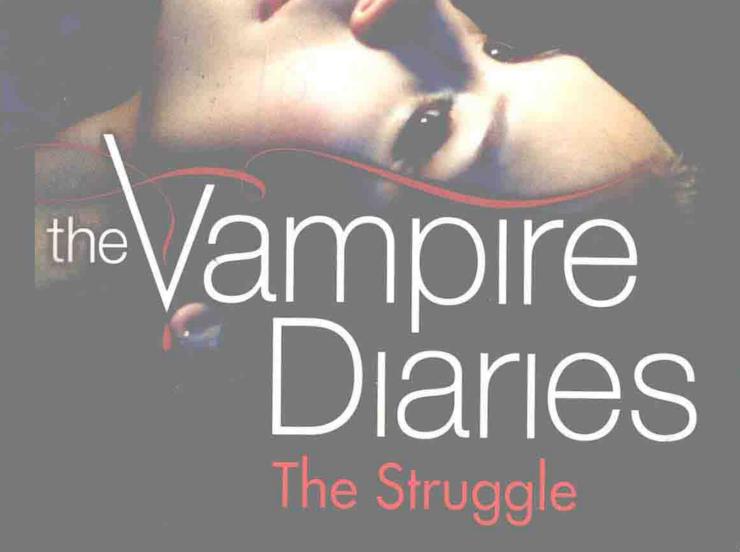
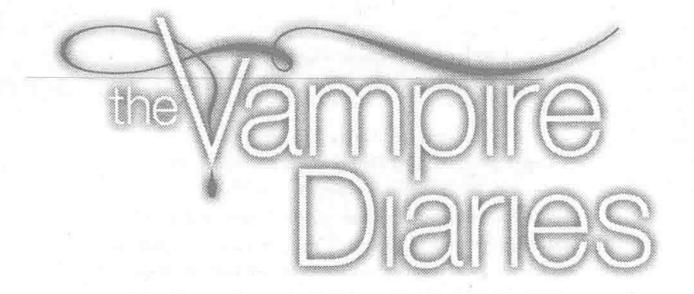
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# L. J. SMITH



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## The Struggle

Volume II

HARPER

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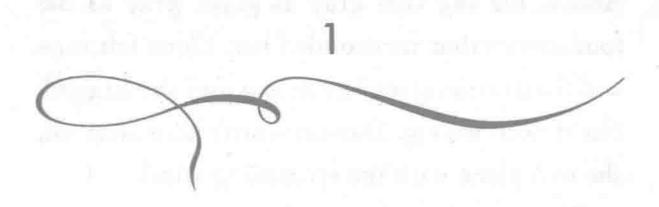
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To my dear friend and sister, Judy

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The Struggle



### "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 anymore."

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.

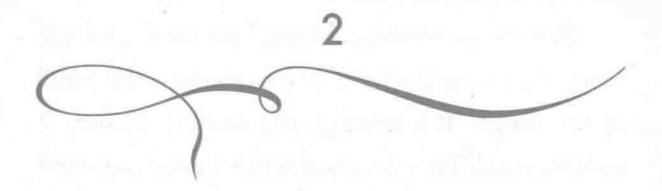
"Winter is coming, Elena," he said, and his voice was clear and chilling even over the howl of the wind. "An unforgiving season. Before it comes, you'll have learned what I can and can't do. Before winter is here, you'll have joined me. You'll be mine."

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.



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 anymore, 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