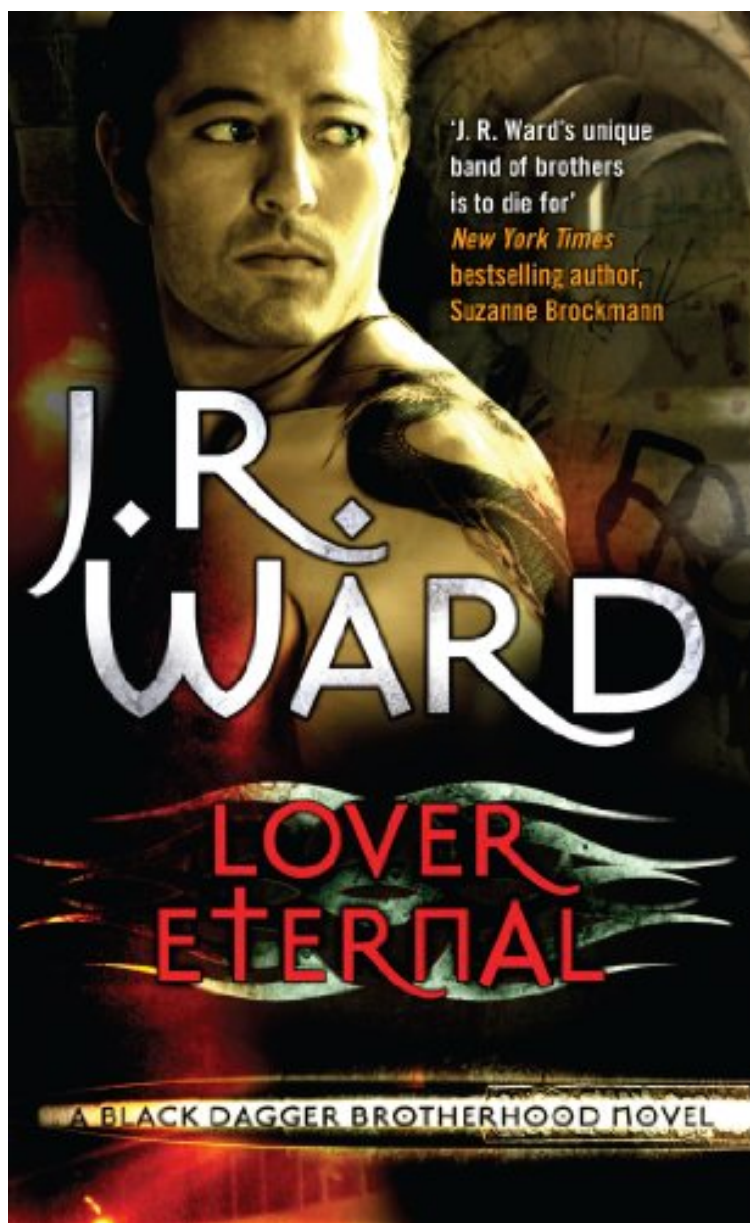


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Lover Eternal: Number 2 in series



Par J. R. Ward
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Description : Description du produitWithin the brotherhood, Rhage is the vampire with the strongest appetite. He's the best fighter, the quickest to act on his impulses, and the most voracious lover-for inside him burns a ferocious curse cast by the Scribe Virgin. Possessed by this dark side, Rhage fears the times when his inner dragon is unleashed, making him a danger to everyone around him. When Mary Luce is unwittingly thrown into the vampire world, she must rely on Rhage's protection. Knowing that Mary feels the same intense animal attraction, Rhage must make her his alone...

Prsentation de l'diteurIn the shadows of the night in Caldwell, New York, there's a deadly war raging

between vampires and their slayers. And there exists a secret band of brothers like no other - six vampire warriors, defenders of their race. Possessed by a deadly beast, Rhage is the most dangerous of the Black Dagger Brotherhood...Within the brotherhood, Rhage is the vampire with the strongest appetites. He's the best fighter, the quickest to act on his impulses, and the most voracious lover - for inside him burns a ferocious curse cast by the Scribe Virgin. Possessed by this dark side, Rhage fears the times when his inner dragon is unleashed, making him a danger to everyone around him. Mary Luce, a survivor of many hardships, is unwittingly thrown into the vampire world and reliant on Rhage's protection. With a life-threatening curse of her own, Mary is not looking for love. Her faith in miracles was lost years ago. But when Rhage's intense animal attraction turns into something more emotional, he knows that he must make Mary his alone. And while their enemies close in, Mary fights desperately to gain life eternal with the one she loves.

