluttered, and with dawning joy she felt his fingers return the pressure of hers. He swallowed again.

"Yes." She waited until his eyes blinked and slowly opened before sitting back. Then she fumbled one-handed with the high neck of her sweater, folding it out of the way.

Those green eyes were dazed and heavy, but as stubborn as she had ever seen them. "No," Stefan said, his voice a cracked whisper.

"You have to, Stefan. The others are coming back and bringing a nurse with them. I had to agree to that. And if you're not well enough to convince her you don't need a hospital..." She left the sentence unfinished. She herself didn't know what a doctor or lab technician would find examining Stefan. But she knew he knew, and that it made him afraid.

But Stefan only looked more obstinate, turning his face away from her. "Can't," he whispered. "It's too dangerous. Already took... too much... last night."

Could it have been only last night? It seemed a year ago. "Will it kill me?" she asked. "Stefan, answer me! Will it kill me?"

"No..." His voice was sullen. "But—"

"Then we have to do it. Don't argue with me!" Bending over him, holding his hand in hers, Elena could feel his overpowering need. She was amazed that he was even trying to resist. It was like a starving man standing before a banquet, unable to take his eyes from the steaming dishes, but refusing to eat.

"No," Stefan said again, and Elena felt frustration surge through her. He was the only person she'd ever met who was as stubborn as she was.

"Yes. And if you won't cooperate I'll cut something else, like my wrist." She had

been pressing her finger into the sheet to staunch the blood; now she held it up to him.

His pupils dilated, his lips parted. "Too much... already," he murmured, but his gaze remained on her finger, on the bright drop of blood at the tip. "And I can't... control..."

"It's all right," she whispered. She drew the finger across his lips again, feeling them open to take it in; then, she leaned over him and shut her eyes.

His mouth was cool and dry as it touched her throat. His hand cupped the back of her neck as his lips sought the two little punctures already there. Elena willed herself not to recoil at the brief sting of pain. Then she smiled.

Before, she had felt his agonizing need, his driving hunger. Now, through the bond they shared, she felt only fierce joy and satisfaction. Deep satisfaction as the hunger was gradually assuaged.

Her own pleasure came from giving, from knowing that she was sustaining Stefan with her own life. She could sense the strength flowing into him.

In time, she felt the intensity of the need lessen. Still, it was by no means gone, and she could not understand when Stefan tried to push her away.

"That's enough," he grated, forcing her shoulders up. Elena opened her eyes, her dreamy pleasure broken. His own eyes were green as mandrake leaves, and in his face she saw the fierce hunger of the predator.

"It isn't enough. You're still weak—"

"It's enough for *you*." He pushed at her again, and she saw something like desperation spark in those green eyes. "Elena, if I take much more, you will begin to change. And if you don't move away, if you don't move away from me *right now*..."

"

Elena withdrew to the foot of the bed. She watched him sit up and adjust the dark robe. In the lamplight, she saw that his skin had regained some color, a slight flush glazing its pallor. His hair was drying into a tumbled sea of dark waves.

"I missed you," she said softly. Relief throbbed within her suddenly, an ache that was almost as bad as the fear and tension had been. Stefan was alive; he was talking to her. Everything was going to be all right after all.

"Elena..." Their eyes met and she was held by green fire. Unconsciously, she moved toward him, and then stopped as he laughed aloud.

"I've never seen you look like this before," he said, and she looked down at herself. Her shoes and jeans were caked with red mud, which was also liberally smeared over the rest of her. Her jacket was torn and leaking its down stuffing. She had no doubt that her face was smudged and dirty, and she *knew* her hair was tangled and straggly. Elena Gilbert, immaculate fashion plate of Robert E. Lee, was a mess.

"I like it," Stefan said, and this time she laughed with him.

They were still laughing as the door opened. Elena stiffened alertly, twitching at her turtleneck, glancing around the room for evidence that might betray them. Stefan sat up straighter and licked his lips.

"He's better!" Bonnie caroled out as she stepped into the room and saw Stefan. Matt and Meredith were right behind her, and their faces lit with surprise and pleasure. The fourth person who came in was only a little older than Bonnie, but she had an air of brisk authority that belied her youth. Mary McCullough went straight over to her patient and reached for his pulse.

"So you're the one afraid of doctors," she said.

Stefan looked disconcerted for a moment; then, he recovered. "It's sort of a childhood phobia," he said, sounding embarrassed. He glanced sideways at Elena, who smiled nervously and gave a tiny nod. "Anyway, I don't need one now, as you can see."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that? Your pulse is all right. In fact, it's surprisingly slow, even for an athlete. I don't think you're hypothermic, but you're still chilled. Let's get a temperature."

"No, I really don't think that's necessary." Stefan's voice was low, calming. Elena had heard him use that voice before, and she knew what he was trying to do. But Mary took not the slightest notice.

"Open up, please."

"Here, I'll do it," said Elena quickly, reaching to take the thermometer from Mary. Somehow, as she did so, the little glass tube slipped out of her hand. It fell to the hardwood floor and smashed into several pieces. Uh, I'm sorry!

"It doesn't matter," Stefan said. "I'm feeling much better than I was, and I'm getting warmer all the time."

Mary regarded the mess on the floor, then looked around the room, taking in its ransacked state. "All right," she demanded, turning around with hands on hips. "What's been going on here?"

Stefan didn't even blink. "Nothing much. Mrs. Flowers is just a terrible housekeeper," he said, looking her straight in the eye.

Elena wanted to laugh, and she saw that Mary did, too. The older girl grimaced and crossed her arms over her chest instead. "I suppose it's useless to hope for a straight answer," she said. "And it's clear you're not dangerously ill. I can't *make* you go to the clinic. But I'd strongly suggest you get a checkup tomorrow."

"Thank you," said Stefan, which, Elena noticed, was not the same as agreeing.

"Elena, *you* look as if you could use a doctor," said Bonnie. "You're white as a ghost."

"I'm just tired," Elena said. "It's been a long day."

"My advice is to go home and go to bed— and stay there," Mary said. "You're not anemic, are you?"

Elena resisted the impulse to put a hand to her cheek. Was she so pale? "No, I'm just tired," she repeated. "We can go home now, if Stefan's all right."

He nodded reassuringly, the message in his eyes for her alone. "Give us a minute, will you?" he said to Mary and the others, and they stepped back to the staircase.

"Good-bye. Take care of yourself," Elena said aloud as she hugged him. She whispered, "Why didn't you use your Powers on Mary?"

"I did," he said grimly in her ear. "Or at least I tried. I must still be weak. Don't worry; it'll pass."

"Of course, it will," said Elena, but her stomach lurched. "Are you sure you should be alone, though? What if—"

"I'll be fine. You're the one who shouldn't be alone." Stefan's voice was soft but urgent. "Elena, I didn't get a chance to warn you. You were right about Damon being in Fell's Church."

"I know. He did this to you, didn't he?" Elena didn't mention that she'd gone searching for him.

