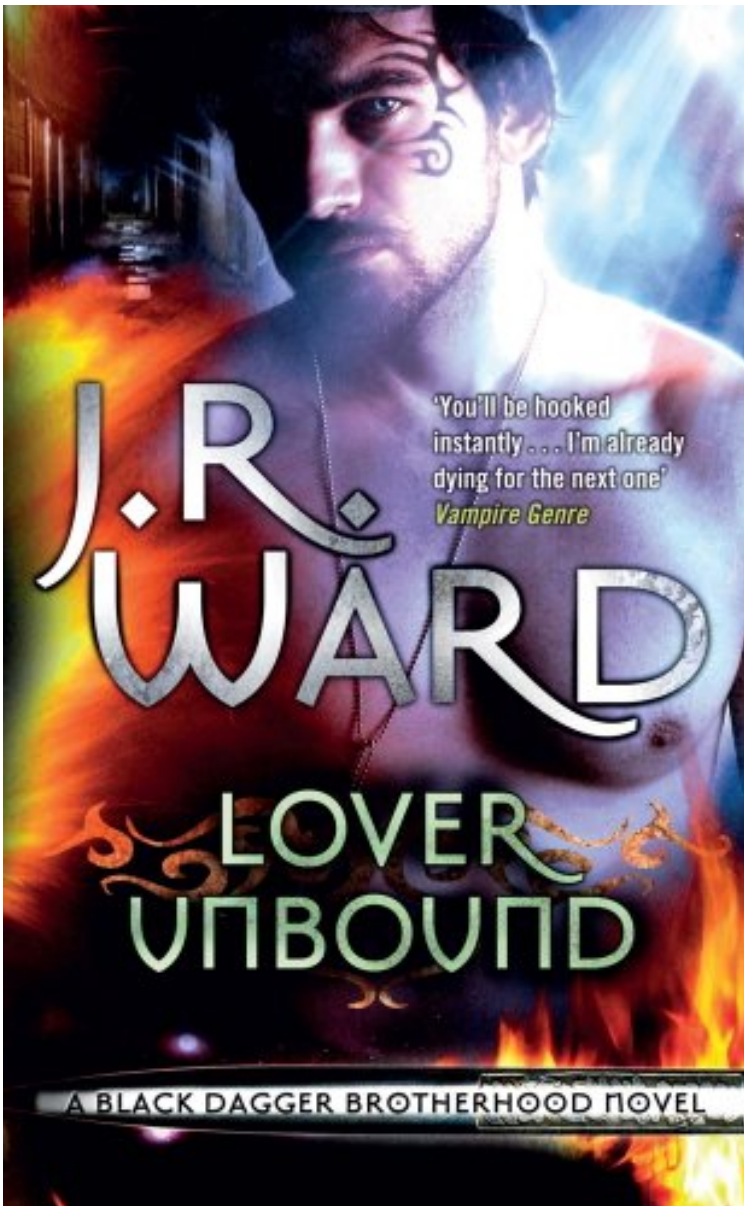


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Lover Unbound: Number 5 in series



Par J. R. Ward

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNow, the cold heart of a cunning predator will be warmed against its will . . .Ruthless and brilliant, Vishous, a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood, possesses a destructive curse and the frightening ability to see the future. Tormented and abused growing up in his father's war camp, he has no interest in love or emotion, only the battle with the Lessening Society. But when a mortal injury puts him in the care of a human surgeon, Dr Jane Whitcomb compels him to reveal his inner pain and taste true pleasure for the first time - until a destiny he didn't choose takes him towards a future that cannot include her . . .
.ExtraitPraise for J. R. Ward and her novelsJ. R. Wards unique band of brothers is to die for. I love this

series! Suzanne Brockmann, New York Times bestselling author of Into the Storm Best new series Ive read in years! Tautly written, wickedly sexy, and just plain fun. Now heres a band of brothers who know how to show a girl a good time. Lisa Gardner, New York Times bestselling author of Gone Lover Revealed Frighteningly addictive The series [has] earned Ward an Anne Rice style following, deservedly so; this entry should prove no less popular. Publishers Weekly Its tough to keep raising the bar in a series, but the phenomenal Ward manages to do just that! Amazing The world of the Black Dagger Brotherhood continues to grow and become more layered, ramping up the tension, risk, and passion. This is awesome stuff. Romantic Times (4 Stars, Top Pick) Lover Awakened Ward spins her take on Beauty and the Beast into a raw, gritty tour de force. A tale that sparks enough plot stunners to keep readers fascinated for years to come. Booklist (starred review) Lover Awakened is utterly absorbing and deliciously erotic. I found myself turning pages faster and faster and then I wished I hadnt, because there was no more to read! The Brotherhood is the hottest collection of studs in romance, and I cant wait for the next one! USA Today bestselling author Angela Knight Compelling Ward pulls no punches in this dark, dangerous, and at times tragic series. Romantic Times (4 Stars, Top Pick) Lover Eternal 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. Booklist [An] extremely intense and emotionally powerful tale. Wards paranormal world is, among other things, colorful, dangerous, and richly conceived. Intricate plots and believable characters. Romantic Times (4 Stars, Top Pick) Dark Lover Its 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) A dynamite new vampire series delicious, erotic, and thrilling! J. R. Ward has created a wonderful cast of characters, with a sexy, tormented, to-die-for hero. A fabulous treat for romance readers! Nicole Jordan, New York Times bestselling author of Fever Dreams: A Novel J. R. Ward has a great style of writing, and she shines. You will lose yourself in this world; it is different, creative, dark, violent, and flat-out amazing If you read only one paranormal this year, make it Dark Lover. All About Romance An awesome, instantly addictive debut novel. Its 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, author of Night Lost Novels in the Black Dagger Brotherhood series by J. R. Ward Dark Lover Lover Eternal Lover Awakened Lover Revealed Lover Unbound LOVER UNBOUND A Novel of the Black Dagger Brotherhood J. R. Ward A SIGNET BOOK With immense gratitude to the readers of the Black Dagger Brotherhood, and a shout-out to the Cellies! Im not even going to bring up the couch. I cant count that high. Thank you so very much: Karen Solem, Kara Cesare, Claire Zion, Kara Welsh. Thank you, Dorine and Angie, for taking such very good care of me and thanks also to S-Byte and Ventrue for everything you do out of the goodness of your hearts! As always with gratitude to my executive committee: Sue Grafton, Dr. Jessica Andersen, Betsey Vaughan, and my Partner. And with much respect to the incomparable Suzanne Brockmann. To DLB guess what? ya mummy still loves ya xxx To NT Mas always, with love and gratitude. As you well know. And I have to say, none of this would be possible without: my loving husband, who sticks by me always; my wonderful mother, whos been with me since well, hey, the very beginning; my family (both those of blood and those by choice); and my dearest friends. Glossary of Terms and Proper Nouns Prologue Chapter One Chapter Two Chapter Three Chapter Four Chapter Five Chapter Six Chapter Seven Chapter Eight Chapter Nine Chapter Ten Chapter Eleven Chapter Twelve Chapter Thirteen Chapter Fourteen Chapter Fifteen Chapter Sixteen Chapter Seventeen Chapter Eighteen Chapter Nineteen Chapter Twenty Chapter Twenty-one Chapter Twenty-two Chapter Twenty-three Chapter Twenty-four Chapter Twenty-five Chapter Twenty-six Chapter Twenty-seven Chapter Twenty-eight Chapter Twenty-nine Chapter Thirty Chapter Thirty-one Chapter Thirty-two Chapter Thirty-three Chapter Thirty-four Chapter Thirty-five Chapter Thirty-six Chapter Thirty-seven Chapter Thirty-eight Chapter Thirty-nine Chapter Forty Chapter Forty-one Chapter Forty-two Chapter Forty-three Chapter Forty-four Chapter Forty-five Chapter Forty-six Chapter Forty-seven Chapter Forty-eight Chapter Forty-nine Chapter Fifty Chapter Fifty-one Chapter Fifty-two Chapter Fifty-three Chapter Fifty-four Epilogue Glossary of Terms and Proper Nouns ahvenge (v.) Act of mortal retribution, carried out typically by a male loved one. attendhente (n.) Chosen who serves the Scribe Virgin in particularly close