ExtraitPraise for USA Today bestselling author J. R. Ward's dazzling debut *Dark Lover* The first novel in the Black Dagger Brotherhood seriesA fabulous treat for romance readers!Nicole Jordan, New York Times bestselling author of *Wicked Fantasy*An awesome, instantly addictive debut novel. It's a midnight whirlwind of dangerous characters and mesmerizing erotic romance. The Black Dagger Brotherhood owns me now. Dark fantasy lovers, you just got served.Lynn Viehl, USA Today bestselling author of *Private Demon*It's not easy to find a new twist on the vampire myth, but Ward succeeds beautifully. This dark and compelling world is filled with enticing romance as well as perilous adventure. With myriad possibilities to choose from, the Black Dagger Brotherhood series promises tons of thrills and chills.Romantic Times (4 stars, Top Pick)Even if you are so over vamps, think there is no new way to tell a story, or need a break from the same old thing, pick this one up! If you read only one paranormal this year, make it *Dark Lover*.All About RomanceThis is the first installment in what promises to be a spectacular new series. Ms. Ward has created an edgy, dangerous, and sexy band of brothers that will rock your world. If *Dark Lover* is any indication of what readers have in store, Ms. Ward will have us begging for more. Lovers of the genre will not want to miss this talented new author!The Best sLOVER ETERNALA Novel of the Black Dagger BrotherhoodJ. R. WardA SIGNET ECLIPSE BOOKAcknowledgmentsGlossary of Terms and Proper NounsChapter OneChapter TwoChapter ThreeChapter FourChapter FiveChapter SixChapter SevenChapter EightChapter NineChapter TenChapter ElevenChapter TwelveChapter ThirteenChapter FourteenChapter FifteenChapter SixteenChapter SeventeenChapter EighteenChapter NineteenChapter TwentyChapter Twenty-oneChapter Twenty-twoChapter Twenty-threeChapter Twenty-fourChapter Twenty-fiveChapter Twenty-sixChapter Twenty-sevenChapter Twenty-eightChapter Twenty-nineChapter ThirtyChapter Thirty-oneChapter Thirty-twoChapter Thirty-threeChapter Thirty-fourChapter Thirty-fiveChapter Thirty-sixChapter Thirty-sevenChapter Thirty-eightChapter Thirty-nineChapter FortyChapter Forty-oneChapter Forty-twoChapter Forty-threeChapter Forty-fourChapter Forty-fiveChapter Forty-sixChapter Forty-sevenChapter Forty-eightChapter Forty-nineChapter FiftyChapter Fifty-oneAcknowledgmentsWith immense gratitude to the readers of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Without you, the brothers wouldn't have a home on the page.Thank you so very much: Karen Solem, Kara Cesare, Claire Zion, Kara Welsh, Rose Hilliard.With love to my family and friends, and with continued reverence for my Executive Committee: Sue Grafton, Dr. Jessica Andersen, Betsey Vaughan.Glossary of Terms and Proper NounsBlack Dagger Brotherhood (pr. n.) Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, brothers possess immense physical and mental strength as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings for the most part, and are inducted into the brotherhood upon nomination by the brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they exist apart from civilians, having little contact with members of the other classes except when they need to feed. They are the subjects of legend and the objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed only by the most serious of wounds, e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc.blood slave (n.) Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has largely been discontinued, though it has not been outlawed.the Chosen (n.) Female vampires who have been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. They are considered members of the aristocracy, though they are spiritually rather than temporally focused. They have little or no interaction with males, but can be mated to brothers at the Scribe Virgins direction to propagate their class. They have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the brotherhood, but that practice has been abandoned by the brothers.doggen (n.) Member of the servant class within the vampire world. Doggen have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is

approximately five hundred years.the Fade (pr. n.) Nontemporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass eternity.First Family (pr. n.) The king and queen of the vampires, and any children they may have.hellren (n.) Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate.leelan (adj.) A term of endearment loosely translated as dearest one.Lessening Society (pr. n.) Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species.lesser (n.) De-souled human who as a member of the Lessening Society targets vampires for extermination. Lessers must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, bluishless, and pale-eyed. They smell like baby powder. Inducted into the society by the Omega, they retain a ceramic jar thereafter into which their heart was placed after it was removed.needling period (n.) Female vampires time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a females transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated.the Omega (pr. n.) Malevolent, mystical figure who has targeted the vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers, though not the power of creation.princeps (n.) Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgins Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred.pyrocant (n.) Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover.rythe (n.) Ritual manner of assuaging honor granted by one who has offended another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender, who presents him-or herself without defenses.the Scribe Virgin (pr. n.) Mystical force who is counselor to the king as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers. Capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence.shellan (n.) Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males.the Tomb (pr. n.) Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site as well as a storage facility for the jars of lessers. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary actions against brothers. No one may enter except for members of the brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin, or candidates for induction.transition (n.) Critical moment in a vampires life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, they must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and are unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the mid-twenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular. Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize.vampire (n.) Member of a species separate from that of Homo sapiens. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their mid-twenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires cannot convert humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short-term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upward of a thousand years, or in some cases even longer.wahlker (n.) An individual who has died and returned to the living from the Fade. They are accorded great respect and are revered for their travails.

Chapter One

Ah, hell, V, youre killing me. Butch ONeal mined through his sock drawer, looking for black silk, finding white cotton.No, wait. He pulled out one dress sock. Not exactly a triumph.If I were killing you, cop, footwear be the last thing on your mind.Butch glanced over at his roommate. His fellow Red Sox fan. Hiswell, one of his two best friends.Both of whom, as it turned out, happened to be vampires.Fresh from the shower, Vishous had a towel wrapped around his waist, his chest muscles and thick arms out on display. He was pulling on a black leather driving glove, covering up his tattooed left hand.Do you have to go for my dress blacks?V grinned, fangs flashing in the midst of his goatee. They feel good.Why dont you ask Fritz to get you some?Hes too busy feeding your jones for clothes, man.Okay, so maybe Butch had recently gotten in touch with his inner Versace, and whove thought hed had it in him, but how hard could it be to get an extra dozen silkies in the house?Ill ask him for you.Arent you a gentleman. V pushed back his dark hair. The tattoos at his left temple made an appearance and then were covered up again. You need the Escalade tonight?Yeah, thanks. Butch stuffed his feet into Gucci loafers, bareback.So youre going to see Marissa?Butch nodded. I need to know.