"I—don't remember. But he's dangerous. Keep Bonnie and Meredith with you tonight, Elena. I don't want you alone. And make sure no one invites a stranger into your house."

"We're going straight to bed," Elena promised, smiling at him. "We won't be inviting anybody in."

"Make sure of it." There was no flippancy in his tone at all, and she nodded slowly.

"I understand, Stefan. We'll be careful."

"Good." They kissed, a mere brushing of lips, but their joined hands separated only reluctantly. "Tell the others 'thank you'," he said.

"I will."

The five of them regrouped outside the boarding house, Matt offering to drive Mary home so Bonnie and Meredith could go back with Elena. Mary was still clearly suspicious about the night's goings-on, and Elena couldn't blame her. She also couldn't think. She was too tired.

"He said to say 'thanks' to all of you," she remembered after Matt had left.

"He's... welcome," Bonnie said, splitting the words with an enormous yawn as Meredith opened the car door for her.

Meredith said nothing. She had been very quiet since leaving Elena alone with Stefan.

Bonnie laughed suddenly. "One thing we all forgot about," she said. "The prophecy."

"What prophecy?" said Elena.

"About the bridge. The one you say I said. Well, you went to the bridge and Death wasn't waiting there after all. Maybe you misunderstood the words."

"No," said Meredith. "We heard the words correctly all right."

"Well, then, maybe it's another bridge. Or... mmm..." Bonnie snuggled down in her coat, shutting her eyes, and didn't bother to finish.

But Elena's mind completed the sentence for her. *Or another time.*

An owl hooted outside as Meredith started the car.

Five

November 2, Saturday

Dear Diary,

This morning I woke up and felt so strange. I don't know how to describe it. On the one hand, I was so weak that when I tried to stand up my muscles wouldn't support me. But on the other hand I felt... pleasant. So comfortable, so relaxed. As if I were floating on a bed of golden light. I didn't care if I never moved again.

Then I remembered Stefan, and I tried to get up, but Aunt Judith put me back to bed. She said Bonnie and Meredith had left hours ago, and that I'd been so fast asleep they couldn't wake me. She said what I needed was rest.

So here I am. Aunt Judith brought the TV in, but I don't care about watching it. I'd rather lie here and write, or just lie here.

I'm expecting Stefan to call. He told me he would. Or maybe he didn't. I can't remember. When he does call I have to

November 3, Sunday (10:30 p.m.)

I've just read over yesterday's entry and I'm shocked. What was wrong with me? I broke off in the middle of a sentence, and now I don't even know what I was going to say. And I didn't explain about my new diary or anything. I must have been completely spaced out.

Anyway, this is the official start of my new diary. I bought this blank book at the drugstore. It's not as beautiful as the other one, but it will have to do. I've given up hope of ever seeing my old one again. Whoever stole it isn't going to bring it back. But when I think of them reading it, all my inner thoughts and my feelings about Stefan, I want to kill them. While simultaneously dying of humiliation myself.

I'm not ashamed of the way I feel about Stefan. But it's private. And there are things in there, about the way it is when we kiss, when he holds me, that I know he wouldn't want anybody else to read.

Of course, it hasn't got anything about his secret in it. I hadn't found that out yet. It wasn't until I did that I really understood him, and we got together, really together, at last. Now we're part of each other. I feel as if I've been waiting for him all my life.

Maybe you think I'm terrible for loving him, considering what he is. He can be violent, and I know there are some things in his past that he's ashamed of. But he could never be violent toward me, and the past is over. He has so much guilt and he hurts so much inside. I want to heal him.

I don't know what will happen now; I'm just so glad that he's safe. I went to the boarding house today and found out that the police had been there yesterday. Stefan was still weak and couldn't use his Powers to get rid of them, but they didn't accuse him of anything. They just asked questions. Stefan says they acted

friendly, which makes me suspicious. What all the questions really boil down to is: where were you on the night the old man was attacked under the bridge, and the night Vickie Bennett was attacked in the ruined church, and the night Mr. Tanner was killed at school?

They don't have any evidence against him. So the crimes started right after he came to Fell's Church, so what? That's not proof of anything. So he argued with Mr. Tanner that night. Again, so what? Everybody argued with Mr. Tanner. So he disappeared after Mr. Tanner's body was found. He's back now, and it's pretty clear that he was attacked himself, by the same person who committed the other crimes. Mary told the police about the condition he was in. And if they ever ask us, Matt and Bonnie and Meredith and I can all testify how we found him. There's no case against him at all.

Stefan and I talked about that, and about other things. It was so good to be with him again, even if he did look white and tired. He still doesn't remember how Thursday night ended, but most of it is just as I suspected. Stefan went to find Damon Thursday night after he took me home. They argued. Stefan ended up half-dead in a well. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what happened in between.

I still haven't told him that I went looking for Damon in the graveyard Friday morning. I suppose I'd better do it tomorrow. I know he's going to be upset, especially when he hears what Damon said to me.

Well, that's all. I'm tired. This diary is going to be well-hidden, for obvious reasons.

Elena paused and looked at the last line on the page. Then she added:

P.S. I wonder who our new European history teacher will be?

She tucked the diary under her mattress and turned out the light.

Elena walked down the hallway in a curious vacuum. At school she was usually peppered with greetings from all sides; it was "hi, Elena," after "hi, Elena," wherever she went. But today eyes slid away furtively as she approached, or people suddenly became very busy doing something that required them to keep their backs to her. It had been happening all day long.

She paused in the doorway of the European history classroom. There were several students already sitting down, and at the chalkboard was a stranger.

He looked almost like a student himself. He had sandy hair, worn a little long, and the build of an athlete. Across the board he had written "Alaric K. Saltzman." As he turned around, Elena saw that he also had a boyish smile.

He went on smiling as Elena sat down and other students filed in. Stefan was

"And just what *is* happening?"

"Well, let's just say that going out with a murderer can put a cramp in your social life."

Elena's chest tightened as if Caroline had hit her. For a moment, the desire to hit Caroline back was almost irresistible. Then, with the blood pounding in her ears, she said through clenched teeth, "That isn't true. Stefan hasn't done anything. The police questioned him, and he was cleared."

Caroline shrugged. Her smile now was patronizing. "Elena, I've known you since kindergarten," she said, "so I'll give you some advice for old times' sake: drop Stefan. If you do it right now you might just avoid being a complete social leper. Otherwise you might as well buy yourself a little bell to ring in the street."

Rage held Elena hostage as Caroline turned and walked away, her auburn hair moving like liquid under the lights. Then Elena found her tongue.

"Caroline." The other girl turned back. "Are you going to go to that party at the Ramsey house tonight?"

"I suppose so. Why?"

"Because I'll be there. With Stefan. See you in the jungle." This time Elena was the one to turn away.

The dignity of her exit was slightly marred when she saw a slim, shadowed figure at the far end of the hallway. Her step faltered for an instant, but as she drew closer she recognized Stefan.