manner. **Black 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 by only 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** (pr. 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, save for the Primale, but can be mated to Brothers at the Scribe Virgins direction. They have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the Brotherhood, and that practice has been adopted once again. **cohntehst** (n.) Conflict between two males competing for the right to be a females mate. **Dhunhd** (pr. n.) Hell. **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. **ehros** (n.) A Chosen trained in the matter of sexual arts. **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. **ghardian** (n.) Custodian of an individual. There are varying degrees of ghardians, with the most powerful being that of a sehcluded female. **glymera** (n.) The social core of the aristocracy, roughly equivalent to Regency England's ton. **hellren** (n.) Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate. **leahdyre** (n.) A person of power and influence. **leelan** (n.) 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 targets vampires for extermination as a member of the Lessening Society. 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, blushless, 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. **lewlhen** (n.) Gift. **lheage** (n.) A term of respect used by a sexual submissive to refer to his or her dominant. **mahmen** (n.) Mother. Used both as an identifier and a term of affection. **mhis** (n.) The masking of a given physical environment; the creation of a field of illusion. **nalla** (n.f.) or **nallum** (n.m.) Beloved. **needing 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 needing. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated. **newling** (n.) A virgin. **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. **pherarsom** (adj.) Term referring to the potency of a males sexual organs. Literal translation something close to worthy of entering a female. **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. **rahlman** (n.) Savior. **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. **sehclusion** (n.) Status conferred by the king upon a female of the aristocracy as a result of a petition by the females family. Places the female under the sole direction of her ghardian, typically the eldest male in her household. Her ghardian then has the legal right to determine all manner of her life, restricting at will any and all interactions she has with the world. **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. **symphath** (n.) Species within the vampire race

characterized by the ability and desire to manipulate emotions in others (for the purposes of an energy exchange), among other traits. Historically, they have been discriminated against and during certain eras hunted by vampires. They are near extinction.

tahlly (n.) A term of endearment loosely translated as darling.

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.

trahyner (n.) Word of mutual respect and affection used between males. Translated loosely as beloved friend.

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. (S)he is accorded great respect and is revered for his/her travails.

whard (n.) Equivalent of a godfather or godmother to an individual.

Prologue Greenwich Country Day School Greenwich, Connecticut

Twenty years ago Just take it, Jane. Jane Whitcomb grabbed the backpack. You're still coming, right? I told you this morning. Yes. Okay. Jane watched her friend head down the sidewalk until a horn beeped. Straightening her jacket, she squared her shoulders and turned toward a Mercedes-Benz. Her mother was staring out of the drivers-side window, her eyebrows clenched. Jane hustled across the street, the rogue backpack with the contraband making too much noise, as far as she was concerned. She hopped in the backseat and stashed the thing at her feet. The car started rolling before she got the door shut. Your father is coming home this evening. What? Jane pushed her glasses up on her nose. When? Tonight. So I'm afraid the No! You promised! Her mother looked over her shoulder. I beg your pardon, young lady. Jane teared up. You promised me for my thirteenth birthday. Katie and Lucy are supposed to. I've already called their mothers. Jane fell back against the seat. Her mother's eyes lifted to the rearview mirror. Take that expression off your face, thank you. Do you think you're more important than your father? Do you? Of course not. He's god. The Mercedes swerved to the shoulder with a lurch and the brakes squealed. Her mother twisted around, lifted her hand, and held the pose, her arm trembling. Jane shrank back in horror. After a moment of suspended violence, her mother turned away, smoothing her perfectly smooth hair with a palm that was steady as boiling water. You will not be joining us for dinner this evening. And your cake will be disposed of. The car started moving again. Jane wiped her cheeks and looked down at the backpack. She had never had a sleepover before. Had begged for months. Ruined. It was all ruined now. They were silent the whole ride home, and when the Mercedes was in the garage Jane's mother got out of the car and walked into the house without looking back. You know where to go, was all she said. Jane stayed in the car, trying to collect herself. Then she picked up the backpack and her books and dragged herself in through the kitchen. Richard, the cook, was bent over the trash bin pushing a cake with white icing and red and yellow flowers off a plate. She didn't say anything to Richard because her throat was tight as a fist. Richard didn't say anything to her because he didn't like her. He didn't like anyone but Hannah. As Jane went out the butlers door into the dining room, she didn't want to run into her younger sister and prayed Hannah was in bed. She'd been sick this morning. Probably because she'd had a book report due. On the way to the staircase, Jane saw her mother in the living room. The couch cushions. Again. Her mother was still in her pale blue wool coat with her silk scarf in her hand, and no doubt she was going to stay dressed like that until she was satisfied with the way the cushions looked. Which might be a while. The standard against which the things were measured was the same as the hair standard: total smoothness. Jane headed up to her room. Her only hope at this point was that her father would arrive after dinner. That way, although he would still find out she was grounded, at least he wouldn't have to look at her empty seat. Like her mother, he hated anything out of order, and Jane not at the table was big-time out of order. The length of the lecture she'd get from him would be longer than

