

Vampire
Diaries
THE RETURN

Also by L. J. Smith:

Vampire Diaries series

Volume 1 – *The Awakening* and *The Struggle*

Volume 2 – *The Fury* and *The Reunion*

Book 5 – *The Return: Nightfall*

Coming soon:

Book 6 – *The Return: Shadow Souls*

Book 7 – *The Return: Midnight*

Night World series

Volume 1 – *Secret Vampire, Daughters of Darkness*
and *Enchantress*

Volume 2 – *Dark Angel, The Chosen* and *Soulmate*

Volume 3 – *Huntress, Black Dawn* and *Witchlight*

Coming soon:

Book 10 – *Strange Fate*

Coming Soon:

Secret Circle series

Volume 1 – *The Initiation* and *The Captive Part I*

Volume 2 – *The Captive Part II* and *The Power*

P R E F A C E

S*te-fan?*

Elena was frustrated. She couldn't make the mind-word come out the way she wanted.

"Stefan," he coaxed, leaning on an elbow and looking at her with those eyes that always made her almost forget what she was trying to say. They shone like green spring leaves in the sunlight. "Stefan," he repeated. "Can *you* say it, lovely love?"

Elena looked back at him solemnly. He was so handsome that he broke her heart, with his pale, chiselled features and his dark hair falling carelessly across his forehead. She wanted to put into words all the feelings that were piled behind her clumsy tongue and stubborn mind. There was so much she needed to ask him . . . and to tell him. But the sounds wouldn't come yet. They tangled on her tongue. She couldn't even send it telepathically to him – it all came as fragmented images.

After all, it was only the seventh day of her new life.

Stefan told her that when she'd first woken up, first

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come back from the Other Side after her death as a vampire, she'd been able to walk and talk and do all sorts of things that she seemed to have forgotten now. He didn't know why she'd forgotten – he'd never known anyone who'd come back from death except vampires – which Elena had been, but certainly was no longer.

Stefan had also told her excitedly that she was learning like wildfire every day. New pictures, new thought-words. Even though sometimes it was easier to communicate than others, Stefan was sure she would be herself again someday soon. Then she would act like the teenager she really was. She would no longer be a young adult with a childlike mind, the way the spirits had clearly wanted her to be: growing, seeing the world with new eyes, the eyes of a child.

Elena thought that the spirits had been a little unfair. What if Stefan found someone in the meantime who could walk and talk – and write, even? Elena worried over this.

That was why, some nights ago, Stefan had woken up to find her gone from her bed. He had found her in the bathroom, poring anxiously over a newspaper, trying to make sense of the little squiggles that she knew were words she once recognised. The paper was dotted with the marks of her tears. The squiggles meant nothing to her.

“But why, love? You'll learn to read again. Why rush?”

That was before he saw the bits of pencil, broken from too hard a grip, and the carefully hoarded paper napkins. She had been using them to try to imitate the words. Maybe if she could write like other people, Stefan would stop sleeping in his chair and would hold her on the big bed. He wouldn't go looking for someone older or smarter. He would *know* she was a grown-up.

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She saw Stefan put this together slowly in his mind, and she saw the tears come to his eyes. He had been brought up to think he was never allowed to cry no matter what happened. But he had turned his back on her and breathed slowly and deeply for what seemed like a very long time.

And then he had picked her up, taken her to the bed in his room, and looked into her eyes and said, "Elena, tell me what you want me to do. Even if it's impossible, I'll do it. I swear it. Tell me."

All the words she wanted to think to him were still jammed up inside her. Her own eyes spilled tears, which Stefan dabbed off with his fingers, as if he could ruin a priceless painting by touching it too roughly.

Then Elena turned her face up, and shut her eyes, and pursed her lips slightly. She wanted a kiss. But . . .

"You're just a child in your mind now," Stefan agonised. "How can I take advantage of you?"

There was a sign language they had had, back in her old life, which Elena still remembered. She would tap under her chin, just where it was softest: once, twice, three times.

It meant she felt uncomfortable, inside. As if she were too full in her throat. It meant she wanted . . .

Stefan groaned.

"I can't . . ."

Tap, tap, tap . . .

"You're not back to your old self yet . . ."

Tap, tap, tap . . .

"Listen to me, love . . ."