She knew the smile she gave him looked forced, and he glanced back toward the lockers as they walked side by side out of the school.

"So football practice was canceled?" she said.

He nodded. "What was that all about?" he said quietly.

"Nothing. I asked Caroline if she was going to the party tonight." Elena tilted back her head to look at the gray and dismal sky.

"And that's what you were talking about?"

She remembered what he had told her in his room. He could see better than a human, and hear better, too. Well enough to catch words spoken down forty feet of corridor?

"Yes," she said defiantly, still inspecting the clouds.

"And that's what made you so angry?"

"Yes," she said again, in the same tone.

She could feel his eyes on her. "Elena, that's not true."

"Well, if you can read my mind, you don't need to ask me questions, do you?"

They were facing each other now. Stefan was tense, his mouth set in a grim line. "You know I wouldn't do that. But I thought you were the one who was so big on

honesty in relationships."

"All right. Caroline was being her usual bitchy self and shooting her mouth off about the murder. So what? Why do you care?"

"Because," said Stefan simply, brutally, "she might be right. Not about the murder but about you. About you and me. I should have realized this would happen. It's not just her, is it? I've been sensing hostility and fear all day, but I was too tired to try and analyze it. They think I'm the killer and they're taking it out on you."

"What they think doesn't matter! They're wrong, and they'll realize that eventually. Then everything will be the way it was again."

A wistful smile tugged at the corner of Stefan's mouth. "You really believe that, don't you?" He looked away, and his face hardened. "And what if they don't? What if it only gets worse?"

"What are you saying?"

"It might be better..." Stefan took a deep breath and continued, carefully. "It might be better if we didn't see each other for a while. If they think we're not together, they'll leave you alone."

She stared at him. "And you think you could do that? Not see me or talk to me for however long?"

"If it's necessary—yes. We could pretend we've broken up." His jaw was set.

Elena stared another moment. Then she circled him and moved in closer, so close that they were almost touching. He had to look down at her, his eyes only a few inches from her own.

"There is," she said, "only one way I'm going to announce to the rest of the school that we've broken up. And that's if you tell me that you don't love me and you don't want to see me. Tell me that, Stefan, right now. Tell me that you don't want to be with me any more."

He'd stopped breathing. He stared down at her, those green eyes striated like a cat's in shades of emerald and malachite and holly green.

"Say it," she told him. "Tell me how you can get along without me, Stefan. Tell me—"

She never got to finish the sentence. It was cut off as his mouth descended on hers.

Six

Stefan sat in the Gilbert living room, agreeing politely with whatever it was Aunt Judith was saying. The older woman was uncomfortable having him here; you didn't need to be a mind reader to know that. But she was trying, and so Stefan was trying, too. He wanted Elena to be happy.

Elena. Even when he wasn't looking at her, he was aware of her more than of anything else in the room. Her living presence beat against his skin like sunlight against closed eyelids. When he actually let himself turn to face her, it was a sweet shock to all his senses.

He loved her so much. He never saw her as Katherine any more; he had almost forgotten how much she looked like the dead girl. In any case, there were so many differences. Elena had the same pale gold hair and creamy skin, the same delicate features as Katherine, but there the resemblance ended. Her eyes, looking violet in the firelight just now but normally a blue as dark as lapis lazuli, were neither timid nor childlike as Katherine's had been. On the contrary, they were windows to her soul, which shone like an eager flame behind them. Elena was Elena, and her image had replaced Katherine's gentle ghost in his heart.

But her very strength made their love dangerous. He hadn't been able to resist her last week when she'd offered him her blood. Granted, he might have died without it, but it had been far too soon for Elena's own safety. For the hundredth time, his eyes moved over Elena's face, searching for the telltale signs of change. Was that creamy skin a little paler? Was her expression slightly more remote?

They would have to be careful from now on. He would have to be more careful. Make sure to feed often, satisfy himself with animals, so he wouldn't be tempted. Never let the need get too strong. Now that he thought of it, he was hungry right now. The dry ache, the burning, was spreading along his upper jaw, whispering through his veins and capillaries. He should be out in the woods—senses alert to catch the slightest crackle of dry twigs, muscles ready for the chase—not here by a fire watching the tracery of pale blue veins in Elena's throat.

That slim throat turned as Elena looked at him.

"Do you want to go to that party tonight? We can take Aunt Judith's car," she said.

"But you ought to stay for dinner first," said Aunt Judith quickly.

"We can pick up something on the way." Elena meant they could pick up something for her, Stefan thought. He himself could chew and swallow ordinary food if he had to, though it did him no good, and he had long since lost any taste for it. No, his... appetites... were more particular now, he thought. And if they went to this party, it would mean hours more before he could feed. But he nodded agreement to Elena.

"If you want to," he said.

She did want to; she was set on it. He'd seen that from the beginning. "All right then, I'd better change."

He followed her to the base of the stairway. "Wear something with a high neck. A sweater," he told her in a voice too low to carry.

She glanced through the doorway, to the empty living room, and said, "It's all right. They're almost healed already. See?" She tugged her lacy collar down, twisting her head to one side.

Stefan stared, mesmerized, at the two round marks on the fine-grained skin. They were a very light, translucent burgundy color, like much-watered wine. He set his teeth and forced his eyes away. Looking much longer at that would drive him crazy.

"That wasn't what I meant," he said brusquely.

The shining veil of her hair fell over the marks again, hiding them. "Oh."

"Come in!"

As they did, walking into the room, conversations stopped. Elena looked at the faces turned toward them, at the curious, furtive eyes and the wary expressions. Not the kind of looks she was used to getting when she made an entrance.

It was another student who'd opened the door for them; Alaric Saltzman was nowhere in sight. But Caroline was, seated on a bar stool, which showed off her legs to their best advantage. She gave Elena a mocking look and then made some remark to a boy on her right. He laughed.

Elena could feel her smile start to go painful, while a flush crept up toward her face. Then a familiar voice came to her.

"Elena, Stefan! Over here."

Gratefully, she spotted Bonnie sitting with Meredith and Ed Goff on a loveseat in the corner. She and Stefan settled on a large ottoman opposite them, and she heard conversations start to pick up again around the room.

By tacit agreement, no one mentioned the awkwardness of Elena and Stefan's arrival. Elena was determined to pretend that everything was as usual.

And Bonnie and Meredith were backing her. "You look great," said Bonnie warmly. "I just love that red sweater."

"She does look nice. Doesn't she, Ed?" said Meredith, and Ed, looking vaguely startled, agreed.

"So your class was invited to this, too," Elena said to Meredith. "I thought maybe it was just seventh period."

"I don't know if *invited* is the word," replied Meredith dryly. "Considering that participation is half our grade."

"Do you think he was serious about that? He couldn't be serious," put in Ed.

"Your incredible sensitivity has me ready to throw up," said Meredith in a strangled voice. "Could we possibly talk about something else?"