way, because it would have to include both how she'd let the family down with her absence at the meal as well as the fact that she'd been rude to her mother. Upstairs, Jane's buttercup yellow bedroom was like everything else in the house: smooth as hair and couch cushions and the way people talked. Nothing out of place. Everything in the kind of frozen perfection you saw in house magazines. The only thing that didn't fit was Hannah. The rogue backpack went into the closet, on top of the rows of penny loafers and Mary Janes; then Jane changed out of her school uniform into a Lanz flannel nightgown. There was no reason to put real clothes on. She was going nowhere. She took her stack of books to her white desk. She had English homework to do. Algebra. French. She glanced over at her bedside table. Arabian Nights waited for her. She couldn't think of a better way to spend her punishment, but homework came first. Had to. Otherwise she would feel too guilty. Two hours later she was on her bed with Nights in her lap when the door opened and Hannah's head poked in. Her curly red hair was another deviation. The rest of them were blonds. I brought food. Jane sat up, worried for her younger sister. You'll get in trouble. No, I won't. Hannah slipped in, a little basket with a gingham napkin, a sandwich, an apple, and a cookie in her hand. Richard gave this to me so I'd have a snack tonight. What about you? I'm not hungry. Here. Thanks, Han. Jane took the basket as Hannah sat on the foot of the bed. So what didja do? Jane shook her head and bit into the roast beef sandwich. I got upset with Mom. Cuz you couldn't have your party? Uh-huh. Well, I got something to cheer you up. Hannah slid a folded piece of construction paper onto the duvet. Happy birthday! Jane looked at the card and blinked fast a couple of times. Thanks, Han. Don't be sad, I'm here. Look at your card! I made it for you. On the front, drawn in her sister's messy hand, were two stick figures. One had straight blond hair and the word Jane written under it. The other had curly red hair and the name Hannah at its feet. They were holding hands and had big smiles on their circle faces. Just as Jane went to open the card, a pair of headlights swept the front of the house and started coming up the driveway. Papa's home, Jane hissed. You better get out of here. Hannah didn't seem as concerned as she'd usually be, probably because she didn't feel good. Or maybe she was distracted by well, whatever Hannah got distracted by. She was mostly in her daydreams, which was probably why she was happy all the time. Go, Han, seriously. Okay. But I'm really sorry that's your party got quitted. Hannah shuffled over to the door. Hey, Han? I like my card. You didn't look inside. Don't have to. I like it because you made it for me. Hannah's face split into one of her daisy smiles, the kind that reminded Jane of sunny days. It's about you and me. As the door shut, Jane heard her parents' voices drift up from the foyer. In a rush she ate Hannah's snack, shoved the basket into the folds of the drapes next to the bed, and went to the stack of her schoolbooks. She took Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* back with her to the bed. She figured if she was working on school stuff when her father came in, it would buy her some brownie points. Her parents came upstairs an hour later and she tensed, expecting her father to knock. He didn't. Which was weird. He was, in his controlling way, as reliable as a clock, and there was a strange comfort in his predictability, even though she didn't like dealing with him. She put *Pickwick* aside, turned the light out, and tucked her legs under her frilly duvet. Beneath the canopy of her bed she couldn't sleep, and eventually she heard the grandfather clock at the head of the stairs chime twelve times. Midnight. Slipping from bed, she went to the closet, got out the rogue knapsack, and unzipped it. The Ouija board fell out, flipping open and landing faceup on the floor. She grabbed it with a wince, as if it might have broken or something, then got the pointer thingy. She and her friends had been looking forward to playing the game because they all wanted to know who they were going to marry. Jane liked a boy named Victor Browne, who was in her math class. The two of them had been talking a little lately, and she really thought they could be a couple. Trouble was, she wasn't sure what he felt for her. Maybe he just liked her because she gave him answers. Jane laid out the board on her bed, rested her hands on the pointer, and took a deep breath. What is the name of the boy I'm going to marry? She didn't expect the thing to move. And it didn't. A couple more tries and she leaned back in frustration. After a minute she rapped on the wall behind her headboard. Her sister knocked back, and a little later Hannah sneaked in through the door. When she saw the game, she got excited and jumped on the bed, bouncing the pointer into the air. How do you play! Shh! God, if they got caught like this, they were totally grounded. Forever. Sorry. Hannah tucked her legs up and held on to them to keep from spazzing. How do you ask it questions and it tells you the answers. What can we ask? Who were going to marry. Okay, now Jane was nervous. What if the answer wasn't Victor? Let's start with you. Put your fingertips on the pointer, but don't push down or anything. Just like that, yup. Okay. Who is Hannah going to marry? The pointer didn't move. Even after Jane repeated the question. It's broken, Hannah said, pulling away. Let me try another question. Put your hands back up. Jane took a deep breath. Who am I going to marry? A squeaky little noise rose up from the board as the pointer began to move. When it came to rest on the letter V, Jane trembled. Heart in her throat, she