TAP! TAP! TAP! She gazed at him with pleading eyes. If she could have spoken, she would have said, *Please, give me some credit – I'm not totally stupid. Please, listen to what I can't say to you.*

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“You hurt. You’re really hurting,” Stefan had interpreted, with something like dazed resignation. “I— if I— if I only take a little . . .”

And then suddenly Stefan’s fingers had been cool and sure, moving her head, lifting it, turning it at just *this* angle, and then she had felt the twin bites, which convinced her more than anything she was alive and not a spirit any more.

And *then* she had been very sure that Stefan loved her and no one else, and she could tell Stefan some of the things she wanted to. But she had to tell them in little exclamations – not of pain – with stars and comets and streaks of light falling around her. And Stefan had been the one who had not been able to think a single word to her. Stefan was the one struck mute.

Elena felt that was only fair. After that, he held her at night and she was always happy.

CHAPTER

1

Damon Salvatore was lounging in mid-air, nominally supported by one branch of a . . . who knew the names of trees anyway? Who gave a damn? It was tall, it allowed him to peep into Caroline Forbes's third-storey bedroom, and it made a comfy backrest. He lay back in the convenient tree fork, hands clasped together behind his head, one neatly booted leg dangling over thirty feet of empty space. He was comfortable as a cat, eyes half-closed as he watched.

He was waiting for the magic moment of 4:44 am to arrive, when Caroline would perform her bizarre ritual. He'd already seen it twice and he was enthralled.

Then he got a mosquito bite.

Which was ridiculous because mosquitoes didn't prey on vampires. Their blood wasn't nutritious like human blood. But it certainly felt like a tiny mosquito bite on the back of his neck.

He swivelled to see behind him, feeling the balmy summer night all around him – and saw nothing.

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The needles of some conifer. Nothing flying about. Nothing crawling on them.

All right then. It must have been a conifer needle. But it certainly did hurt. And the pain got worse with time, not better.

A suicidal bee? Damon felt the back of his neck carefully. No venom sack, no stinger. Just a tiny squishy lump that hurt.

A moment later his attention was called back to the window.

He wasn't sure exactly what was going on but he could feel the sudden buzzing of Power around the sleeping Caroline, like a high-tension wire. Several days ago, it had drawn him to this place, but once he'd arrived he couldn't seem to find the source.

The clock ticked 4:40 and beeped an alarm. Caroline woke and swatted it across the room.

Lucky girl, Damon thought, with wicked appreciation. If I were a rogue human instead of a vampire, then your virtue – presuming you've any left – might be in danger. Fortunately for you, I had to give up all that sort of thing nearly half a millennium ago.

Damon flashed a smile at nothing in particular, held it for a twentieth of a second, and then turned it off, his black eyes going cold. He looked back into the open window.

Yes . . . he'd always felt that his idiot younger brother Stefan didn't appreciate Caroline Forbes enough. There was no doubt that the girl was worth looking at: long, golden-brown limbs, a shapely body, and bronze-coloured hair that fell around her face in waves. And then there was her mind. Naturally skewed, vengeful, spiteful. Delicious. For instance, if he wasn't mistaken, she was working with little voodoo dolls on her desk in there.

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Terrific.

Damon liked to see the creative arts at work.

The alien Power still buzzed, and still he couldn't get a fix on it. Was it inside – in the *girl*? Surely not.

Caroline was hastily grabbing for what looked like a handful of silken green cobwebs. She stripped her T-shirt off and – almost too fast for the vampire eye to see – had herself dressed in lingerie that made her look like a jungle princess. She stared intently at her own reflection in a stand-alone full-length mirror.

Now, what *can* you be waiting for, little girl? Damon wondered.

Well – he might as well keep a low profile. There was a dark flutter, one ebony feather fell to the ground, and then there was nothing but an exceptionally large crow sitting in the tree.

Damon watched intently from one bright bird-eye as Caroline moved forward suddenly as if she'd gotten an electric jolt, lips parted, her gaze on what seemed to be her own reflection.

Then she smiled at it in greeting.

Damon could pinpoint the source of Power now. It was inside the mirror. Not in the same *dimension* as the mirror, certainly, but contained inside it.

Caroline was behaving – oddly. She tossed back her long bronze hair so that it fell in magnificent disarray down her back; she wet her lips and smiled as if at a lover. When she spoke, Damon could hear her quite clearly.