"You weren't the one with blood all over you," Bonnie began, but Stefan interrupted her.

"Have the investigators come to any conclusions from what they've learned? Are they any closer to finding the killer?"

"I don't know," said Bonnie, and then she brightened. "That's right, Elena, you said you knew—"

"Shut up, Bonnie," said Elena desperately. If there ever were a place *not* to discuss this, it was in a crowded room surrounded by people who hated Stefan. Bonnie's eyes widened, and then she nodded, subsiding.

Elena could not relax, though. Stefan hadn't killed Mr. Tanner, and yet the same evidence that would lead to Damon could as easily lead to him. And *would* lead to him, because no one but she and Stefan knew of Damon's existence. He was out there, somewhere, in the shadows. Waiting for his next victim. Maybe waiting for Stefan—or for her.

"I'm hot," she said abruptly. "I think I'll go see what kinds of refreshments *Alaric* has provided."

Stefan started to rise, but Elena waved him back down. He wouldn't have any use for potato chips and punch. And she wanted to be alone for a few minutes, to be moving instead of sitting, to calm herself.

Being with Meredith and Bonnie had given her a false sense of security. Leaving them, she was once again confronted by sidelong glances and suddenly turned backs. This time it made her angry. She moved through the crowd with deliberate insolence, holding any eye she accidentally caught. I'm already notorious, she thought. I might as well be brazen, too.

She was hungry. In the Ramsey dining room someone had set up an assortment of finger foods that looked surprisingly good. Elena took a paper plate and dropped a few carrot sticks on it, ignoring the people around the bleached oak table. She wasn't going to speak to them unless they spoke first. She gave her full attention to the refreshments, leaning past people to select cheese wedges and Ritz crackers, reaching in front of them to pluck grapes, ostentatiously looking up and down the whole array to see if there was anything she'd missed.

She'd succeeded in riveting everyone's attention, something she knew without raising her eyes. She bit delicately down on a bread stick, holding it between her teeth like a pencil, and turned from the table.

"Mind if I have a bite?"

Shock snapped her eyes wide open and froze her breath. Her mind jammed, refusing to acknowledge what was going on, and leaving her helpless, vulnerable, in the face of it. But though rational thought had disappeared, her senses went right on recording mercilessly: dark eyes dominating her field of vision, a whiff of some kind

tucked inside his arm. By sheer force of will, she managed not to look over her shoulder as they walked away, but the skin on her back tingled and crawled as if expecting the stab of a knife.

Instead, she heard Damon's low ironical voice: "And have you heard that kissing a red-haired girl cures fever blisters?" And then Bonnie's outrageous, flattered laughter.

On the way out, they finally ran into their host.

"Leaving so soon?" Alaric said. "But I haven't even had a chance to talk to you yet."

He looked both eager and reproachful, like a dog that knows perfectly well it's not going to be taken on a walk but wags anyway. Elena felt worry blossom in her stomach for him and everyone else in the house. She and Stefan were leaving them to Damon.

She'd just have to hope her earlier assessment was right and he wanted to continue the masquerade. Right now she had enough to do getting Stefan out of here before he changed his mind.

"I'm not feeling very well," she said as she picked up her purse where it lay by the ottoman. "Sorry." She increased the pressure on Stefan's arm. It would take very little to get him to turn back and head for the dining room right now.

"I'm sorry," said Alaric. "Good-bye."

They were on the threshold before she saw the little slip of violet paper stuck into the side pocket of her purse. She pulled it out and unfolded it almost by reflex, her mind on other things.

There was writing on it, plain and bold and unfamiliar. Just three lines. She read them and felt the world rock. This was too much; she couldn't deal with anything more.

"What is it?" said Stefan.

"Nothing." She thrust the bit of paper back into the side pocket, pushing it down with her fingers. "It's nothing, Stefan. Let's get outside."

They stepped out into driving needles of rain.

the locked door, trying to breathe.

The last thing she wanted to do was look in a mirror. But at last, slowly, she approached the one over the sink, trembling as she saw the edge of her reflection, moving inch by inch until she was framed in the silvery surface.

Her image stared back, ghastly pale, with eyes that looked bruised and frightened. There were deep shadows under them and smears of blood on her face.

Slowly, she turned her head slightly and lifted up her hair. She almost cried out loud when she saw what was underneath.

Two little wounds, fresh and open on the skin of her neck.

Damon's fault, again. Everything was Damon's fault, except the diary. She had no one to blame for that but herself. If only she hadn't written about Stefan, if only she hadn't brought the diary to school. If only she hadn't left it in Bonnie's living room. If only, if only.

Right now all that mattered was that she had to get it back.

then saw lights spring to life under the closed door, cutting off her escape.

She was trapped. At any moment Caroline's parents might come in. She saw the french windows leading to a balcony and made her decision in that same instant.

Outside, the air was cool, and her panting breath showed faintly. Yellow light burst forth from the room beside her, and she huddled even farther to the left, keeping out of its path. Then, the sound she had been dreading came with terrible clarity: the snick of a door handle, followed by a billowing of curtains inward as the french windows opened.

She looked around frantically. It was too far to jump to the ground, and there was nothing to grab hold of to climb down. That left only the roof, but there was nothing to climb up, either. Still, some instinct made her try, and she was on the balcony railing and groping for a handhold above even as a shadow appeared on the filmy curtains. A hand parted them, a figure began to emerge, and then Elena felt something clasping her own hand, locking on her wrist and hauling her upwards. Automatically, she boosted with her feet and felt herself scrambling onto the shingled roof. Trying to calm her ragged breath, she looked over gratefully to see who her rescuer was—and froze.

Eleven

"The name *is* Salvatore. As in savior," he said. There was a brief flash of white teeth in the darkness.

Elena looked down. The overhang of the roof obscured the balcony, but she could hear shuffling sounds down there. But they were not the sounds of pursuit, and there was no sign that her companion's words had been overheard. A minute later, she heard the french windows close.

"I thought it was Smith," she said, still looking down into the darkness.

Damon laughed. It was a terribly engaging laugh, without the bitter edge of Stefan's. It made her think of the rainbow lights on the crow's feathers.

Nevertheless, she was not fooled. Charming as he seemed, Damon was dangerous almost beyond imagination. That graceful, lounging body was ten times stronger than a human's. Those lazy dark eyes were adapted to seeing perfectly at night. The long-fingered hand that had pulled her up to the roof could move with impossible quickness. And, most disturbing of all, his mind was the mind of a killer. A predator.

She could feel it just beneath his surface. He was *different* from a human. He had lived so long by hunting and killing that he'd forgotten any other way. And he enjoyed it, not fighting his nature as Stefan did, but glorying in it. He had no morals and no conscience, and she was trapped here with him in the middle of the night.

She settled back on one heel, ready to jump into action at any minute. She ought to be angry with him now, after what he'd done to her in the dream. She was, but there was no point in expressing it. He knew how furious she must be, and he would only laugh at her if she told him.