watched it move to the letter I. Its Victor! Hannah said. Its Victor! Youre going to marry Victor! Jane didnt bother shushing her sister. This was too good to be true. The pointer landed on the letter S. S? This is wrong, Jane said. This has to be wrong. Dont stop. Lets find out who it is. But if it wasnt Victor, she didnt know. And what kind of boy had a name like Vis? Jane fought to redirect the pointer, but it insisted on going to the letter H. Then O, U, and once more to S. VISHOUS. Dread coated the inside of Janes rib cage. I told you it was broken, Hannah muttered. Whos called Vishous? Jane looked away from the board, then let herself fall back onto her pillows. This was the worst birthday shed ever had. Maybe we should try again, Hannah said. When Jane hesitated, she frowned. Come on, I want an answer, too. Its only fair. They put their fingers back on the pointer. What will I get for Christmas? Hannah asked. The pointer didnt move. Try a yes or no to get it started, Jane said, still freaked out over the word shed been given. Maybe the board couldnt spell? Will I get anything for Christmas? Hannah said. The pointer started to squeak. I hope its a horse, Hannah murmured as the pointer circled. I should have asked that. The pointer stopped on no. They both stared at the thing. Hannahs arms went around herself. I want some presents, too. Its just a game, Jane said, closing the board up. Besides, the thing really is broken. I dropped it. I want presents. Jane reached out and hugged her sister. Dont worry about the stupid board, Han. Ill always get you something for Christmas. When Hannah left a little later, Jane got back between the sheets. Stupid board. Stupid birthday. Stupid everything. As she closed her eyes, she realized shed never looked at her sisters card. She turned the light back on and picked it up off the bedside table. Inside it said, We will always hold hands! I love you! Hannah. That answer theyd been given about Christmas was so wrong. Everyone loved Hannah and got her presents. Jeez, she could even sway their father on occasion, and no one else could do that. So of course she would get things. Stupid board. After a while Jane fell asleep. She must have, because Hannah woke her. You okay? Jane said, sitting up. Her sister was standing by the bed in her flannel nightie, an odd expression on her face. I gotta go. Hannahs voice was sad. To the bathroom? You gonna be sick? Jane pushed the covers away. Ill go with you. You cant. Hannah sighed. I gotta go. Well, when youre finished doing whatever, you can come back here and sleep if you wanna. Hannah looked to the door. Im scared. Being sick is scary. But Ill always be here for you. I gotta go. When Hannah glanced back, she looked all grown-up somehow. Nothing like the ten-year-old she was. Ill try and come back. Ill do my best. Um okay. Maybe her sister had a fever or something? You want to go wake up Mother? Hannah shook her head. I only want to see you. Go back to sleep. As Hannah left, Jane sank back against her pillows. She thought about going and checking on her sister in the bathroom, but sleep claimed her before she could follow through on the impulse. The following morning Jane woke up to the sound of heavy footfalls running outside in the hall. At first she assumed someone had dropped something that was leaving a stain on a carpet or a chair or a bedspread. But then the ambulance sirens came up the driveway. Jane got out of bed, checked the front windows, then poked her head into the hall. Her father was speaking to someone downstairs, and the door to Hannahs room was open. On tiptoe, Jane went down the Oriental runner, thinking that her sister wasnt usually up this early on a Saturday. She must really be sick. She stopped in the doorway. Hannah was lying still on her bed, her eyes open toward the ceiling, her skin white as the pristine snowy sheets she was on. She wasnt blinking. In the opposite corner of the room, as far away from Hannah as possible, their mother was sitting in the window seat, her ivory silk dressing robe pooling on the floor. Go back to bed. Now. Jane raced for her room. Just as she shut her door, she saw her father coming up the stairs with two men in navy blue uniforms. He was talking with authority and she heard the words congenital heart something. Jane jumped into her bed and pulled the sheets up over her head. As she trembled in the darkness, she felt very small and very scared. The board had been right. Hannah got no Christmas presents and married no one. But Janes little sister kept her promise. She did come back. Chapter One I am so not feeling all this cowhide. Vishous looked up from his bank of computers. Butch ONeal was standing in the Pits living room with a pair of leathers on his thighs and a whole lot of youve got-to-be-kidding-me on his puss. They dont fit you? V asked his roommate. Not the point. No offense, but these are wicked Village People. Butch held his heavy arms out and turned in a circle, his bare chest catching the light. I mean, come on. Theyre for fighting, not fashion. So are kilts, but you dont see me rocking the tartan. And thank God for that. Youre too bowlegged to pull that shit off. Butch assumed a bored expression. You can bite me. I wish, V thought. With a wince, he went for his pouch of Turkish tobacco. As he took out some rolling paper, laid down a line, and twisted himself a cig, he did what he spent a lot of time doing: He reminded himself that Butch was happily mated to the love of his life, and that even if he werent, the guy didnt play like that. As V lit up and inhaled, he tried not to look at the cop and failed. Fucking peripheral vision. Always did him in. Man, he was a perverted freak. Especially given how tight the two of them

were. In the last nine months, V had grown closer to Butch than anyone he'd ever met in his over three hundred years of living and breathing. He'd roomed with the male, gotten drunk with him, worked out with him. Been through death and life and prophecies and doom with him. Helped bend the laws of nature to turn the guy from human to vampire, then healed him when he did his special business with the races enemies.

He'd also proposed him for membership in the Brotherhood and stood by him when he'd been mated to his she'llan. While Butch paced around like he was trying to get comfy with the leathers, V stared at the seven letters that were carved in Old English across his back: MARISSA. V had done both the As, and they'd come out well, in spite of the fact that his hand had been shaking the whole time. Yeah, Butch said. I'm not sure I'm feeling these. After their mating ceremony, V had vacated the Pit for the day so the happy couple could have their privacy. He'd gone across the compounds courtyard and shut himself up in a guest room at the big house with three bottles of Grey Goose. He'd gotten saturated drunk, real rice-paddy flooded, but hadn't been able to meet the goal of making himself pass out. The truth had kept him mercilessly awake: V was attached to his roommate in ways that complicated things and yet changed nothing at all. Butch knew what was doing.

Hell, they were best friends, and the guy could read V better than anyone could. And Marissa knew it because she wasn't stupid. And the Brotherhood knew it because those old-maid fool idiots never let you keep secrets. They were all cool with it. He wasn't. He couldn't stand the emotions. Or himself. You going to try the rest of your gear on? he asked on an exhale. Or you want to whine about your pants a little more? Don't make me flip you off. Why would I deprive you of a favorite hobby? Because my fingers getting sore. Butch walked over to one of the couches and picked up a chest harness. As he slid it onto his broad shoulders, the leather contoured to his torso perfectly. Shit, how'd you get it to fit so well? I measured you, remember? Butch buckled the thing in place, then bent down and ran his fingertips across the lid of a black-lacquered box. He lingered over the gold crest of the Black Dagger Brotherhood, then traced the Old Language characters that spelled out Destroyer, descended of Wrath, son of Wrath. Butch's new name.