“Thank you. But you're late today.”

There was still no one but her in the bedroom, and Damon could hear no answer. But the lips of the Caroline in the mirror were not moving in synch with the real girl's lips.

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Bravo! he thought, always willing to appreciate a new trick on humans. Well done, whoever you are!

Lip-reading the mirror girl's words, he caught something about *sorry*. And *lovely*.

Damon cocked his head.

Caroline's reflection was saying, "... you don't *have* to ... after today."

The real Caroline answered huskily. "But what if I can't fool them?"

And the reflection: "... have help. Don't worry, rest easy ..."

"OK. And nobody will get, like, *fatally* hurt, right? I mean, we're not talking about death – for *humans*."

The reflection: "Why should we ...?"

Damon smiled inwardly. How many times had he heard exchanges like *that* before? As a spider himself, he knew: First you got your fly into the parlour; then you reassured her; and before she knew it, you could have anything from her, until you didn't *need* her any longer.

And then – his black eyes glittered – it was time for a new fly.

Now Caroline's hands were writhing in her lap. "Just as long as you really – you know. What you promised. You really mean it about loving me?"

"... trust me. I'll take care of you – and your enemies, too. I've already begun ..."

Suddenly Caroline stretched, and it was a stretch that boys at Robert E. Lee High School would have paid to watch. "That's what I want to see," she said. "I'm just *so* sick of hearing about Elena this, Stefan that ... and now it's going to start all over."

Caroline broke off abruptly, as if someone had hung up on her on the phone and she'd only just realised it.

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For a moment her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned. Then, slowly, she relaxed. Her eyes remained on the mirror, and one hand lifted until it was resting lightly on her stomach. She stared at it and slowly her features seemed to soften, to melt into an expression of apprehension and anxiety.

But Damon hadn't taken his eyes off the mirror for an instant. Normal mirror, normal mirror, normal mirror – *là era!* Just at the last moment, as Caroline turned away, a flash of red.

Flames?

Now, what *could* be going on? he thought lazily, fluttering as he transformed from a sleek crow back into a drop-dead gorgeous young man lounging in a high branch of the tree. Certainly the mirror-creature wasn't from around Fell's Church. But it sounded as if it meant to make trouble for his brother, and a fragile, beautiful smile touched Damon's lips for a second.

There was nothing he loved more than to watch self-righteous, sanctimonious, *I'm-better-than-you-cos-I-don't-drink-human-blood* Stefan get in trouble.

The teenagers of Fell's Church – and some of the adults – regarded the tale of Stefan Salvatore and their local beauty Elena Gilbert as a modern Romeo-and-Juliet story. She had given her life to save his when they'd both been captured by a maniac, and afterward he had died of a broken heart. There were even whispers that Stefan had been not *quite* human . . . but something else. A demon lover that Elena had died to redeem.

Damon knew the truth. Stefan was dead all right – but he had been dead for hundreds of years. And it was true that he was a vampire, but calling him a demon was like calling Tinkerbell armed and dangerous.

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Meanwhile Caroline couldn't seem to stop talking to an empty room.

"Just you wait," she whispered, walking over to the piles of untidy papers and books that littered her desk.

She rummaged through the papers until she found a miniature video camera that had a green light shining at her like a single unblinking eye. Delicately, she connected the camera to her computer and began typing a password.

Damon's eyesight was much better than a human's, and he could clearly see the tanned fingers with the long shining bronze nails: CFRULES. Caroline Forbes rules, he thought. Pitiful.

Then she turned around, and Damon saw tears well up in her eyes. The next moment, unexpectedly, she was sobbing.

She sat heavily on the bed, weeping and rocking herself back and forth, occasionally striking the mattress with a clenched fist. But mainly she just sobbed and sobbed.

Damon was startled. But then custom took over and he murmured, "Caroline? Caroline, may I come in?"

"What? Who?" She looked around frantically.

"It's Damon. May I come in?" he asked, his voice dripping with mock sympathy, simultaneously using mind control on her.

All vampires had such powers of control over mortals. How great the Power was depended on many things: the vampire's diet (human blood was by far the most potent), the strength of the victim's will, the relationship between the vampire and the victim, the fluctuation of day and night – and so many other things that even Damon didn't begin to understand. He only knew when he felt his own Power quicken, as it was quickening now.

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And Caroline was waiting.

"I can come in?" he said in his most musical, most beguiling voice, at the same time crushing Caroline's strong will under one much stronger.

"Yes," she answered, wiping her eyes quickly, apparently seeing nothing unusual in his entrance by a third-storey window. Their eyes locked. "Come in, Damon."

She had issued the necessary invitation for a vampire. With one graceful motion he swung himself over the sill. The interior of her room smelled like perfumes – and not subtle ones. He felt really quite savage now – it was surprising the way the bloodfever had come on so suddenly, so irresistibly. His upper canines had extended to about half again their size, and their edges were razor-sharp.

This was no time for conversation, for loitering around as he usually did. For a gourmet, half the pleasure was in the anticipation, sure, but right now he was in *need*. He drew strongly on his Power to control the human brain and gave Caroline a dazzling smile.

That was all it took.

Caroline had been moving toward him; now she stopped. Her lips, partly open to ask a question, remained parted; and her pupils suddenly widened as if she were in a dark room, and then contracted and remained contracted.

"I— I—" she managed. "Ohhh—"

There. She was his. And so easily, too.

His fangs were throbbing with a kind of pleasurable pain, a tender soreness beckoning him to strike as quickly as the lunge of a cobra, to sink his teeth to the hilt in an artery. He was hungry – no, *starving* – and his whole body was burning with the urge to drink as deeply

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as he liked. After all, there were others to choose from if he drained this vessel dry.

Carefully, never taking his eyes from hers, he lifted Caroline's head to expose her throat, with the sweet pulse throbbing in its hollow. It filled all his senses: the beating of her heart, the smell of the exotic blood just under the surface, dense and ripe and sweet. His head was spinning. He'd never been so excited, so eager—

So eager that it gave him pause. After all, one girl was as good as another, right? What was different about this time? What was *wrong* with him?

And then he knew.

I'll have my own mind back, thank you.

Suddenly Damon's intellect was icy cold; the sensual aura in which he'd been trapped froze over instantly. He dropped Caroline's chin and stood very still.

He had almost fallen under the influence of the thing that was using Caroline. It had been trying to snare him into breaking his word to Elena.

And again, he could just barely sense a whisk of red in the mirror.

It was one of those creatures drawn to the nova of Power that Fell's Church had become – he knew that. It had been using him, spurring him on, trying to get him to drain Caroline dry. To take all her blood, to kill a human, something he hadn't done since meeting Elena.

Why?

Coldly furious, he centred himself, and then probed in all directions with his mind to find the parasite. It should still be here; the mirror was only a portal for it to travel small distances. And it had been controlling him – *him, Damon Salvatore* – so it had to be very close indeed.

Still, he could find nothing. That made him even

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angrier than before. Absently fingering the back of his neck, he sent a dark message:

I will warn you once, and once only. Stay away from ME!

He sent the thought out with a blast of Power that flashed like sheet lightning in his own senses. It ought to have knocked something dead nearby – from the roof, from the air, from a branch . . . maybe even from next door. From *somewhere*, a creature should have plummeted to the ground, and he should have been able to sense it.

But although Damon could feel clouds darkening above him in response to his mood, and the wind rubbing branches together outside, there was no falling body, no attempt at dying retaliation.

He could find nothing close enough to have entered his thoughts, and nothing at a distance could be that strong. Damon might amuse himself sometimes by pretending to be vain, but underneath he had a cool and logical ability to analyse himself. He was strong. He knew that. As long as he kept himself well nourished and free of weakening sentiment, there were few creatures that could stand against him – at least in this plane.

Two were right here in Fell's Church, a little mocking counterpoint in his mind said, but Damon shrugged that off disdainfully. Surely there could be no other vampire Elders nearby, or he would sense them. Ordinary vampires, yes, they were already flocking. But they were all too weak to enter *his* mind.

He was equally certain there was no creature within range that could challenge him. He would have sensed it as he sensed the blazing ley lines of uncanny magical power that formed a nexus under Fell's Church.

He looked at Caroline again, still held motionless by the trance he'd put on her. She would come out of it

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gradually, none the worse for the experience – for what *he'd* done to her, at least.

He turned and, as gracefully as a panther, swung out of the window, onto the tree – and then dropped easily thirty feet to the ground.