She watched him quietly, intently, waiting for his next move.

But he didn't move. Those hands that could dart as quickly as striking snakes rested motionlessly on his knees. His expression reminded her of the way he'd looked at her once before. The first time they'd met she'd seen the same guarded, reluctant respect in his eyes—except that then there had also been surprise in them. Now there was none.

"You're not going to scream at me? Or faint?" he said, as if offering her the standard options.

Elena was still watching him. He was much stronger than she was, and faster, but if she needed to she thought she could get to the edge of the roof before he reached her. It was a thirty foot drop if she missed the balcony, but she might decide to risk it. It all depended on Damon.

"I don't faint," she said shortly. "And why should I scream at you? We were playing a game. I was stupid that night and so I lost. You warned me in the graveyard about the consequences."

"That isn't fair," he said, his eyes tortured. "You know it isn't, Elena. You know how much—" He turned away from her again, his hands clenched into fists.

"Then why not? Stefan, I need..." She couldn't finish. She couldn't explain to him what she needed; it was a need for connection to him, for closeness. She needed to remember what it was like with him, to wipe out the memory of dancing in her dream and of Damon's arms locked around her. "I need us to be together again," she whispered.

Stefan was still turned away, and he shook his head.

"All right," Elena whispered, but she felt a wash of grief and fear as defeat seeped into her bones. Most of the fear was for Stefan, who was vulnerable without his Powers, vulnerable enough that he might be hurt by the ordinary citizens of Fell's Church. But some of it was for herself.

Margaret to him.

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. She saw Damon's hand on the doorknob; she saw those merciless eyes. She was walking through the doorway, leaving behind the only safe place she knew.

Death was in the house, Bonnie had said. And now Elena had gone to meet Death of her own free will. She bowed her head to conceal the helpless tears that came to her eyes. It was over. Damon had won.

She did not look up to see him advance on her. But she felt the air stir around her, making her shiver. And then she was enfolded in soft, endless blackness, which wrapped around her like a great bird's wings.

Dear Diary,

It's late but I couldn't sleep. I don't seem to need as much sleep as I used to.

Well, tomorrow's the day.

We talked to Bonnie and Meredith tonight. Stefan's plan is simplicity itself. The thing is, no matter where Caroline has hidden the diary, she has to bring it out tomorrow to take it with her. But our readings are the last thing on the agenda, and she has to be in the parade and everything first. She'll have to stash the diary somewhere during that time. So if we watch her from the minute she leaves her house until she gets up on stage, we should be able to see where she puts it down. And since she doesn't even know we're suspicious, she won't be on guard.

That's when we get it.

The reason the plan will work is because everyone in the program will be in period dress. Mrs. Grimesby, the librarian, will help us put on our 19th century clothes before the parade, and we can't be wearing or carrying anything that's not part of the costume. No purses, no backpacks. No diaries! Caroline will have to leave it behind at some point.

We're taking turns watching her. Bonnie is going to wait outside her house and see what Caroline's carrying when she leaves. I'll watch her when she gets dressed at Mrs. Grimesby's house. Then, while the parade is going on, Stefan and Meredith will break into the house—or the Forbes' car, if that's where it is—and do their stuff.

I don't see how it can fail. And I can't tell you how much better I feel. It's so good just to be able to share this problem with Stefan. I've learned my lesson; I'll never keep things from him again.

I'm wearing my ring tomorrow. If Mrs. Grimesby asks me about it, I'll tell her it's even older than 19th century, it's from Renaissance Italy. I'd like to see her face when I say that.

I'd better try to get some sleep now. I hope I don't dream.

another. She blinked dizzily, stepping back, letting out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"And so you got to hear Elena read," Aunt Judith continued happily. "You did a beautiful job, Elena, but I don't know what was going on with Caroline. The girls in this town are all acting bewitched lately."

"Nerves," suggested Damon, his face carefully solemn. Elena felt an urge to giggle and then a wave of irritation. It was all very well to be grateful to Damon for saving them, but if not for Damon there wouldn't have been a problem in the first place. Damon had committed the crimes Caroline wanted to pin on Stefan.

"And where *is* Stefan?" she said, voicing her next thought aloud. She could see Bonnie and Meredith in the courtyard alone.

Aunt Judith's face showed her disapproval. "I haven't seen him," she said briefly. Then she smiled fondly. "But I have an idea; why don't you come to dinner with us, Damon? Then afterwards perhaps you and Elena could—"

"Stop it!" said Elena to Damon. He looked politely inquiring.

"What?" said Aunt Judith.

"Stop it!" Elena said to Damon again. "You know what. Just stop it right now!"

Fifteen

"Elena, you're being rude!" Aunt Judith seldom got angry but she was angry now. "You're too old for this kind of behavior."

"It's not rudeness! You don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly. You're acting just the way you did when Damon came to dinner. Don't you think a guest deserves a little more consideration?"

Frustration flooded over Elena. "You don't even know what you're talking about," she said. This was too much. To hear Damon's words coming from Aunt Judith's lips... it was unbearable.

"Elena!" A mottled flush was creeping up Aunt Judith's cheeks. "I'm *shocked* at you! And I *have* to say that this childish behavior only started since you've been going out with that boy."

"Oh, 'that boy'." Elena glared at Damon.

"Yes, that boy!" Aunt Judith answered. "Ever since you lost your head over him you've been a different person. Irresponsible, secretive—and defiant! He's been a bad influence from the start, and I won't tolerate it any more."

"Oh, really?" Elena felt as if she were talking to Damon and Aunt Judith at once, and she looked back and forth between the two of them. All the emotions she'd been suppressing for the last days—for the last weeks, for the months since Stefan had come into her life—were surging forward. It was like a great tidal wave inside her, over which she had no control.

She realized she was shaking. "Well, that's too bad because you're going to have to tolerate it. I am *never* going to give Stefan up, not for anyone. Certainly not for *you!*" This last was meant for Damon, but Aunt Judith gasped.

"That's enough!" Robert snapped. He'd appeared with Margaret, and his face was dark. "Young lady, if this is how that boy encourages you to speak to your aunt—"

"He's not 'that boy'!" Elena took another step back, so she could face all of them. She was making a spectacle of herself, everyone in the courtyard was looking. But she didn't care. She had been keeping a lid on her feelings for so long, shoving down all the anxiety and the fear and the anger where it wouldn't be seen. All the worry about Stefan, all the terror over Damon, all the shame and humiliation she'd suffered at school, she'd buried it deep. But now it was coming back. All of it, all at once, in a maelstrom of impossible violence. Her heart was pounding crazily; her ears rang. She felt that nothing mattered except to hurt the people who stood in front of her, to show them all.

"He's not 'that boy'," she said again, her voice deadly cold. "He's Stefan and he's all I care about. And I happen to be engaged to him."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" Robert thundered. It was the last straw.

"Is this ridiculous?" She held up her hand, the ring toward them. "We're going to get married!"