One way or the other. And he had a feeling it was going to be the other. She's a good female. She sure the hell was, which was probably why she wasn't returning his calls. Ex-cops who liked Scotch weren't exactly good relationship material for women, human or vampire. And the fact that he wasn't one of her kind didn't help the situation. Well, cop, Rhage and I'll be throwing back a few at One Eye. You come and find us when you're done. Banging, like someone was hitting the front door with a battering ram, brought their heads around. V yanked up the towel. Goddamn it, flyboy is going to have to learn how to use a doorbell. You try talking to him. He doesn't listen to me. Rhage doesn't listen to anyone. V jogged down the hall. As the thundering dried up, Butch went over to his ever-expanding tie collection. He chose a pale blue Brioni, popped the collar of his white button-down, and slipped the silk around his neck. As he strolled out to the living room, he could hear Rhage and V talking over 2Pacs RU still down? Butch had to laugh. Man, his life had taken him to a lot of places, most of them ugly, but he'd never thought he'd end up living with six warrior vampires. Or being on the fringes of their fight to protect their dwindling, hidden species. Somehow, though, he belonged with the Black Dagger Brotherhood. And he and Vishous and Rhage were an awesome threesome. Rhage lived in the mansion across the courtyard with the rest of the Brotherhood, but the troika hung out in the gatehouse, where V and Butch crashed. The Pit, as the place was now known, was sweet digs compared to the hovels Butch had lived in. He and V had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a galley kitchen, and a living room that was decorated in a win-some, postmodern, Frat-House-Basement style: a pair of leather couches, plasma-screen high-def TV, foosball table, gym bags everywhere. As Butch stepped into the main room, he got a load of Rhage's ensemble for the night: Black leather trench coat fell from his shoulders to his ankles. Black wife-beater was tucked into leathers. Shitkickers topped him out at six-eight or so. In the getup, the vampire was flat-out, drop-dead gorgeous. Even to a certified hetero like Butch. The son of a bitch actually bent the laws of physics, he was so attractive. Blond hair was cut short in the back and left longer in the front. Teal-blue eyes were the color of Bahamas seawater. And that face made Brad Pitt look like a candidate for The Swan. But he was no mama's boy, in spite of being a charmer. Something dark and lethal seethed behind the flashy exterior, and you knew it the minute you saw him. He gave off the vibe of a guy who'd smile while he set the record straight with his fists, even if he was spitting his own teeth out while he took care of business. What's doing, Hollywood? Butch asked. Rhage smiled, revealing a splendid set of pearlies with those long canines. Time to go out, cop. Damn, vampire, didn't you get enough last night? That redhead looked like serious stuff. And so did her sister. You know me. Always hungry. Yeah, well, fortunately for Rhage, there was an endless stream of women more than happy to oblige his needs. And sweet Jesus, the guy had them. Didn't drink. Didn't smoke. But he ran through the ladies like nothing Butch had ever seen. And it wasn't like Butch knew a lot of choirboys. Rhage looked over at V. Go get dressed, man. Unless you were thinking of hitting One Eye in a towel? Quit clocking me, my brother. Then gitcha ass moving. Vishous stood up from behind a table weighed down with enough computer equipment to give Bill Gates a hard-on. From this command center, V ran the security and monitoring systems for the Brotherhood's compound, including the main house, the underground training facility, the Tomb and their Pit, as well as the system of underground tunnels that connected the buildings. He controlled everything: the retractable steel shutters that were installed over every window; the locks on the steel doors; the temperatures in the rooms; the lights; the security cameras; the gates. V had set up the whole kit and caboodle by himself before the Brotherhood had moved in three weeks ago. The buildings and tunnels had already been up since the early 1900s, but they'd been unused for the most part. After events in July, however, the decision was made to consolidate the Brotherhood's operations, and they'd all come here. As V went to his bedroom, Rhage took a Tootsie Roll Pop out of his pocket, ripped off the red paper, and put the thing in his mouth. Butch could feel the guy staring. And he wasn't surprised when the brother started in on him. So I can't believe you're getting all dolled up for a trip to One Eye, cop. I mean, this is heavy-duty, even for you. The tie, the cuff links—those are all new, right? Butch smoothed the Brioni down his chest and reached for the Tom Ford jacket that matched his black slacks. He didn't want to go into the Marissa thing. Just skirting around the subject with V had been enough. Besides, what could he say? She blew my doors off when I met her, but she's been avoiding me for the past three weeks. So instead of taking the hint, I'm heading over to beg like a desperate loser. Yeah, he really wanted to trot that out in front of Mr. Perfect, even if the guy was a good buddy. Rhage rolled the lollipop around in his mouth. Tell me something. Why do you bother with the clothes, man? You don't do anything with your mojo. I mean, I see you turn down females at the bar all the time. You saving yourself for marriage? Yup. That's right. Got myself tied in a knot until I walk down that aisle. Come on, I really am curious. Are you holding it for someone? When there was only silence, the vampire laughed softly. Do I