Butch's old, noble lineage. Oh, for fuck's sake, open the thing. V stabbed out his cig, rolled another, and lit up again. Man, it was a good thing vampires didn't get cancer. Lately he'd been chain-smoking like a felon. Go on. I still can't believe this. Just open the damn thing. I really can't. Open. It. At this point, V was twitchy enough to levitate out of his frickin' chair. The cop triggered the solid-gold lock mechanism and lifted the top. Lying on a bed of red satin were four matching black-bladed daggers, each precisely weighted to Butch's specs and honed to a lethal edge. Holy Mary, Mother of God. They're beautiful. Thanks, V said on another exhale. I make good bread, too. The cop's hazel eyes shot across the room. You did these for me? Yeah, but it's no big thing. I

do them for all of us. V lifted up his gloved right hand. I'm good with heat, as you know. V thank you. Whatever. Like I said, I'm the blade man. Do it all the time. Yeah, just maybe not with quite as much focus. For Butch, he'd spent the past four days straight on them. The sixteen-hour marathons working his cursed glowing hand over the composite steel had made his back burn and his eyes strain, but goddamn it, he'd been determined to get each one worthy of the male who would wield them. They still weren't good enough. The cop took one of the daggers out, and as he palmed it his eyes flared. Jesus, feel this thing. He began working the weapon back and forth in front of his chest. Never held anything so well weighted. And the grip. God, perfect. The praise pleased V more than any he'd ever received. So it irritated the shit out of him. Yeah, well, they're supposed to be like that, true? He stabbed the hand-rolled out in an ashtray, crushing the fragile glow at its tip. No sense you going out in the field with a set of Ginsus. Thank you. Whatever. V, seriously, make that fuck you. When there was no slappy comeback, he looked up. Shit. Butch was standing right in front of him, the cop's hazel eyes dark with a knowledge V wished the guy didn't have. V dropped his stare to his lighter. Whatever, cop, they're just knives. The black tip of the dagger slid under V's chin and angled his head up. As he was forced to meet Butch's stare, V's body tensed. Then trembled. With the weapon linking them, Butch said, They're beautiful. V closed his eyes, despising himself. Then he deliberately leaned into the blade so that it bit into his throat. Swallowing the flare of pain, he held it in his gut, using it as a reminder that he was a fucked-up freak, and freaks deserved to get hurt. Vishous, look at me. Leave me alone. Make me. For a split second V almost launched himself at the guy, prepared to punch the bastard out cold. But then Butch said, I'm just thanking you for doing something cool. No BFD. No big fucking deal? V's eyes flipped open and he felt his stare glow. That's bullshit. For reasons you are very fucking aware of. Butch removed the blade, and as the male's arm dropped, V felt a trickle of blood ease down his neck. It was warm and soft as a kiss. Don't say you're sorry, V muttered into the silence. I'm liable to get violent. But I am. Nothing to be sorry for. Man, he couldn't take living here with Butch anymore. Make that Butch and Marissa. The constant reminder of what he couldn't have and shouldn't want was killing him. And Christ

knew he was already in bad shape. When was the last time hed slept through the day? Weeks and weeks. Butch sheathed the blade in the chest holster, handle down. I dont want you to hurt We are so not discussing this further. Putting his forefinger to his throat, V caught the blood hed drawn with the blade hed made. As he licked it off, the hidden door to the underground tunnel opened and the scent of the ocean filled the Pit. Marissa came around the corner, looking Grace Kelly fine as usual. With her long blond hair and her precision-molded face, she was known as the great beauty of the species, and even V, who didnt go for her type, had to show love. Hello, boys Marissa stopped and stared at Butch. Good Lord look at those pants. Butch winced. Yeah, I know. Theyre Could you come over here? She started backing down the hall to their bedroom. I need you to come back here for a minute. Or ten. Butchs bonding scent flared to a dull roar, and V knew damn well the guys body was hardening for sex. Baby, you can have me for as long as you want me. Just as the cop left the living room, he shot a look over his shoulder. Im so feeling these leathers. Tell Fritz I want fifty pairs of them. Stat. Left by himself, Vishous leaned over to the Alpine and cranked up MIMSs Music Is My Savior. As the rap pounded, he thought about how before, hed used the shit to drown out the thoughts of others. Now that his visions had dried up and that whole mind-reading thing had gone poof!? He used the bass beats to keep him from hearing his roommate making love. V rubbed his face. He really had to get out of here. For a while hed tried to get them to move out, but Marissa maintained that the Pit was cozy and that she liked living in it. Which had to be a lie. Half the living room was eaten up by the foosball table, ESPN was on mute twenty-four/seven, and hard-core rap was always playing. The refrigerator was a demilitarized zone marked with decaying casualties from Taco Hell and Arbys. Grey Goose and Lagavulin were the only drinks in the house. Reading material was limited to Sports Illustrated and well, back issues of Sports Illustrated. So, yeah, not a whole lot of duck-and-bunny-adorable going down. The place was part frat house, part locker room. With decor by Derek Jeter. As for Butch? When V had suggested a little U-Haul action to the guy, the cop had shot a level stare across the couch, shook his head once, and gone into kitchen for more Lagavulin. V refused to think they stayed because they were worried about him or some shit. The very idea made him mental. He got to his feet. If there was going to be a separation, he was going to have to be the one who initiated it. The trouble was, not having Butch around all the time was unthinkable. Better the torture he had now than an exile. He checked his watch and figured he might as well hit the underground tunnel and head over to the big house. Even though the rest of the Black Dagger Brotherhood lived in that rock-faced monster of a mansion next door, there were plenty of extra rooms. Maybe he should just try one on for size. For a couple of days. The thought made his stomach churn. On his way to the door, he caught the bonding scent wafting from Butch and Marissas bedroom. As he thought about what was happening, his blood heated even as shame made his skin go Popsicle. With a curse, he walked over to his leather jacket and took out a cell phone. As he dialed, his chest was warm as a meat locker, but at least he felt as if he was doing something about this obsession of his. When the female voice answered, V sliced through her husky hello. Sundown. Tonight. You know what to wear, and your hair will be off your neck. What do you say to me? The reply was a purr of submission. Yes, my lheage. V hung up and tossed the cell phone on the desk, watching as it bounced and came to rest against one of his four keyboards. The submissive hed chosen for tonight liked things especially hard-core. And he was going to deliver. Fuck, he truly was a pervert. Down to the marrow. A confirmed, unrepentant sexual deviant who was somehow famous within the race for what he was. Man, it was absurd, but then, the tastes and motivations of females had always been bizarre. And his fancy reputation was no more significant to him than his subs were. All that mattered was that he had volunteers for what he needed sexually. What was said about him, what the females needed to believe about him, was just oral masturbation for mouths that needed to be otherwise occupied. As he went down into the tunnel and headed for the mansion, he was thoroughly bitched. Thanks to that stupid rotation schedule the Brotherhood was on, he wasnt allowed in the field tonight, and he hated that. Hed much rather be hunting and killing the undead slayers who went after the race than parked on his ass. But there were ways to burn off a case of the eye-splitting frustrates. That was what restraints and willing bodies were made for. Phury walked into the mansions industrial-sized kitchen and froze the way you did when confronted with an accidental injury of the bloody variety: The soles of his feet got stuck to the floor, his breath stopped, his heart skipped then scrambled. Before he could back out through the butlers door, he got caught. Bella, his twins shellan, looked up and smiled. Hi. Hello. Leave. Now. God, she smelled good. She waved the knife in her hand over the roasted turkey she was working on. Would you like me to make you a sandwich, too? What? he said like an idiot. A sandwich. She pointed the blade at the bread loaf and the almost empty jar of mayonnaise and the lettuce and tomatoes. You must be hungry. You didnt eat