"You are *not* going to get married," Robert began. Everyone was furious. Damon grabbed her hand and stared at the ring, then turned abruptly and strode away, every step full of barely leashed savagery. Robert was spluttering on in exasperation. Aunt Judith was fuming.

"Elena, I absolutely forbid you—"

"You're *not my mother!*" Elena cried. Tears were trying to force themselves out of her eyes. She needed to get away, to be alone, to be with someone who loved her. "If Stefan asks, tell him I'll be at the boarding house!" she added, and broke away through the crowd.

She half expected Bonnie or Meredith to follow her, but she was glad they didn't. The parking lot was full of cars but almost empty of people. Most of the families were staying for the afternoon activities. But a battered Ford sedan was parked nearby, and a familiar figure was unlocking the door.

"Matt! Are you leaving?" She made her decision instantly. It was too cold to walk all the way to the boarding house.

"Huh? No, I've got to help Coach Lyman take the tables down. I was just putting this away." He tossed the Outstanding Athlete placard into the front seat. "Hey, are you okay?" His eyes widened at the sight of her face.

"Yes—no. I will be if I can get out of here. Look, can I take your car? Just for a little while?"

"Well... sure, but... I know, why don't you let me drive you? I'll go tell Coach Lyman."

"No! I just want to be alone... Oh, please don't ask any questions." She almost snatched the keys out of his hand. "I'll bring it back soon, I promise. Or Stefan will. If you see Stefan, tell him I'm at the boarding house. And thanks." She slammed the door on his protests and revved the engine, pulling out with a clash of gears because she wasn't used to a stick shift. She left him standing there staring after her.

She drove without really seeing or hearing anything outside, crying, locked in her own spinning tornado of emotions. She and Stefan would run away... They would elope... They would show everyone. She would never set foot in Fell's Church again.

And then Aunt Judith would be sorry. Then Robert would see how wrong he'd been. But Elena would never forgive them. Never.

As for Elena herself, she didn't need anybody. She certainly didn't need stupid old Robert E. Lee, where you could go from being mega-popular to being a social pariah in one day just for loving the wrong person. She didn't need any family, or any friends, either...

Slowing down to cruise up the winding driveway of the boarding house, Elena felt

her thoughts slow down, too.

Well... she wasn't mad at all her friends. Bonnie and Meredith hadn't done anything. Or Matt. Matt was all right. In fact, she might not need him but his car had come in pretty handy.

In spite of herself Elena felt a strangled giggle well up in her throat. Poor Matt. People always borrowing his clunking dinosaur of a car. He must think she and Stefan were nuts.

The giggle let loose a few more tears and she sat and wiped them off, shaking her head. Oh, God, how did things turn out this way? What a day. She should be having a victory celebration because they'd beaten Caroline, and instead she was crying alone in Matt's car.

Caroline *had* looked pretty damn funny, though. Elena's body shook gently with slightly hysterical chuckles. Oh, the look on her face. Somebody better have a video of that.

At last the sobs and giggles both abated and Elena felt a wash of tiredness. She leaned against the steering wheel trying not to think of anything for a while, and then she got out of the car.

She'd go and wait for Stefan, and then they'd both go back and deal with the mess she'd made. It would take a lot of cleaning up, she thought wearily. Poor Aunt Judith. Elena had yelled at her in front of half the town.

Why had she let herself get so upset? But her emotions were still close to the surface, as she found when the boarding house door was locked and no one answered the bell.

Oh, wonderful she thought, her eyes stinging again. Mrs. Flowers had gone off to the Founders' Day celebration, too. And now Elena had the choice of sitting in the car or standing out here in this windstorm...

It was the first time she'd noticed the weather, but when she did she looked around in alarm. The day had started out cloudy and chilly, but now there was a mist flowing along the ground, as if breathed out from the surrounding fields. The clouds were not just swirling, they were seething. And the wind was getting stronger.

It moaned through the branches of the oak trees, tearing off the remaining leaves and sending them down in showers. The sound was rising steadily now, not just a moan but a howl.

And there was something else. Something that came not just from the wind, but from the air itself, or the space around the air. A feeling of pressure, of menace, of some unimaginable force. It was gathering power, drawing nearer, closing in.

Elena spun to face the oak trees.

There was a stand of them behind the house, and more beyond, blending into the forest. And beyond that were the river and the graveyard.

Something... was out there. Something... very bad...

"No," whispered Elena. She couldn't see it, but she could feel it, like some great shape rearing up to stand over her, blotting out the sky. She *felt* the evil, the hatred, the animal fury.

Bloodlust. Stefan had used the word, but she hadn't understood it. Now she felt this bloodlust... focused on her.

"No!"

Higher and higher, it was towering over her. She could still see nothing, but it was as if great wings unfolded, stretching to touch the horizon on either side. Something with a Power beyond comprehension... and it wanted to *kill*...

"No!" She ran for the car just as it stooped and dived for her. Her hands scrabbled at the door handle, and she fumbled frantically with the keys. The wind was screaming, shrieking, tearing at her hair. Gritty ice sprayed into her eyes, blinding her, but then the key turned and she jerked the door open.

Safe! She slammed the door shut again and brought her fist down on the lock. Then she flung herself across the seat to check the locks on the other side.

The wind roared with a thousand voices outside. The car began rocking.

"Stop it! Damon, stop it!" Her thin cry was lost in the cacophony. She put her hands out on the dashboard as if to balance the car and it rocked harder, ice pelting against it.

Then she saw something. The rear window was clouding up, but she could discern the shape through it. It looked like some great bird made of mist or snow, but the outlines were hazy. All she was sure of was that it had huge sweeping wings ... and that it was coming for her.

Get the key in the ignition. Get it in! Now go! Her mind was rapping orders at her. The ancient Ford wheezed and the tires screamed louder than the wind as she took off. And the shape behind her followed, getting larger and larger in the rearview mirror.

Get to town, get to Stefan! Go! Go! But as she squealed onto Old Creek Road, turning left, the wheels locking, a bolt of lightning split the sky.

If she hadn't been skidding and braking already, the tree would have crashed down on her. As it was, the violent impact shook the car like an earthquake missing the front right fender by inches. The tree was a mass of heaving, pitching branches, its trunk blocking the way back to town completely.

She was trapped. Her only route home cut off. She was alone, there was no escape from this terrible Power...

Power. That was it; that was the key. "The stronger your Powers are, the more the rules of the dark bind you."

Running water!

Throwing the car into reverse, she brought it around and then slammed into forward. The white shape banked and swooped, missing her as narrowly as the tree

had, and then she was speeding down Old Creek Road into the worst of the storm.

It was still after her. Only one thought pounded in Elena's brain now. She had to cross running water, to leave this thing behind.

There were more cracks of lightning, and she glimpsed other trees falling, but she swerved around them. It couldn't be far now. She could see the river flickering past on her left side through the driving ice storm. Then she saw the bridge.