know her? Butch narrowed his eyes, weighing whether the conversation would be over faster if he kept his mouth shut. Probably not. Once Rhage got started, he didn't quit until he decided he was finished. He talked the same way he killed. Rhage shook his head ruefully. Doesn't she want you? We're going to find out tonight. Butch checked his cash level. Sixteen years as a homicide detective hadn't lined his pockets with much to speak of. Now that he was hanging with the Brotherhood? He had so much of the green, he couldn't possibly spend it fast enough. You're lucky, cop. Butch glanced over. How you figure? I've always wondered what it would be like to settle down with a female of worth. Butch laughed. The guy was a sex god, an erotic legend in his race. V had said that stories about Rhage were passed from father to son when the time was right. The idea that he'd downshift into being someone's husband was absurd. Okay, Hollywood, what's the punch line? Come on, hit me with it. Rhage winced and looked away. Holy hell, the guy had been serious. Whoa. Listen, I didn't mean to. Nah, it's cool. The smile reappeared, but the eyes were flat. He sauntered over to the wastebasket and dropped the lollipop stick in the trash. Now, can we get out of here? I'm tired of waiting for you boys. Mary Luce pulled into her garage, shut off her Civic, and stared at the snow shovels hanging on pegs in front of her. She was tired, although her day hadn't been strenuous. Answering phones and filing papers at a law office just wasn't taxing, physically or mentally. So she really shouldn't be exhausted. But maybe that was the point. She wasn't being challenged, so she was wilting. Could it be time to go back to the kids? After all, it was what she was trained for. What she loved. What nourished her. Working with her autistic patients and helping them find ways of communicating had brought her all kinds of rewards, personally and professionally. And the two-year hiatus had not been her choice. Maybe she should call the center, see if they had an opening. Even if they didn't, she could volunteer until something became available. Yes, tomorrow she would do that. There was no reason to wait. Mary grabbed her purse and got out of the car. As the garage door trundled shut, she went around to the front of her house and picked up the mail. Flipping through bills, she paused to test the chilly October night with her nose. Her sinuses hummed. Autumn had swept out the dregs of summer a good month ago, the change of seasons ushered in on the back of a cold rush of air from Canada. She loved the fall. And upstate New York did it proud, in her opinion. Caldwell, New York, the town she was born and would most likely die in, was more than an hour north of Manhattan, so it was technically considered upstate. Split in half by the Hudson River, the Caldies, as it was known by natives, was every midsize city in America. Wealthy parts, poor parts, nasty parts, normal parts. Wal-Marts and Targets and McDonaldses. Museums and libraries. Suburban malls strangling a faded downtown. Three hospitals, two community colleges, and a bronze statue of George Washington in the park. She tilted her head back and looked at the stars, thinking that it would never occur to her to leave. Whether that spoke of loyalty or lack of imagination, she wasn't sure. Maybe it was her house, she thought as she headed for her front door. The converted barn was situated on the edge of an old farmhouse property, and she'd put in an offer fifteen minutes after she'd gone through it with a real estate agent. Inside, the spaces were cozy and small. It was lovely. Which was why she'd bought it four years ago, right after the death of her mother. She'd needed lovely then, as well as a complete change of scenery. Her barn was everything her childhood home had not been. Here, the pine floorboards were the color of honey, varnished clear, not stained. Her furniture was from Crate and Barrel, all fresh, nothing worn or old. The throw rugs were sisal, short-napped and trimmed with suede. And everything from the slipcovers to the drapes to the walls to the ceilings was creamy white. Her aversion to darkness had been her interior decorator. And hey, if it's all a variation on beige, the stuff matches, right? She put her keys and her purse down in the kitchen and grabbed the phone. She was told that You have two new messages. Hey, Mary, it's Bill. Listen, I'm going to take you up on your offer. If you could cover me at the hotline tonight for an hour or so that would be great. Unless I hear from you, I'll assume you're still free. Thanks again. She deleted it with a beep. Mary, this is Dr. Della Croce's office. We'd like you to come in as a follow-up to your quarterly physical. Would you please call to schedule an appointment when you get this message? We'll accommodate you. Thanks, Mary. Mary put the phone down. The shaking started in her knees and worked its way up into the muscles in her thighs. When it hit her stomach, she considered running for the bathroom. Follow-up. We'll accommodate you. It's back, she thought. The leukemia was back. Chapter Two What the hell are we going to tell him? He's coming here in twenty minutes! Mr. O regarded his colleagues theatrically with a bored stare, thinking that if the lesser did any more hopping up and down, the idiot would qualify as a pogo stick. Goddamn, but E was a fuckup. Why his sponsor had brought him into the Lessening Society in the first place was a mystery. The man had little drive. No focus. And no stomach for their new direction in the war against the vampire race. What are we going to tell him anything, O said as he looked around the basement. Knives, razors, and