much at Last Meal. Oh, yeahno, Im not His stomach put the kibosh on the lie by growling like the empty beast it was. Bastard. Bella shook her head and went back at the turkeys breast. Get yourself a plate and have a seat. Okay, this was the last thing he needed. Better to be buried alive than sit alone in the kitchen with her as she prepared food for him with her beautiful hands. Phury, she said without looking up. Plate. Seat. Now. He complied because in spite of the fact that he came from a warrior bloodline and he was a member of the Brotherhood and he outweighed her by a good hundred pounds, he was lame and weak when it came to her. His twins shellanhis twins pregnant shellanwas not someone Phury could deny. After sliding a plate over next to hers, he sat down across the granite island and told himself not to look at her hands. Hed be okay as long as he didnt look at her long, elegant fingers and her short, buffed nails and the way Shit. I swear, she said as she sliced more breast meat off, Zsadist wants me big as a house. Another thirteen months of him pestering me to eat and I wont fit into the swimming pool. I can barely get my pants on anymore. You look good. Hell, she looked perfect, with her long dark hair and her sapphire eyes and her tall, fit body. The young inside of her didnt show beneath her baggy shirt, but the pregnancy was obvious in her glowing skin and the way her hand frequently went to her lower belly. Her condition was also evident in the anxiety behind Zs eyes whenever he was around her. As vampire pregnancies carried high maternal/fetal death rates, they were a blessing and a curse for the hellren who had bonded with his mate. Do you feel okay? Phury asked. After all, Z wasnt the only one worried about her. Pretty much. I get tired, but its not all that bad. She licked her fingertips, then grabbed the mayonnaise jar. As she fished around inside, the knife made a rattling noise, like a coin being shaken up and down. Zs driving me nuts, though. Hes refusing to feed. Phury remembered what her blood tasted like and looked away as his fangs elongated. There was no nobility in what he felt for her, none at all, and as a male who had always prided himself on his honorable nature, he couldnt reconcile his emotions with his principles. And what was doing on his end was definitely not reciprocated. Shed fed him that one time because hed needed it desperately and because she was a female of worth. It had not been because she was driven to sustain him or because she craved him. No, all of that was for his twin. From the first night shed met Z, hed captivated her, and fate had provided that she be the one who truly saved him from the hell hed been locked in. Phury may have rescued Zs body from that century of being a blood slave, but Bella had resurrected his spirit. Which was, of course, just one more reason to love her. Damn, he wished he had some red smoke on him. Hed left his frickin stash upstairs. So how are you doing? she asked as she dealt out thin slices of turkey, then layered on lettuce leaves. Is that new prosthesis still giving you problems? Its a little better, thanks. Technology these days was light-years ahead of what hed had a century ago, but considering all the fighting he did, his lost lower leg was a constant management issue. Lost leg yeah, hed lost it, all right. Shot it off to get Z away from that sick bitch Mistress of his. The sacrifice had been worth it. Just like the sacrifice of his happiness was worth Z being with the female they both loved. Bella topped the sandwiches with bread and slid his plate across the granite. Here you go. This is just what I needed. He savored the moment as he sank his front teeth into the thing, the soft bread giving way like flesh. While swallowing, he was struck with a sad joy that she had prepared this food for his belly, and she had done it with a certain kind of love. Good. Im glad. She bit into her own sandwich. So Ive wanted to ask you something for a day or so. Oh? What? Ive been working down at Safe Place with Marissa, as you know. Its such a great organization, full of great people. There was a long pause the kind that made him brace himself. Anyway, a new social worker has come in to counsel the females and their young. She cleared her throat. Wiped her mouth with a paper towel. Shes really great. Warm, funny. I was kind of thinking that maybe Oh, God. Thanks, but no. Shes really nice. No, thanks. With his skin shriveling up tight around his body, he started eating at a dead run. Phury I know its not my business, but why the celibacy? Shit. Faster with the sandwich. May we change the subject? Its because of Z, right? Why youve never been with a female. Its your sacrifice to him and his past. Bella please Youre over two hundred years old, and its time you started to think about yourself. Zs never going to be completely normal, and no one knows that better than you and me. But hes more stable now. And hes going to get even healthier over time. True, provided Bella survived this pregnancy of hers: Until she came out of the delivery healthy, his twin wasnt out of the woods yet. And by extension, neither was Phury. Please let me introduce you No. Phury stood up and chewed like a cow. Table manners were very important, but this conversation had to end before his head exploded. Phury I dont want a female in my life. You would make a wonderful hellren, Phury. He wiped his mouth on a dish towel and said in the Old Language, Thank you for this meal made by thine hands. Blessed evening, Bella, beloved mate of mine twin, Zsadist. Feeling cheap that he didnt help clean up, but figuring it was better than him having an aneurism, he pushed through the butlers door into the dining room. Halfway down the thirty-foot-

long table, he ran out of gas, pulled free a random chair, and dropped into the thing. Man, his heart was pounding. When he looked up, Vishous was standing on the other side of the table, staring down at him. Christ! Little tense there, my brother? At six-feet-six, and descended of the great warrior known only as the Bloodletter, V was a massive male. With his blue-rimmed ice white irises, his jet-black hair, and his angular, cunning face, he might have been considered beautiful. But the goatee and the warning tattoos at his temple made him look evil. Not tense. Not at all. Phury splayed his hands out on the glossy table, thinking about the blunt he was going to light up the instant he got to his room. Actually, I was going to come find you. Oh, yeah? Wrath didnt like the vibe at this mornings meeting. Which was an understatement. V and the king had ended up chin-to-chin on a couple of things, and that wasnt the only argument that flew. Hes taken us all off rotation tonight. Said we need some R and R. V arched his brows, looking smarter than a matched set of Einsteins. The genius air wasnt just an appearance thing. The guy spoke sixteen languages, developed computer games for kicks and giggles, and could recite the twenty volumes of the Chronicles by rote. The brother made Stephen Hawking seem like a candidate for votech. All of us? V said. Yeah, I was going to hit ZeroSum. Wanna come? Just scheduled some private biz. Ah, yes. Vs unconventional sex life. Man, he and Vishous were on such opposite ends of the sexual spectrum: Him knowing nothing, Vishous having explored everything, and most of it on the extremesthe untrodden path and the Autobahn. And that wasnt the only difference between them. Come to think of it, the two of them had absolutely nothing in common. Phury? He shook himself to attention. Sorry, what? I said, I dreamed of you once. Many years ago. Oh, God. Why hadnt he just gone straight to his room? He could be lighting up right now. How so? V stroked his goatee. I saw you standing at a crossroads in a field of white. It was a stormy day yeah, lots of storms. But when you took a cloud from the sky and wrapped it around the well, the rain stopped falling. Sounds poetic. And what a relief. Most of Vs visions were scary as hell. But meaningless. None of what I see is meaningless, and you know it. Allegorical then. How can anyone wrap up a well? Phury frowned. And why tell me now? Vs black brows came down over his mirrorlike eyes. I God, I have no idea. I just had to say it. With a nasty curse, he headed for the kitchen. Is Bella still in there? How did you know she was? You always look ruined after you see her. Chapter Two Half an hour and a turkey sandwich later, V materialized to the terrace of his private downtown penthouse. The night was a bitch, all March cold and April wet, the bitter wind weaving around like a drunk with a nasty attitude. As he stood before the panorama of Caldwell's bridge, the postcard view of the twinkling city bored him. And so did his prospects for the evenings fun and games. He supposed he was similar to a long-standing coke addict. The high had once been intense, but now he serviced the monkey on his back with no particular enthusiasm. He was all need, no ease. Planting his palms on the terrace ledge, he leaned way over and got sandblasted in the face with a rush of icy air, his hair blowing back all fashion-model and shit. Or maybe more like in superhero comics. Yeah, that was a better metaphor. Except he would be a villain, wouldnt he? He realized his hands were stroking the flat stone they rested on, caressing it. The ledge was four feet high and ran around the building like the lip of a serving tray. The top of it was a three-foot-wide shelf just begging to be leaped off of, with the thirty feet of thin air on the other side the perfect breezy prelude to deaths hard fuck. Now, this was a view that interested him. He knew firsthand how sweet that free fall was. How the force of the wind pushed at your chest, making it hard to breathe. How your eyes watered and the tears streaked up your temples, not down your cheeks. How the ground rushed up to greet you, a host ready to welcome you to the party. He wasnt sure hed made the right decision to save himself that time hed jumped. At the last moment, though, he dematerialized back up to the terrace. Back into Butch's arms. Fucking Butch. Always came back to that son of a bitch, didnt it. V turned away from the urge to pull another flier and unlocked one of the sliders with his mind. The penthouses three walls of glass were bulletproof, but they didnt filter sunlight. Not that he would have stayed here during the day even if they did. This was not a home. As he stepped inside, the place and what he used it for pressed into him as if the force of gravity were different here. The walls and the ceiling and the marble floors of the sprawling one-room spread were black. So were the hundreds of candles that he could light at his will. The only thing that could be classified as furniture was a king-size bed that hed never used. The rest was equipment: The table with the restraints. The chains mounted into the wall. The masks and the ball gags and the whips and the canes and the chains. The cabinet full of nipple weights and steel clips and stainless-steel tools. All for the females. He took off his leather jacket and tossed it onto the bed, then ditched his shirt. He always kept his leathers on during the sessions. The subs never saw him completely naked. No one did except for his brothers during ceremonies in the Tomb, and that was only because the rituals demanded it. What he looked like down below was no one elses fucking biz. Candles flared at his command, the liquid light rebounding off

the glossy floor before being sucked up by the black dome of the ceiling. There was nothing romantic in the air. The place was a cave where the profane was performed on the willing, and the illumination was only to ensure proper placement of leather and metal, hands and fangs. Plus, candles could be used for a purpose other than illumination. He went to the wet bar, poured himself a couple of inches of Grey Goose, and leaned back against the short stretch of counter. There were those among the species who thought coming here and withstanding intercourse with him was a rite of passage. Then there were others who could find their satisfaction only with him. And still more who wanted to explore how pain and sex could mix. The Lewis-and-Clark types were the ones who interested him least. Usually they couldn't handle it and had to use the safe word or safe hand signal he gave them in the middle. He always let them go readily, though any tears were theirs to soothe, not his. Nine out of ten times they wanted to try again, but that was a no-go. If they broke too easily once, they'd probably do it again, and he wasn't interested in coaching lightweights into the lifestyle. The ones who could take it called him lheage and worshiped him, not that he gave a shit about their reverence. The edge in him had to get dulled, and their bodies were the stone he used to grind himself down on. End of story. He walked over to the wall, picked up one of the lengths of steel chain, and let it slide through his palm, link by link. Although he was a sadist by nature, he didn't get off hurting his subs. His sadistic side was fed by his lesser kills. For him, the control over his subs' minds and bodies was what he was after. The things he did to them sexually or otherwise, the things he said, what he made them wear—it was all carefully calibrated for effect. Sure, there was pain involved, and yeah, maybe they cried from the vulnerability and the fear. But they begged him for more. Which he gave to them, if he felt like it. He glanced at the masks. He always put them in masks, and they were never to touch him unless he told them where and how and with what. If he had orgasms during the course of a session, it was unusual and regarded by the subs with great pride. And if he fed, it was only because he had to. He never degraded those who came here, never made them do some of the nasty things he knew damn well some Doms favored. But he did not comfort them in the beginning, the middle, or the end, and the sessions were on his terms only. He told the people where and when, and if they pulled any jealous entitlement horseshit, they were out. For good. He checked his watch and lifted the mhis that surrounded the penthouse. The female who was coming tonight could track him because he'd taken her vein a couple months ago. When he was through with her, he would fix it so she would leave with no memory of the location where she'd been. She would know what happened, though. The marks of the sex would be all over her. As the female materialized on the terrace, he turned around. Through the sliders she was an anonymous shadow of curves in a black leather bustier and a long, loose black skirt. Her dark hair was coiled up high on her head, as he'd required. She knew to wait. Knew not to knock. He opened the door with his mind, but she also knew better than to come in without being summoned. He looked her over and caught her scent. She was totally aroused. His fangs elongated, but not because he was particularly interested in the wet sex between her legs. He needed to feed, and she was female and she had all kinds of veins to tap into. It was biology, not bewitchment. V extended his arm and crooked his finger at her. She came forward, trembling, as well she should. He was in a particularly sharp mood tonight. Lose that skirt, he said. I'm not feeling it. She immediately unzipped the thing and let it fall to the floor in a rush of satin. Underneath, she wore a black garter and black lace-topped hose. No panties. Hm, yeah. He was going to cut that lingerie off her hips with a dagger. Eventually, V walked over to the wall and picked out a mask with only one opening. She was going to have to breathe through her mouth if she wanted air. Tossing it to her, he said, On. Now. She covered her face without a word. Get up on my table. He didn't help her as she fumbled around, just watched, knowing she'd find her way. They always did. Females like her always found the way to his rack. To pass the time, he took a hand-rolled out of his back pocket, put it between his lips, and picked a black candle from its holder. As he lit his cigarette, he stared at the little pool of liquid wax at the foot of the flame. He checked on how the female was progressing. Well-done. She'd positioned herself faceup, arms out, legs spread. After he restrained her, he knew exactly where to start tonight. He kept the candle in his hand as he stepped forward. Under the caged lights of the Brotherhoods gym, John Matthew assumed the ready position and focused on his training opponent. The two of them were as well matched as a pair of chopsticks, both thin and insubstantial, easily broken. As all pretrans were. Zsadist, the Brother who was teaching the hand-to-hand tonight, whistled through his teeth, and John and his classmate bowed to each other. His opponent said the appropriate acknowledgment in the Old Language, and John returned the statement using American Sign Language. Then they engaged. Small hands and bony arms flew around to no great effect; kicks were thrown out like paper airplanes; dodges were made with little finesse. All their moves and positions were shadows of what they should have been, echoes of

thunder, not the bass roar itself. The thunder came from elsewhere in the gym. In the middle of the round, there was a tremendous WHOOMP! as a solid body hit the blue mats like a bag of sand. Both John and his opponent glanced over and abandoned their meager mixed-martial-arts attempts. Zsadist was working with Blaylock, one of John's two best friends. The redhead was the only trainee who'd been through the change so far, so he was twice the size of everyone else in the class. And Z had just rugged the guy. Blaylock sprang to his feet and once more faced off like a trooper, but he was just going to get his ass handed to him again. As big as he was, Z was a giant as well as a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. So Blay was facing a Sherman tank with a fuckload of fighting experience. Man, Quinn should be here to see this. Where was the guy? All eleven trainees let out a Whoa! as Z calmly clipped Blay off balance, tossed him sunny-side down on the mats, and cranked him into a bone-bending submission hold. The instant Blay tapped out, Z got off him. As Zsadist stood over the kid, his voice was as warm as it ever got. Five days out of your transition and you're doing good. Blay smiled, even though his cheek was mashed into the mat like it had been glued down there. Thank you. He panted. Thank you, sire. Z extended his hand and hooked Blay off the floor just as the sound of a door opening echoed through the gym. John's eyes bulged at what came in. Well, shit, that explained where Quinn had been all afternoon. The male coming slowly across the mats was a six-foot-four-inch, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound likeness of someone who'd weighed about as much as a bag of dog food the day before. Quinn had been through the transition. God, no wonder the guy hadn't Y-messy'd or texted during the day. He'd been busy growing a new body. As John lifted his hand, Quinn nodded back like his neck was stiff or maybe his head was pounding. The guy looked like shit and moved as if every bone in his body hurt. He also fiddled with the collar of his new XXXL fleece like the feel of it was bugging him, and he kept jacking his jeans up with a wince. His black eye was a surprise, but maybe he'd bumped into something in the middle of the transition? Word had it you flailed around a lot when you were changing. Glad you showed, Zsadist said. Quinns voice was deep as he replied, a totally different cadence from before. I wanted to come even though I can't work out. Good call. You can chill over there. As Quinn went to the sidelines he met Blay's eyes and they both smiled real slow. Then they looked at John. Using American Sign Language, Quinns hands spelled out, After class we go to Blay's. Have a shitload to tell both of you. As John nodded, Z's voice cracked through the gym. Kibitzing breaks over, ladies. Don't make me lap your asses, because I will. John faced his little partner and settled into his ready position. Even though one of the trainees had died from the change, John couldn't wait for his to hit. Sure, he was pants-down terrified, but better to be dead than stuck in the world as a sexless scrap of flesh at the mercy of others. He was beyond ready to be male. He had family business to take care of with the lessers. Two hours later, V was as satisfied as he ever got. Not surprisingly, the female was in no shape to dematerialize home, so he put her in a robe, hypnotized her into a stupor, and took her down in the building's freight elevator. Fritz was waiting at the curb with the car, and the elderly doggen didn't ask any questions after her address was given. As always, that butler was a godsend. From Publishers Weekly The newest in Ward's ferociously popular Black Dagger Brotherhood series bears all the marks of a polished storyteller completely at home in her world. Vishous, son of the Bloodletter, is a cunning, stone-hearted vampire warrior devoted to killing the wicked, undead vampire slayers known as the Lessers; after an ill-fated visit to a hospital, Vishous falls instantly and unexpectedly in love with a human surgeon, Dr. Jane Whitcomb. Soon, Vishous has brought the unwitting human back to the Brotherhood lair, where she returns his feelings, opening up a potentially cataclysmic conflict. Vishous is, against his will, destined to become the Primale, a warrior with multiple vampire wives who's meant to ensure the survival of the species. Ward has by now become an expert at fleshing out the stories of her supporting characters each with his or her own novel without overpowering the central story, and while the romance between Vishous and Whitcomb is genre-typical, Ward isn't afraid to break with convention in challenging, gratifying ways. Though not recommended for newcomers to Ward's universe or romance traditionalists, this fix will give Brotherhood addicts a powerful rush. (Oct.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.