It was there; she'd made it! A gust threw sleet across the windshield, but with the wipers' next stroke she saw it fleetingly again. This was it, the turn should be about *here*.

The car lurched and skidded onto the wooden structure. Elena felt the wheels grip at slick planks and then felt them lock. Desperately, she tried to turn with the skid, but she couldn't see and there was no room...

And then she was crashing through the guardrail, the rotted wood of the footbridge giving way under weight it could no longer support. There was a sickening feeling of spinning, dropping, and the car hit the water.

Elena heard screams, but they didn't seem to be connected with her. The river welled up around her and everything was noise and confusion and pain. A window shattered as it was struck by debris, and then another. Dark water gushed across her, along with glass like ice. She was engulfed. She couldn't see; she couldn't get out.

And she couldn't breathe. She was lost in this hellish tumult, and there was no air. *She had to breathe*. She had to get out of here...

"Stefan, help me!" she screamed.

But her scream made no sound. Instead, the icy water rushed into her lungs, invading her. She thrashed against it, but it was too strong for her. Her struggles became wilder, more uncoordinated, and then they stopped.

Then everything was still.

Bonnie and Meredith were hunting around the perimeter of the school impatiently. They'd seen Stefan go this way, more or less coerced by Tyler and his new friends. They'd started to follow him, but then that business with Elena had started. And then Matt had informed them that she'd taken off. So they'd set out after Stefan again, but nobody was out here. There weren't even any buildings except one lonely Quonset hut.

"And now there's a storm coming!" Meredith said. "Listen to that wind! I think it's going to rain."

"Or snow!" Bonnie shuddered. "Where did they *go*?"

"I don't care; I just want to get under a roof. Here it comes!" Meredith gasped as the first sheet of icy rain hit her, and she and Bonnie ran for the nearest shelter—the Quonset hut.

And it was there that they found Stefan. The door was ajar, and when Bonnie looked in she recoiled.

"Tyler's goon squad!" she hissed. "Look out!"

Stefan had a semicircle of guys between him and the door. Caroline was in the corner.

"He must have it! He took it somehow; I know he did!" she was saying.

"Took what?" said Meredith, loudly. Everyone turned their way.

Caroline's face contorted as she saw them in the doorway and Tyler snarled. "Get out." he said. "You don't want to be involved in this."

Meredith ignored him. "Stefan, can I talk to you?"

"In a minute. Are you going to answer her question? Took what?" Stefan was concentrating on Tyler, totally focused.

"Sure, I'll answer her question. Right after I answer yours." Tyler's beefy hand thumped into his fist and he stepped forward. "You're going to be dog meat, Salvatore."

Several of the tough guys snickered.

Bonnie opened her mouth to say, "Let's get *out* of here." But what she actually said was, "The bridge."

It was weird enough to make everyone look at her.

"What?" said Stefan.

"The bridge," said Bonnie again, without meaning to say it. Her eyes bulged, alarmed. She could hear the voice coming from her throat, but she had no control over it. And then she felt her eyes go wider and her mouth drop open and she had her own voice back. "The bridge, oh, my God, the bridge! That's where Elena is! Stefan, we've got to save her... Oh, hurry!"

"Bonnie, are you sure?"

"Yes, oh, God... that's where she's gone. She's drowning! *Hurry!*" Waves of thick blackness broke over Bonnie. But she couldn't faint now; they had to get to Elena.

Stefan and Meredith hesitated one minute, and then Stefan was through the goon squad, brushing them aside like tissue paper. They sprinted through the field toward the parking lot, dragging Bonnie behind. Tyler started after them, but stopped when the full force of the wind hit him.

"Why would she go out in this storm?" Stefan shouted as they sprang into Meredith's car.

"She was upset; Matt said she took off in his car," Meredith gasped back in the comparative quiet of the interior. She pulled out fast and turned into the wind, speeding dangerously. "She said she was going to the boarding house."

"No, she's at the bridge! Meredith, drive faster! Oh, God, we're going to be too late!" Tears were running down Bonnie's face.

Meredith floored it. The car swayed, buffeted by wind and sleet. All through that nightmare ride Bonnie sobbed, her fingers clutching the seat in front of her.

Stefan's sharp warning kept Meredith from running into the tree. They piled out and were immediately lashed and punished by the wind.

"It's too big to move! We'll have to walk," Stefan shouted.

Of course it was too big to move, Bonnie thought, already scrambling through the branches. It was a full-grown oak tree. But once on the other side, the icy gale whipped all thought out of her head.

Within minutes she was numb, and the road seemed to go on for hours. They tried to run but the wind beat them back. They could scarcely see; if it hadn't been for Stefan, they would have gone over the riverbank. Bonnie began to weave drunkenly. She was ready to fall to the ground when she heard Stefan shouting up ahead.

Meredith's arm around her tightened, and they broke again into a stumbling run. But as they neared the bridge what they saw brought them to a halt.

"Oh, my God... Elena!" screamed Bonnie. Wickery Bridge was a mass of splintered rubble. The guardrail on one side was gone and the planking had given way as if a giant fist had smashed it. Beneath, the dark water churned over a sickening pile of debris. Part of the debris, entirely underwater except the headlights, was Matt's car.

Meredith was screaming, too, but she was screaming at Stefan. "No! You can't go down there!"

He never even glanced back. He dived from the bank, and the water closed over his head.

Later, Bonnie's memory of the next hour would be mercifully dim. She remembered waiting for Stefan while the storm raged endlessly on. She remembered that she was almost beyond caring by the time a hunched figure lurched out of the water. She remembered feeling no disappointment, only a vast and yawning grief, as she saw the limp thing Stefan laid out on the road.

And she remembered Stefan's face.

She remembered how he looked as they tried to do something for Elena. Only that wasn't really Elena lying there, that was a wax doll with Elena's features. It was nothing that had ever been alive and it certainly wasn't alive now. Bonnie thought it seemed silly to go on poking and prodding at it like this, trying to get water out of its lungs and so on. Wax dolls didn't breathe.

She remembered Stefan's face when he finally gave up. When Meredith wrestled with him and yelled at him, saying something about over an hour without air, and brain damage. The words filtered in to Bonnie, but their meaning didn't. She just

thought it odd that while Meredith and Stefan were screaming at each other they were both crying.

Stefan stopped crying after that. He just sat there holding the Elena-doll. Meredith yelled some more, but he didn't listen to her. He just sat. And Bonnie would never forget his expression.

And then something seared through Bonnie, bringing her to life, waking her to terror. She clutched at Meredith and stared around for the source. Something bad... something terrible was coming. Was almost here.

Stefan seemed to feel it, too. He was alert, stiff, like a wolf picking up a scent.

"What is it?" shouted Meredith. "What's wrong with you?"

"You've got to go!" Stefan rose, still holding the limp form in his arms. "Get out of here!"

"What do you mean? We can't leave you—

"Yes, you can! Get out of here! Bonnie, get her out!"