hammers were scattered out of order on the cheap sideboard in the corner. There were pools of blood here and there, but not under the table, where they belonged. And mixed in with the red was a glossy black, thanks to Es flesh wounds. But the vampire escaped before we got any information out of him! Thanks for the recap. The two of them had just started working the male over when O went out on an assist. By the time he got back, E had lost control of the vampire, been sliced in a couple of places, and was all by his little lonesome bleeding in a corner. That prick boss of theirs was going to be shit-wild, and even though O despised the man, he and Mr. X had one thing in common: Sloppiness was for crap. O watched E dance around a little more, finding in the jerky movements the solution to both an immediate problem and a longer-term one. As O smiled, E, the fool, seemed relieved. Don't worry about a thing, O murmured. I'll tell him we took the body out and left it for the sun in the woods. No big deal. You'll talk to him? Sure, man. You'd better take off, though. He's going to be pissed. E nodded and bolted for the door. Later. Yeah, say good-night, motherfucker, O thought as he started to clean up the basement. The shitty little house they were working in was unremarkable from the street, sandwiched between a burned-out shell that had once been a barbecue restaurant and a condemned rooming house. This part of town, a mix of squalid residential and lowbrow commercial, was perfect for them. Around here, folks didn't go out after dark, gun pops were as common as car alarms, and nobody said nothing if someone let out a scream or two. Also, coming and going from the site was easy. Thanks to the neighborhood hardies, all of the streetlights had been shot out and the ambient glow from other buildings was negligible. As an added benefit, the house had an exterior bulkhead entry into its basement. Carrying a fully loaded body bag in and out was no problem. Although even if someone saw something, it would be the work of a moment to eliminate the exposure. No big surprise to the community, either. White trash had a way of finding their graves. Along with wife beating and beer sucking, dying was probably their only other core competency. O picked up a knife and wiped Es black blood off the blade. The basement was not big and the ceiling was low, but there was enough room for the old table they used as a workstation and the battered sideboard they kept their instruments on. Still, O didn't think it was the right facility. It was impossible to safely and securely store a vampire here, and this meant they lost an important tool of persuasion. Time wore down mental and physical faculties. If leveraged correctly, the passage of days was as powerful as anything you could break a bone with. What O wanted was something out in the woods, something big enough so he could keep his captives over a period of time. As vampires went up in smoke with the dawn, they had to be kept protected from the sun. But if you just locked them in a room, you ran the risk of their dematerializing right out of your hands. He needed something steel to cage them. Up above, the back door shut and footsteps came down the stairs. Mr. X walked under a naked bulb. The Fore-lesser was about six-four and built like a linebacker. As with all slayers who'd been in the Society for a long time, he'd paled out. His hair and skin were the color of flour, and his irises were as clear and colorless as window glass. Like O, he was dressed in standard-issue lesser gear: black cargo pants and a black turtleneck with weapons hidden under a leather jacket. So tell me, Mr. O, how goes your work? As if the chaos in the basement wasn't explanation enough. Am I in charge of this house? O demanded. Mr. X walked casually over to the sideboard and picked up a chisel. In a manner of speaking, yes. So am I permitted to ensure that this he moved his hand around the disorder doesn't happen again? What did happen? The details are boring. A civilian escaped. Will it survive? I don't know. Were you here when it happened? No. Tell me everything. Mr. X smiled as silence stretched out. You know, Mr. O, your loyalty could get you in trouble. Don't you want me to punish the right person? I want to take care of it myself. I'm sure you do. Except if you don't tell me, I might have to take the cost of failure out of your hide anyway. Is that worth it? If I'm allowed to do what I will with the responsible party, yeah. Mr. X laughed. I can only imagine what that might be. O waited, watching the chisel's sharp head catch light as Mr. X walked around the room. I paired you with the wrong man, didn't I? Mr. X murmured as he picked a set of handcuffs off the floor. He dropped them on the sideboard. I thought Mr. E might rise to your level. He didn't. And I'm glad you came to me first before you disciplined him. We both know how much you like to work independently. And how much it pisses me off. Mr. X looked over his shoulder, dead eyes fixed on O. In light of all this, particularly because you approached me first, you can have Mr. E. I want to do it with an audience. Your squadron? And others. Trying to prove yourself again? Setting a higher standard. Mr. X smiled coldly. You are an arrogant little bastard, aren't you? I'm as tall as you are. Suddenly, O found himself unable to move his arms or legs. Mr. X had pulled this paralyzing shit before, so it wasn't entirely unexpected. But the guy still had the chisel in his hand and he was coming closer. O fought the hold, sweat breaking out as he struggled and got nowhere. Mr. X leaned in so their chests were touching. O felt something brush against his ass. Have fun, son, the man whispered into Os ear. But do

yourself a favor. Remember that however long your pants are, you're not me. I'll see you later. The man strode out of the basement. The door upstairs opened and shut. As soon as O could move, he reached into his back pocket. Mr. X had given him the chisel. Rhage stepped from the Escalade and scanned the darkness around One Eye, hoping a couple of lessers would jump out at them. He didn't expect to get lucky. He and Vishous had trolled for hours tonight, and they'd gotten a whole lot of nothing. Not even a sighting. It was damn eerie. And to someone like Rhage, who depended on fighting for personal reasons, it was also frustrating as hell. Like all things, though, the war between the Lessening Society and the vampires went in cycles, and they were currently in a downturn. Which made sense. Back in July, the Black Dagger Brotherhood had taken out the Society's local recruitment center along with about ten of their best men. Clearly, the lessers were reconnoitering. Thank God, there were other ways to burn off his edge. He looked at the sprawling nest of depravity that was the Brotherhood's current R R hangout. One Eye was on the edge of town, so the folks inside were bikers and guys who worked construction, tough types who tended toward the redneck rather than the slick persuasion. The bar was your standard-issue watering hole. Single-story building surrounded by a collar of asphalt. Trucks, American sedans, and Harleys parked in the spots. From tiny windows, beer signs glowed red, blue, and yellow, the logos Coors and Bud Light and Michelob. No Coronas or Heinekens for these boys. As he shut the car door, his body was humming, his skin prickling, his thick muscles twitching. He stretched out his arms, trying to buy himself a little relief. He wasn't surprised when it made no difference. His curse was throwing its weight around, taking him into dangerous territory. If he didn't get some kind of release soon, he was going to have a serious problem. Hell, he was going to be a serious problem. Thank you very much, Scribe Virgin. Bad enough that he'd been born a live wire with too much physical power, a fuckup with a gift of strength he hadn't appreciated or harnessed. But then he'd pissed off the mystical female who lorded over their race. Man, she'd been only too happy to put down another layer of crap on the compost heap he'd been born with. Now, if he didn't blow off steam on a regular basis, he turned deadly. Fighting and sex were the only two releases that brought him down, and he used them like a diabetic with insulin. A steady stream of both helped keep him level, but they didn't always do the trick. And when he lost it, things got nasty for everyone, himself included. God, he was tired of being stuck inside his body, managing its demands, trying not to fall into a brutal oblivion. Sure, his stunner of a face and the strength were all fine and good. But he would have traded both to a scrawny, ugly mofo, if it would have gotten him some peace. Hell, he couldn't even remember what serenity was like. He couldn't even remember who he was. The disintegration of himself had started up pretty quick. After only a couple of years into the curse, he'd stopped hoping for any true relief and simply tried to get by without hurting anyone. That was when he'd started to die on the inside, and now, over a hundred years later, he was mostly numb, nothing more than glossy window dressing and empty charm. On every level that counted, he'd given up trying to pretend he was anything but a menace. Because the truth was, no one was safe when he was around. And that was what really killed him, even more than the physical stuff he had to go through when the curse came out of him. He lived in fear of hurting one of his brothers. And, as of about a month ago, Butch. Rhage walked around the SUV and looked through the windshield at the human male. God, who'd have thought he'd ever be tight with a Homo sapiens? We going to see you later, cop? Butch shrugged. Don't know. Good luck, man. It'll be what it is. Rhage swore softly as the Escalade took off and he and Vishous walked across the parking lot. Who is she, V? One of us? Marissa. Marissa? As in Wrath's former shellan? Rhage shook his head. Oh, man, I need details. V, you gotta hook me. I don't ride him about it. And neither should you. Arent you curious? V didn't reply as they came up to the bars front entrance. Oh, right. You already know, don't you? Rhage said. You know what's going to happen. V merely lifted his shoulders and reached for the door. Rhage planted his hand on the wood, stopping him. Hey, V, you ever dream of me? You ever see my future? Vishous swiveled his head around. In the neon glow of a Coors sign, his left eye, the one with the tattoos around it, went all black. The pupil just expanded until it ate up the iris and the white part, until there was nothing but a hole. It was like staring into infinity. Or maybe into the Fade as you died. Do you really want to know? the brother said. Rhage let his hand drop to his side. Only one thing I care about. Am I going to live long enough to get away from my curse? You know, find a slice of calm? The door flew open and a drunken man lurched out like a truck with a broken axle. The guy headed for the bushes, threw up, and then lay facedown on the asphalt. Death was one sure way to find peace, Rhage thought. And everyone died. Even vampires. Eventually. He didn't meet his brother's eyes again. Scratch it, V. I don't want to know. He'd been cursed once already and still had another ninety-one years before he was free. Ninety-one years, eight months, four days until his punishment was over and the beast would no longer be a part of him. Why should he volunteer for a

cosmic whammy like knowing he wouldnt live long enough to be free of the damn thing? Rhage. What? Ill tell you this. Your destinys coming for you. And shes coming soon. Rhage laughed. Oh, yeah? Whats the female like? I prefer them. Shes a virgin. A chill shot down Rhages spine and nailed him in the ass. Youre kidding, right? Look in my eye. Do you think Im jerking you off? V paused for a moment and then opened the door, releasing the smell of beer and human bodies along with the pulse of an old Guns N Roses song. As they went inside, Rhage muttered, Youre some freaky shit, my brother. You really are.

Chapter Three

Pavlov had a point, Mary thought while she drove downtown. Her panic reaction to the message from Dr. Della Croces office was a trained one, not something logical. Further tests could be a lot of things. Just because she associated any kind of news from a physician with catastrophe didnt mean she could see into the future. She had no idea what, if anything, was wrong. After all, shed been in remission for close to two years and she felt well enough. Sure, she got tired, but who didnt? Her job and volunteer work kept her busy. First thing in the morning shed call for the appointment. For now she was just going to work the beginning of Bills shift at the suicide hotline. As the anxiety backed off a little, she took a deep breath. The next twenty-four hours were going to be an endurance test, with her nerves turning her body into a trampoline and her mind into a whirlpool. The trick was waiting through the panic phases and then shoring up her strength when the fear lightened up. She parked the Civic in an open lot on Tenth Street and walked quickly toward a worn-out six-story building. This was the dingy part of town, the residue of an effort back in the seventies to professionalize a nine-square-block area of what was then a bad neighborhood. The optimism hadnt worked, and now boarded-up office space mixed with low-rent housing. She paused at the entrance and waved to the two cops passing by in a patrol car. The headquarters of the Suicide Prevention Hotline were on the second floor in the front, and she glanced up at the glowing windows. Her first contact with the nonprofit had been as a caller. Three years later, she manned a phone every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. She also covered holidays and relieved people when they needed it. No one knew shed ever dialed in. No one knew shed had leukemia. And if she had to go back to war with her blood, she was going to keep that to herself as well. Having watched her mother die, she didnt want anyone standing over her bed weeping. She already knew the impotent rage that came when saving grace didnt heel on command. She had no interest in a replay of the theatrics while she was fighting for breath and swimming in a sea of failing organs. Okay. Nerves were back. Mary heard a shuffle over to the left and caught a flash of movement, as if someone had ducked out of sight behind the building. Snapping to attention, she punched a code into a lock, went inside, and climbed the stairs. When she got to the second floor, she buzzed the intercom for entrance into the hotlines offices. As she walked past the reception desk, she waved to the executive director, Rhonda Knute, who was on the phone. Then she nodded to Nan, Stuart, and Lola, who were on deck tonight, and settled into a vacant cubicle. After making sure she had plenty of intake forms, a couple of pens, and the hotlines intervention reference book, she took a bottle of water out of her purse. Almost immediately one of her phone lines rang, and she checked the screen for caller ID. She knew the number. And the police had told her it was a pay phone. Downtown. It was her caller. The phone rang a second time and she picked up, following the hotlines script. Suicide Prevention Hotline, this is Mary. How may I help you? Silence. Not even breathing. Dimly, she heard the hum of a car engine flare and then fade in the background. According to the polices audit of incoming calls, the person always phoned from the street and varied his location so he couldnt be traced. This is Mary. How may I help you? She dropped her voice and broke protocol. I know its you, and Im glad youre reaching out tonight again. But please, cant you tell me your name or whats wrong? She waited. The phone went dead. Another one of yours? Rhonda asked, taking a sip from a mug of herbal tea. Mary hung up. How did you know? The woman nodded across her shoulder. I heard a lot of rings out there, but no one got farther than the greeting. Then all of a sudden you were hunched over your phone. Yeah, well. Listen, the cops got back to me today. Theres nothing they can do short of assigning details to every pay phone in town, and theyre not willing to go that far at this point. I told you. I dont feel like Im in danger. You dont know that youre not. Come on, Rhonda, this has been going on for nine months now, right? If they were going to jump me, they would have already. And I really want to help. Thats another thing Im concerned about. You clearly feel like protecting whoever the caller is. Youre getting too personal. No, Im not. Theyre calling here for a reason, and I know I can take care of them. Mary, stop. Listen to yourself. Rhonda pulled a chair over and lowered her voice as she sat down. This is hard for me to say. But I think you need a break. Mary recoiled. From what? Youre here too much. I work the same number of days as everyone else. But you stay here for hours after your shift is through, and you cover for people all the time. Youre too involved. I know youre substituting for Bill right now, but when he comes I want you to leave. And I dont want you back here for a