No one had ever told Bonnie to take care of someone else before. People were always taking care of *her*. But now she seized Meredith's arm and began pulling. Stefan was right. There was nothing they could do for Elena, and if they stayed whatever had gotten her would get them.

"Stefan!" Meredith shouted as she was unaccountably dragged away.

"I'll put her under the trees. The willows, not the oaks," he called after them.

Why would he tell us that now? Bonnie wondered in some deep part of her mind that was not taken up with fear and the storm.

The answer was simple, and her mind promptly gave it back to her. Because he wasn't going to be around to tell them later.

Sixteen

Long ago, in the dark side streets of Florence, starving, frightened, and exhausted, Stefan had made himself a vow. Several vows, in fact, about using the Powers he sensed within himself, and about how to treat the weak, blundering, but still-human creatures around him.

Now he was going to break them all.

He'd kissed Elena's cold forehead and laid her under a willow tree. He would come back here, if he could, to join her, after.

As he'd thought, the surge of Power had passed over Bonnie and Meredith and followed him, but it had receded again, and was now drawn back, waiting.

He wouldn't let it wait long.

Unencumbered by the burden of Elena's body, he broke into a predator's lope on the empty road. The freezing sleet and wind didn't bother him much. His hunter's senses pierced through them.

He turned them all to the task of locating the prey he wanted. No thinking of Elena now. Later, when this was over.

Tyler and his friends were still in the Quonset hut. Good. They never knew what was coming as the window burst into flying glass shards and the storm blew inside.

Stefan meant to kill when he seized Tyler by the neck and sank his fangs in. That had been one of his rules, not to kill, and he wanted to break it.

But another of the toughs came at him before he had quite drained Tyler of blood. The guy wasn't trying to protect his fallen leader, only to escape. It was his bad luck that his route took him across Stefan's path. Stefan flipped him to the ground and tapped the new vein eagerly.

The hot coppery taste revived him, warmed him, flowed through him like fire. It made him want more.

Power. Life. They had it; he needed it. With the glorious rush of strength that came with what he'd already drunk, he stunned them easily. Then he moved from one to another, drinking deep and throwing them away. It was like popping tops on a six-pack.

He was on the last when he saw Caroline huddling in the corner.

His mouth was dripping as he raised his head to look at her. Those green eyes, usually so narrow, showed white all around like those of a terrified horse. Her lips were pale blurs as she gabbled soundless pleas.

He pulled her to her feet by the green sashes at her waist. She was moaning, her eyes rolling up in their sockets. He wound his hand in her auburn hair to position the exposed throat where he wanted it. His head reared back to strike—and Caroline screamed and went limp.

He dropped her. He'd had enough anyway. He was bursting with blood, like an overfed tick. He had never felt so strong, so charged with elemental power.

Now it was time for Damon.

He went out of the Quonset hut the same way he'd come in. But not in human form. A hunting falcon soared out the window and wheeled into the sky.

The new shape was wonderful. Strong... and cruel. And its eyes were sharp. It took him where he wanted, skimming over the oak trees of the woods. He was looking for a particular clearing.

He found it. Wind slashed at him but he spiraled downward, with a keening scream of challenge. Damon, in human form below, threw up his hands to protect his face as the falcon dived at him.

Stefan ripped bloody strips out of his arms and heard Damon's answering scream of pain and anger.

I'm not your weak little brother any more. He sent the thought down to Damon on a stunning blast of Power. *And this time I've come for your blood.*

He felt the backwash of hatred from Damon, but the voice in his mind was mocking. *So this is the thanks I get for saving you and your betrothed?*

Stefan's wings folded and he dived again, his whole world narrowed to one objective. Killing. He went for Damon's eyes, and the stick Damon had picked up whistled past his new body. His talons tore into Damon's cheek and Damon's blood ran. Good.

You shouldn't have left me alive, he told Damon. *You should have killed both of us at once.*

I'll be glad to correct the mistake! Damon had been unprepared before, but now Stefan could feel his drawing Power, arming himself, standing ready. *But first you might tell me whom I'm supposed to have killed this time.*

The falcon's brain could not deal with the riot of emotions the taunting question called up. Screaming wordlessly, it plummeted on Damon again, but this time the heavy stick struck home. Injured, one wing hanging, the falcon dropped behind Damon's back.

Stefan changed to his own form at once, scarcely feeling the pain of his broken arm. Before Damon could turn, he grabbed him, the fingers of his good hand digging into his brother's neck and spinning him around.

When he spoke, it was almost gently.

"Elena," he said, whispered, and went for Damon's throat.

It was dark, and very cold, and someone was hurt. Someone needed help.

But she was terribly tired.

Elena's eyelids fluttered and opened and that took care of the darkness. As for the

cold... she was bone-cold, freezing, chilled to the marrow. And no wonder; there was ice all over her.

Somewhere, deep down, she knew it was more than that.

What had happened? She'd been at home, asleep—no, this was Founders' Day. She'd been in the cafeteria, on the stage.

Someone's face had looked funny.

It was too much to cope with; she couldn't think. Disembodied faces floated before her eyes, fragments of sentences sounded in her ears. She was very confused.

And so tired.

Better go back to sleep then. The ice wasn't really that bad. She started to lie down, and then the cries came to her again.

She heard them, not with her ears, but with her mind. Cries of anger and of pain. Someone was very unhappy.

She sat quite still, trying to sort it all out.

There was a quiver of movement at the edge of her vision. A squirrel. She could smell it, which was strange because she'd never smelled a squirrel before. It stared at her with one bright black eye and then it scampered up the willow tree. Elena realized she'd made a grab for it only when she came up empty with her fingernails digging into bark.

Now that was ridiculous. What on *earth* did she want a squirrel for? She puzzled over it for a minute, then lay back down, exhausted.

The cries were still going on.

She tried to cover her ears, but that did nothing to block them out. Someone was hurt, and unhappy, and fighting. That was it. There was a fight going on.

All right. She'd figured it out. Now she could sleep.

She couldn't, though. The cries beckoned to her, drew her toward them. She felt an irresistible need to follow them to their source.

And *then* she could go to sleep. After she saw... him.

Oh, yes, it was coming back now. She remembered *him*. He was the one who understood her, who loved her. He was the one she wanted to be with forever.

His face appeared out of the mists in her mind. She considered it lovingly. All right, then. For *him* she would get up and walk through this ridiculous sleet until she found the proper clearing. Until she could join him. Then they'd be together.

The very thought of him seemed to warm her. There was a fire inside him that few people could see. She saw it, though. It was like the fire inside her.

He seemed to be having some sort of trouble at the moment. At least, there was a lot of shouting. She was close enough to hear it with her ears as well as her mind

now.

There, beyond that grandfather oak tree. That was where the noise was coming from. He was there, with his black, fathomless eyes, and his secret smile. And he needed her help. She would help him.

Shaking ice crystals out of her hair, Elena stepped into the clearing in the wood.