couple of weeks. You need some perspective. This is hard, draining work, and you have to have a proper distance from it. Not now, Rhonda. Please, not now. I need to be here now more than ever. Rhonda gently squeezed Mary's tense hand. This isn't an appropriate place for you to work out your own issues, and you know that. You're one of the best volunteers I've got, and I want you to come back. But only after you've had some time to clear your head. I may not have that kind of time, Mary whispered under her breath. What? Mary shook herself and forced a smile. Nothing. Of course, you're right. I'll leave as soon as Bill comes in. Bill arrived about an hour later, and Mary was out of the building in two minutes. When she got home, she shut her door and leaned back against the wood panels, listening to all the silence. The horrible, crushing silence. God, she wanted to go back to the hotline offices. She needed to hear the soft voices of the other volunteers. And the phones ringing. And the drone of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. Because with no distractions, her mind flushed up terrible images: Hospital beds. Needles. Bags of drugs hanging next to her. In an awful mental snapshot, she saw her head bald and her skin gray and her eyes sunken until she didn't look like herself, until she wasn't herself. And she remembered what it felt like to cease being a person. After the doctors started treating her with chemo, she'd quickly sunk into the fragile underclass of the sick, the dying, becoming nothing more than a pitiful, scary reminder of other people's mortality, a poster child for the terminal nature of life. Mary darted across the living room, shot through the kitchen, and threw open the slider. As she burst out into the night, fear had her gasping for breath, but the shock of frosty air slowed her lungs down. You don't know that anything's wrong. You don't know what it is. She repeated the mantra, trying to pitch a net on the thrashing panic as she headed for the pool. The Lucite in-ground was no more than a big hot tub, and its water, thickened and slowed by the cold, looked like black oil in the moonlight. She sat down, took off her shoes and socks, and dangled her feet in the icy depths. She kept them submerged even when they numbed, wishing she had the gumption to jump in and swim down to the grate at the bottom. If she held on to the thing for long enough, she might be able to anesthetize herself completely. She thought of her mother. And how Cissy Luce had died in her own bed in the house the two of them had always called home. Everything about that bedroom was still so clear: The way the light had come through the lace curtains and landed on things in a snowflake pattern. Those pale yellow walls and the off-white wall-to-wall rug. That comforter her mother had loved, the one with the little pink roses on a cream background. The smell of nutmeg and ginger from a dish of potpourri. The crucifix above the curving headboard and the big Madonna icon on the floor in the corner. The memories burned, so Mary forced herself to see the room as it had been after everything was over, the illness, the dying, the cleaning up, the selling of the house. She saw it right before she'd moved out. Neat. Tidy. Her mother's Catholic crutches packed away, the faint shadow left by the cross on the wall covered by a framed Andrew Wyeth print. The tears wouldn't stay put. They came slowly, relentlessly, falling into the water. She watched them hit the surface and disappear. When she looked up, she was not alone. Mary leaped to her feet and stumbled back, but stopped herself, wiping her eyes. It was just a boy. A teenage boy. Dark-haired, pale-skinned. So thin he was emaciated, so beautiful he didn't look human. What are you doing here? she asked, not particularly afraid. It was hard to be scared of anything that angelic. Who are you? He just shook his head. Are you lost? He sure looked it. And it was too cold for him to be out just in the jeans and T-shirt he was wearing. What's your name? He lifted a hand to his throat and moved it back and forth while shaking his head. As if he were a foreigner and frustrated by the language barrier. Do you speak English? He nodded and then his hands started flying around. American Sign Language. He was using ASL. Mary reached back to her old life, when she'd trained her autistic patients to use their hands to communicate. Do you read lips or can you hear? she signed back at him. He froze, as if her understanding him had been the last thing he'd expected. I can hear very well. I just can't talk. Mary stared at him for a long moment. You are the caller. He hesitated. Then nodded his head. I never meant to scare you. And I don't call to annoy you. I just like to know you're there. But there's nothing weird to it, honest. I swear. His eyes met hers steadily. I believe you. Except what did she do now? The hotline prohibited contact with callers. Yeah, well, she wasn't about to kick the poor kid off her property. You want something to eat? He shook his head. Maybe I could just sit with you awhile? I'll stay on the other side of the pool. As if he were used to people telling him to get away from them. No, she said. He nodded once and turned away. I mean, sit down here. Next to me. He came at her slowly, as if expecting her to change her mind. When all she did was sit down and put her feet back in the pool, he took off a pair of ratty sneakers, rolled up his baggy pants, and picked a spot about three feet from her. God, he was so small. He slipped his feet in the water and smiled. It's cold, he signed. You want a sweater? He shook his head and moved his feet in circles. What's your name? John Matthew. Mary smiled, thinking they had something in common. Two New Testament prophets. The nuns

gave it to me. Nuns? There was a long pause, as if he were debating what to tell her. You were in an orphanage? she prompted gently. She recalled that there was still one in town, run by Our Lady of Mercy. I was born in a bathroom stall in a bus station. The janitor who found me took me to Our Lady. The nuns thought up the name. She kept her wince to herself. Ah, where do you live now? Were you adopted? He shook his head. Foster parents? Please, God, let there be foster parents. Nice foster parents. Who kept him warm and fed. Good people who told him he mattered even if his parents had deserted him. When he didnt reply, she eyed his old clothes, and the older expression on his face. He didnt look as if hed known a lot of nice. Finally, his hands moved. My place is on Tenth Street. Which meant he was either a poacher living in a condemned building or a tenant in a rat-infested hovel. How he managed to be so clean was a miracle. You live around the hotlines offices, dont you? Which was how you knew I was on this evening even though it wasnt my shift. He nodded. My apartment is across the street. I watch you come and go, but not in a sneaky way. I guess I think of you as a friend. When I called the first time you know, it was on a whim or something.

You answered and I liked the way your voice sounded. He had beautiful hands, she thought. Like a girls. Graceful. Delicate. And you followed me home tonight? Pretty much every night. I have a bike, and youre a slow driver. I figure if I watch over you, youll be safer. You stay so late, and thats not a good part of town for a woman to be alone in. Even if shes in a car. Mary shook her head, thinking he was an odd one. He looked like a child, but his words were those of a man. And all things considered, she probably should be creeped out. This kid latching on to her, thinking he was some kind of protector even though it looked as if he were the one who needed to be rescued. Tell me why you were crying just now, he signed. His eyes were very direct, and it was eerie to have an adult male stare anchored by a childs face. Because I might be out of time, she blurted. Mary? Are you up for a visit? Mary looked over her right shoulder. Bella, her only neighbor, had walked across the two acre meadow that ran between their properties and was standing on the edge of the lawn. Hey, Bella. Ah, come meet John. Bella glided up to the pool. The woman had moved into the big old farmhouse a year ago and theyd taken to talking at night. At six feet tall, and with a mane of dark waves that fell to the small of her back, Bella was a total knockout. Her face was so beautiful it had taken Mary months to stop staring, and the womans body was right off the cover of Sports Illustrateds swimsuit edition. So naturally John was looking awestruck. Mary wondered idly what it would be like to get that reception from a man, even a prepubescent one. Shed never been beautiful, falling instead into that vast category of women who were neither bad-looking nor good-looking. And that had been before chemo had done a number on her hair and skin. Bella leaned down with a slight smile and offered her hand to the boy. Hi. John reached up and touched her briefly, as if he werent sure she was real. Funny, Mary had often felt the same way about the woman. There was something toomuch about her. She just seemed larger than life, more vivid than the other people Mary ran into. Certainly more gorgeous. Although Bella sure didnt act the part of the femme fatale. She was quiet and unassuming and she lived alone, apparently working as a writer. Mary never saw her in the daytime, and no one ever seemed to come or go out of the old farmhouse. John looked at Mary, his hands moving. Do you want me to leave? Then, as if anticipating her answer, he pulled his feet from the water. She put her hand on his shoulder, trying to ignore the sharp thrust of bone just under his shirt. No. Stay. Bella took off her running shoes and socks and flicked her toes over the surface of the water. Yeah, come on, John. Stay with us. Chapter Four Booklist Two hundred years: that's how long Rhage must bear the curse born of his reckless inconsideration. Sex and violence are all he once pursued; now they are the only things that keep the beast within at bay. He has little hope for finding peace during this existence, until Mary Luce enters his life. Irresistibly drawn to her light, he's pulled into a struggle with his own demons as well as the real enemies who threaten the vampire world and Mary. Ward wields a commanding voice perfect for the genre, and readers new to the world of the Black Dagger Brotherhood should hold on tight for an intriguing, adrenaline-pumping ride featuring a race of warrior vampires who fill enemies with terror and women with desire. Like any good thrill ride, the pace changes with a tender story of survival and hope and leaves readers begging for more. Fans of L. A. Banks, Laurell K. Hamilton, and Sherrilyn Kenyon will add Ward to their must-read list. Nina Davis Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved