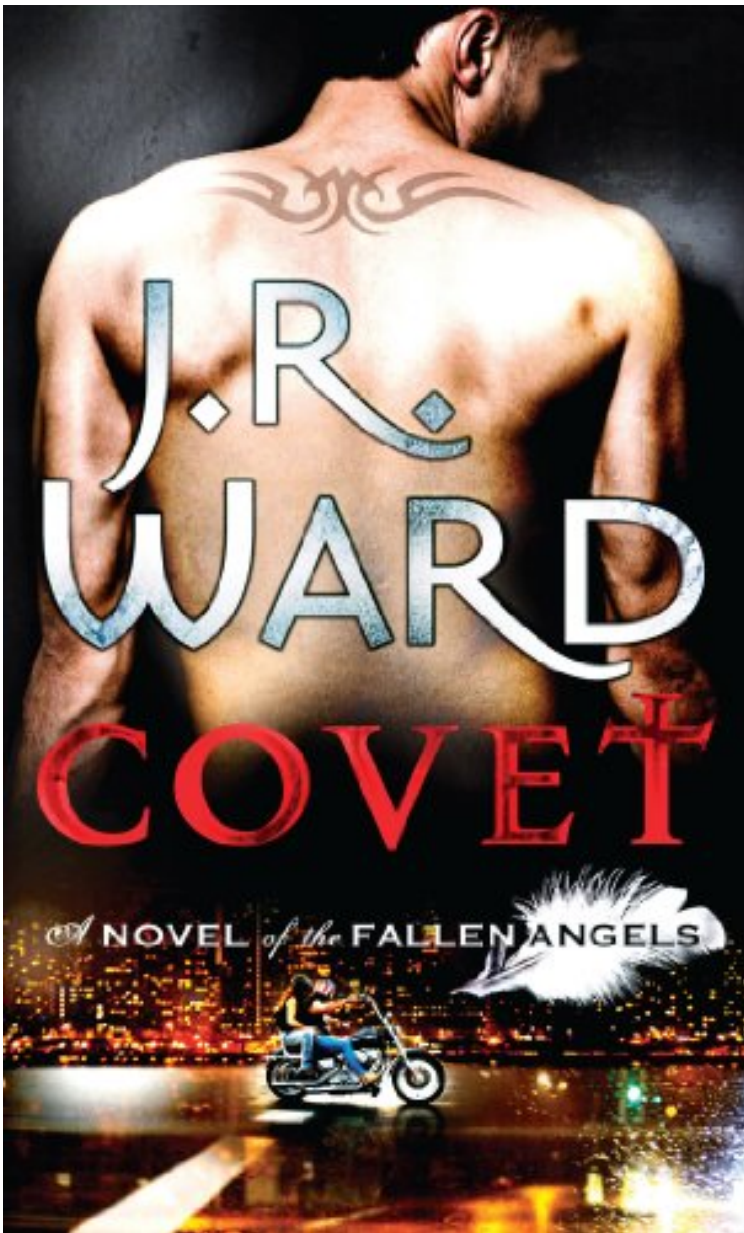


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WARDThe Black Dagger Brotherhood: An Insiders GuideNOVELS IN THE BLACK DAGGER BROTHERHOOD SERIESDark LoverLover EternalLover AwakenedLover RevealedLover UnboundLover EnshrinedLover AvengedCOVETA Novel of the Fallen AngelsJ. R. WardACKNOWLEDGMENTSWith thanks to: Kara Cesare, Claire Zion, Kara Welsh, Leslie Gelbman, and everyone at NAL. As always.Thank you also to Steven Axelrod, my voice of reason.With love to Team Waud: Dee, LeElla, K, and Nathwithout whom none of this would be possible. Thank you also to Jen and Lu and all our Mods and Hall Monitors.And with total gratitude to Doc Jess (aka Jessica Andersen), Sue Grafton, Suz Brockmann, Christine Feehan and her wonderful family, Lisa Gardner, and Linda Francis Lee.And with all love to my husband, my mother, the better half of WriterDog, and my whole family.PROLOGUECHAPTER 1CHAPTER 2CHAPTER 3CHAPTER 4CHAPTER 5CHAPTER 6CHAPTER 7CHAPTER 8CHAPTER 9CHAPTER 10CHAPTER 11CHAPTER 12CHAPTER 13CHAPTER 14CHAPTER 15CHAPTER 16CHAPTER 17CHAPTER 18CHAPTER 19CHAPTER 20CHAPTER 21CHAPTER 22CHAPTER 23CHAPTER 24CHAPTER 25CHAPTER 26CHAPTER 27CHAPTER 28CHAPTER 29CHAPTER 30CHAPTER 31CHAPTER 32CHAPTER 33CHAPTER 34CHAPTER 35CHAPTER 36CHAPTER 37CHAPTER 38CHAPTER 39CHAPTER 40CHAPTER 41CHAPTER 42CHAPTER 43EXCERPT FROM RAPTUREPrologueDemon was such a nasty word.And so damned old-school. People heard demon and they conjured up all kinds of Hieronymus Bosch helter-skelteror worse, Dantes stupid-ass Inferno crap. Honestly. Flames and tortured souls and everyone wailing.Okay, maybe Hell was a little toasty. And if the place had had a court painter, Bosch would have been at the head of the pack.But that wasnt the point. The Demon actually saw itself as more of a Free-Will Coach. Much better, more modern. The anti-Oprah, as it were.It was all about influence.The thing was, the qualities of the soul were not dissimilar to the components of the human body. The corporeal form had a number of vestigial parts, like the appendix, the wisdom teeth, and the coccyxall of which were at best unnecessary, and at worst capable of compromising the functioning of the whole.Souls were the same. They, too, had useless baggage that impeded their proper performance, these annoying, holier-than-thou bits dangling like an appendix waiting for infection. Faith and hope and loveprudence, temperance, justice, and fortitudeall this useless clutter just packed too much damn morality into the heart, getting in the way of the souls innate desire for malignancy.A demons role was to help people see and express their inner truth without their being clouded by all that bullshit, diverting humanity. As long as

people stayed true to their core, things were going in the right direction. And lately, that had been relatively true. Between all the wars on the planet, and the crime, and the disregard for the environment, and that cesspool of finance known as Wall Street, as well as the inequalities far and wide, things were okay. But it wasn't enough and time was running out. To go with a sports analogy, Earth was the playing field and the game had been going on since the stadium had been built. The Demons were the Home Team. Away was made up of Angels pimping that chimera of happiness, Heaven. Where the court painter was Thomas Kincaid, for fucks sake. Each soul was a quarterback on the field, a participant in the universal struggle of good against evil, and the scoreboard reflected the relative moral value of his or her deeds on earth. Birth was kickoff and death was game-over whereupon the score would be added to the larger tally. Coaches had to stay on the sidelines, but they could put different complements of players on the field with the human to influence things and also call time-outs for pep talks. Commonly known as the near-death experience. Here was the problem: Like a spectator who had been watching a postseason game in a cold seat with one too many hot dogs in his belly and a screamer sitting right behind his ear, the Creator was eyeing the exit. Too many fumbles. Too many time-outs. Too many ties that had led to too many unresolved overtimes. What had started out as a gripping contest had evidently lost its appeal, and the teams had been given their notice: Wrap up the play, boys. So both sides had to agree on one particular quarterback. One quarterback and seven plays. Instead of an endless parade of humans, they were down to seven souls in the balance between good and evil seven chances to determine whether humanity was good or bad. A tie was not possible and the stakes were everything. If Team Demon won, it got to keep the facility and all the players that had ever been or ever would be. And the Angels became slaves for eternity. Which made torturing human sinners seem like nothing but a bore. If the Angels won, the entire Earth would be nothing but one giant Christmas frickin morning, a choking wave of happiness and warmth and caring and sharing taking over everything. Under that hideous scenario, the Demons would cease to exist not just in the universe, but in the hearts and minds of all of humanity. Although considering all the happy-happy, joy-joy, that was the best outcome in that scenario. Short of getting stabbed repeatedly in the eye with a pole. The Demons couldn't bear losing. It just wasn't an option. Seven chances were not a lot, and the Away Team had won the metaphysical coin toss so they got to approach the quarterback who was going to drive the seven balls, as it were. Ah, yes the quarterback. Not surprisingly the choice of that key position had led to a lot of heated discussion.

Eventually, though, one had been selected, one who both sides found acceptable one who both coaches expected to rock the plays according to their values and goals. Poor fool didn't know what he was in for. The thing was, though, the Demons weren't prepared to leave such a momentous responsibility on the shoulders of a human. Free will was malleable, after all which was the basis of the whole game. So they were sending someone onto the field as a player. It was against the rules, of course, but true to their nature and also something the opponent was incapable of doing. This was the edge the Home Team had: The one good thing about the Angels was they always colored within the lines. They had to. Suckers. CHAPTER 1 She wants you. Jim Heron lifted his eyes from his Budweiser. Across the crowded, dim club, past bodies that were clad in black and hung with chains, through the thick air of sex and desperation, he saw the she in question. A woman in a blue dress stood beneath one of the few ceiling lights in the Iron Mask, the golden glow floating down over her Brooke Shields brown hair and her ivory skin and her banging body. She was a revelation, a standout slice of color among all the gloomy, neo-Victorian Prozac candidates, as beautiful as a model, as resplendent as a saint. And she was staring at him, though he questioned the wanting part: Her eyes were set deep, which meant as she looked over, the yearning that stalled out his lungs could just be a product of the way her skull was built. Hell, maybe she was simply wondering what he was doing in the club. Which made two of them. I'm telling you, that woman wants you, buddy. Jim glanced over at Mr. Matchmaker. Adrian Vogel was the reason he'd ended up here, and the Iron Mask was definitely the guys scene: Ad was dressed in black from head to toe and had piercings in places most people didn't want needles anywhere around. Nah. Jim took another swig of his Bud. Not her type. You sure about that. Yup. You're a fool. Adrian dragged a hand through the black waves on his head and the stuff eased back into place like it had been trained well. Christ, if it weren't for the fact that he worked construction and had a mouth like a sailor, you'd wonder whether he trolled the women's mousse and spray aisles. Eddie Blackhawk, the other guy with them, shook his head. If he's not interested, that doesn't make him foolish. Says you. Live and let live, Adrian. It's better for everyone. As the guy eased back on the velvet couch, Eddie was more Biker than Goth in his jeans and shitkickers, so he looked as out of place as Jim did although given the hulking size of the guy and those weird-ass red-brown eyes of his, it was hard to imagine him fitting in with anyone but a bunch of pro

wrestlers: even with his hair in that long braid, nobody razed him at the construction site not even the meathead roofers who gave the biggest lip. So, Jim, you don't talk much. Adrian scanned the crowd, no doubt looking for a Blue Dress of his own. After focusing on the dancers who writhed in iron cages, he flagged their waitress. And after working with you for a month, I know it's not because you're stupid. Don't have a lot to say. Nothing wrong with that, Eddie murmured. This was probably why Jim liked Eddie better. The SOB was another member of the Spare Club for Men, a guy who never used a word when a nod or a shake of the head could get his point across. How he'd gotten so tight with Adrian, whose mouth had no neutral on its stick shift, was a mystery. How he roomed with the fucker was inexplicable. Whatever. Jim had no intention of going into all their hows, whys and wheres. It was nothing personal. They were actually the kind of hardheaded smart-asses he would have been friends with in another time, on another planet, but here and now, their shit was none of his business and he'd only gone out with them because Adrian had threatened to keep asking until he did. Bottom line, Jim lived life by the code of the disconnected and expected other people to leave him to his I-am-an-island routine. Since getting out of the military, he'd been vagabonding it, ending up in Caldwell only because it was where he'd stopped driving and he was going to hit the road after the project they were all working on was finished. The thing was, given his old boss, it was better to stay a moving target. No telling how long it was going to be before a special assignment popped up and Jim got tagged again. Finishing off his beer, he figured it was a good thing he owned only his clothes, his truck, and that broken-down Harley. Sure, he didn't have much to show for being thirty-nine. Oh, man, the date. He was forty. Tonight was his birthday. So I gotta know, Adrian said, leaning in. You have a woman, Jim? That why you're not picking up Blue Dress? I mean, come on, she's smokin' hot. Looks aren't everything. Yeah, well, they sure as hell don't hurt. The waitress came over, and while the others ordered another round, Jim shot a glance at the woman they were jawing about. She didn't look away. Didn't flinch. Just slowly licked her red lips like she'd been waiting for him to make eye contact again. Jim refocused on his empty Bud and shifted in the booth, feeling like someone had slipped lit coals into his shorts. It had been a long, long time for him. Not a dry spell, not even a drought. Sahara Desert was more like it. And what do you know, his body was ready to end that stretch of nuthin' but left-handers. You should go over there, Adrian said. Introduce yourself. I'm cool where I am. Which means I may have to reassess your intelligence. Adrian drummed his fingers on the table, the heavy silver ring he wore flashing. Or at least your sex drive. Be my guest. Adrian rolled his eyes, clearly getting the picture that there was no negotiating when it came to Blue Dress. Fine, I'll lay off. The guy sat back into the sofa so that he and Eddie were striking similar sprawls. Predictably, he couldn't stay silent for long. So did you two hear about the shooting? Jim frowned. There another one? Yup. Body was found down by the river. They tend to turn up there. What is this world coming to, Adrian said, throwing back the last of his beer. It's always been this way. You think? Jim leaned back as the waitress planted freshies in front of the boys. Nope, I know. *Deinde, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.* Marie-Terese Boudreau lifted her eyes to the confessional booths lattice window. On the other side of the screen, the priest's face was in profile and heavily shadowed, but she knew who he was. And he knew her. So he was very aware of what she did and why she had to go to confession at least once a week. Go, my child. Be well. As he closed the panel between them, panic nailed her in the chest. In these quiet moments when she laid out her sins, the degrading place where she'd ended up was exposed, the words she spoke shining a brilliant spotlight on the horrible way she spent her nights. The ugly images always took a while to fade. But the choking feeling that came from knowing where she was headed next was just going to get worse. Gathering her rosary together, she put the beads and links in her coat pocket and picked her purse up off the floor. Footsteps right outside the confessional stopped her from leaving. She had reasons for keeping a low profile, some of which having nothing to do with her job. When the sound of heavy heels dimmed, she pulled open the red velvet curtain and stepped out. Caldwell's St. Patrick's Cathedral was maybe half the size of the one down in Manhattan, but it was big enough to inspire awe in even the casually faithful. With gothic arches like the wings of angels and a lofty ceiling that seemed only inches away from Heaven, she felt both unworthy and grateful to be under its roof. And she loved the smell inside. Beeswax and lemon and incense. Lovely. Walking down by the chapels of the saints, she weaved in and out of the scaffolding that had been erected so that the clerestory's mosaics could be cleaned. As always, the racks of flickering votive candles and the dim spotlights on the still statues calmed her, reminding her that there was an eternity of peace waiting at the far end of life. Assuming you were allowed past the pearly gates. The cathedral's side doors were closed after six p.m., and as usual, she had to go out the main entrance which seemed like a waste of the things effort. The carved panels were much better suited to welcoming the hundreds who came for services

each Sunday or the guests of important marriage ceremonies or the virtuous faithful. No, she was more of a side-door kind of person. At least, she was now. Just as she leaned all her weight on the thick wood, she heard her name and looked over her shoulder. No one was there, as far as she could see. The cathedral was empty even of people praying in the pews. Hello? she called out, voice echoing. Father? When there was no reply, a chill licked up her spine. On a quick surge, she heaved herself against the left side of the door and burst out into the cold April night. Holding the lapels of her wool coat together, she moved fast, her flats making a clip, clip, clip sound down the stone steps and over the sidewalk as she hustled to her car. The first thing she did as she got in was lock all the doors. As she panted, she looked around. Shadows curled on the ground beneath leafless trees, and the moon was revealed as thin clouds drifted. People moved around in the windows of the houses across from the church. A station wagon went by slowly. There was no stalker, no man in a black ski mask, no attacker lurking. Nothing. Reining in her tailspin, she coaxed her Toyota into starting and gripped the steering wheel hard. After checking her mirrors, she eased out into the street and headed deeper into downtown. As she went along, lights from streetlamps and other cars flared in her face and flooded the inside of the Camry, illuminating the black duffel bag on the passenger seat. Her god-awful uniform was in there, and as soon as she got out of this nightmare, she was burning it along with what she had to put on her body every night for the last year. The Iron Mask was the second place she worked. The first had blown up about four months ago. Literally. She could not believe she was still in the business. Every time she packed that duffel, she felt as if she were getting sucked back into a bad dream, and she wasn't sure whether the confessions at St. Patrick's were making things better or worse. Sometimes she felt like all they did was stir up crap that was better left buried, but the need for forgiveness was too strong to fight. As she made a turn onto Trade Street, she started past the concentration of clubs, bars, and tattoo parlors that made up the Caldie Strip. The Iron Mask was toward the far end, and like the others, it was hopping every night with its perpetual wait line of wannabe zombies. Ducking into an alley, she bumped over the potholes by all the Dumpsters, and came out into the parking lot. The Camry fit nicely in a spot along the brick wall that was marked STAFF ONLY. Trez Latimer, the owner of the club, insisted that all the women who worked for him use the designated spaces that were closest to the back door. He was as good as the Reverend had been about taking care of his employees, and they all appreciated it. Caldwell had a seedy side, and the Iron Mask was right in the thick of it. Marie-Terese got out with her duffel and looked up. The bright lights of the city dulled the few stars that twinkled around the patchy clouds, and the heavens seemed even farther away than they were. Closing her eyes, she took long, deep breaths and drew the collar of her coat in tight. When she went into the club, she would be in the body and mind of someone else. Someone she didn't know and wouldn't care to remember in the future. Someone who disgusted her. Someone she despised. Last breath. Just before she cracked her lids, that panic flared again, sweat breaking out under her clothes and over her brow in spite of the cold. As her heart beat like she was running from a mugger, she wondered how many more nights of this she had left in her. The anxiety seemed to be getting worse with every week, an avalanche picking up speed, sweeping over her, covering her in icy weight. Except she couldn't stop. She was still paying off debts—some financial, some that felt existential. Until she was back where she started, she needed to stay where she didn't want to be. And besides, she told herself that she didn't want to not go through this shocking anxiety. It meant she hadn't surrendered to the circumstances completely and that at least some part of her true self still survived. Not for much longer, a small voice pointed out. The back door to the club swung open and an accented voice said her name in the most beautiful way. You okay, Marie-Terese? She flipped open her eyes, put her mask on, and strode with calm purpose over to her boss. Trez had no doubt seen her on one of the security cameras; God knew they were everywhere. I'm fine, Trez, thanks. He held the door open for her, and as she walked by him, his dark eyes scanned her. With coffee-colored skin and a face that seemed Ethiopian in its smooth bones and perfectly balanced lips, Trez Latimer was a looker although his manners were the most attractive thing about him, as far as she was concerned. The guy had gallantry down to a science. Although you didn't want to cross him. You do that every night, he said as he shut the door behind them and cranked the bar bolt in place. You stand by your car and look at the sky. Every night. Do I? Anybody bothering you? No, but if someone was, I would tell you. Anything bothering you? Nope. I'm good. Trez didn't look convinced as he escorted her down to the ladies locker room and left her at the door. Remember, I'm available twenty-four/seven, and you can talk to me anytime. I know. And thank you. He put his hand to his heart and gave her a little bow. My pleasure. You take care of yourself. The locker room was walled with long metal compartments and broken up by benches that were screwed down into the floor. Against the far wall, the lighted showgirl mirror had a six-foot-long counter that was littered with makeup,

and there were hairpieces and skimpy clothes and stilettos everywhere. The air smelled like girl sweat and shampoo. As usual, she had the place to herself. She was always the first to come in and the first to leave, and now that she was in work mode, there were no hesitations, no hiccups in the routine. Coat went into her locker. Street shoes were kicked off. Scrunchie was pulled free of her ponytail. Duffel bag was yanked open. Her blue jeans and her white turtleneck and her navy blue fleece were traded for a set of clothes she wouldn't be caught dead wearing on Halloween: microscopic Lycra skirt, halter top that came down to the bottom of her ribs, thigh-highs with lace tops, and pimpish pumps that pinched her toes. Everything was black. Black was the Iron Masks signature color, and it had been the other clubs as well. She never wore black when she was away from work. About a month into this nightmare, she'd thrown away every thread of clothing she had with any black in it to the point where she'd had to go out and buy something to wear to the last funeral she'd gone to. Over at the lighted mirror, she hit her five tons of brunette hair with some spray and then weeded through the palettes of eye shadows and blushers, picking out dark, sparkly colors that were about as girl-next-door as a Penthouse centerfold. Moving quickly, she went Ozzy Osbourne on the eyeliner and glued on some fake eyelashes. The last thing she did was go to her bag and take out a tube of lipstick. She never shared lipsticks with the other girls. Everyone was properly screened each month, but she wasn't taking chances: She could control what she did and how scrupulous she was when it came to safety. The other girls might have different standards. The red gloss tasted like plastic strawberry, but the lipstick was critical. No kissing. Ever. And most of the men knew that, but with a coating of the grease, she cut short any debate: None of them wanted their wives or girlfriends to know what they were doing on guys night out. Refusing to look at her reflection, Marie-Terese turned away from the mirror and headed out to face the noise and the people and the business. As she went down the long, dim hall to the club proper, the bass of the music grew louder and so did the sound of her heart pounding in her ears. Maybe it was one and the same. At the end of the corridor, the club sprawled out before her, its deep purple walls and black floor and bloodred ceiling lit so sparsely it was like walking into a cave. The vibe was all about kinked-out sex, with women dancing in wrought-iron cages and bodies moving in pairs or threesomes and trippy, erotic music filling the thick air. After her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she sifted through the men, applying a data screen she wished she'd never acquired. You couldn't tell whether they were prospects by the clothes they wore or who they were with or whether they had a wedding ring on. It wasn't even a case of where they looked at you, because all men did the breast-to-hip sweep. The difference with the prospects was that they stared at you with something more than greed: As they ran their eyes over your body, the deed had already been done as far as they were concerned. It didn't bother her, though. There was nothing that any man could do to her that was worse than what had already happened. And there were two things she knew for sure: Three a.m. was going to come eventually. And like the end of her shift, this phase of her life wasn't going to last forever. In her saner, less depressive moments, she told herself that this rough patch was something she was going to get through and come out of, kind of like her life had the flu: Even though it was hard to have faith in the future, she had to believe that one day she would wake up, turn her face to the sun, and revel in the fact that the sickness was gone and wellness had returned. Although that was assuming it was just the flu. If what she was putting herself through was more like a cancer maybe a part of her would always be gone, lost to the disease forever. Marie-Terese shut off her brain and walked forward, into the crowd. Nobody ever said life was fun or easy or even fair, and sometimes you did things to survive that would seem utterly and completely incomprehensible to the home-and-hearth part of your brain. But there were no shortcuts in life and you had to pay for your mistakes. Always.

CHAPTER 2

Marcus Reinhardt Jewelers, est. 1893, had been housed in the same gracious brick building in downtown Caldwell since the mortar in its deep red walls had been set. The firm had changed hands in the Depression, but the ethos of the business had remained the same and prevailed into the Internet era: high-end, important jewels offered at competitive prices and paired with incomparable personal service. The ice wine is chilling in the private room, sir. Excellent. We're almost ready.

James Richard Jameson, great-grandson of the man who had bought the store from Mr. Reinhardt, straightened his tie in one of the mirrored displays. Satisfied with how he looked, he turned to inspect the three staff members who had chosen to stay after hours. They all had on black suits, with William and Terrence sporting gold-and-black club ties marked with the store's logo and Janice wearing a gold-and-onyx necklace from the 1950s. Perfect. His people were as elegant and discreet as everything in the showroom, and each was capable of conversing in English and French. For what Reinhardt had to offer, customers were willing to travel up from Manhattan or down from Montreal, and north or south, it was always worth the trip. All around the showroom, sparkling flashes twinkled at the eye, a galaxy come home to roost, and the angles

of the direct lighting and the arrangement of the glass cases were calibrated to decimate the distinction between want and need. Just before the grandfather clock by the door chimed the tenth hour, James flashed over to a pocket door, whipped out an Oreck, and ran the vacuum across the footprints on the antique Oriental rug. On the return to the broom closet, he backed his way over his own path so there was nothing to mar the nap. I think he's here, William said by one of the barred windows. Oh my God, Janice murmured as she leaned in beside her colleague. He certainly is. James slid the vacuum out of sight and snapped his suit jacket back into place. His heart was alive in his chest, beating fast, but on the outside he was calm as he walked toe-heel, toe-heel over to look into the street. Customers were welcome in the store from ten a.m. to six p.m. Monday through Saturday. Clients got to come privately after hours. On any day and time that suited them. The gentleman who stepped out of the BMW M6 was solidly in client territory: European-cut suit, no overcoat in spite of the chill, stride like an athlete, face like an assassin. This was a very smart, very powerful man who probably had some shady in him, but it wasn't as though Mafia or drug money was discriminated against at Marcus Reinhardt. James was in the business of selling, not judging so as far as he was concerned, the man coming to his door was a paragon of virtue, upstanding in his pair of Bally loafers. James released the lock and opened the way before the bell was rung. Good evening, Mr. diPietro. The handshake was firm and short, the voice deep and sharp, the eyes cold and gray. Are we ready? Yes. James hesitated. Will your intended be joining us? No. James shut the door and indicated the way to the back, studiously ignoring how Janice's eyes clung to the man. May we offer you a libation? You can start showing me diamonds, how about that. As you wish. The private viewing room had oil paintings on the walls, a large antique desk, and four gold chairs. There was also a microscope, a black velvet exhibition pad, the chilling ice wine, and two crystal glasses. James nodded at his staff and Terrence came forward to remove the silver bucket while Janice took away the globlets with a bit of a fluster. William remained in the doorway, at the ready for any requests. Mr. diPietro took a seat and put his hands on the desk, a platinum Chopard watch flashing from beneath his cuff. Those eyes of his, which were the same color as the watch, didn't so much as focus on James as bore right through to the back of his skull. James cleared his throat as he sat opposite the man. Pursuant to our conversation, I have pulled a selection of stones from our collection as well as called in a number of diamonds from Antwerp directly. James took out a gold key and inserted it into a lock in the top drawer of the desk. When he dealt with a client who had yet to do a viewing or purchase, as he was now, he had to make a call whether they were the type who wanted to see the top range of their options first or build up to the most expensive choices. It was clear which category Mr. diPietro fit into. There were ten rings in the tray that James put out on the blotter, all of which had been steam-cleaned for presentation. The one he plucked from the black velvet crease was not the largest, although only by a fraction of a carat. It was, however, by far the best. This is a seven-point-seven-carat emerald-cut, D in color, internally flawless. I have both the GIA and EGL certifications for your perusal. James stayed silent as Mr. diPietro took the ring and bent down to inspect it. There was no reason to mention that the polish and the symmetry of the stone were exceptional or that the platinum setting had been handmade for the diamond or that it was the kind of thing that came onto the market very infrequently. The reflected light and fire spoke for themselves, the flashes radiating upward so brilliantly one had to wonder if the stone itself weren't magical. How much? Mr. diPietro demanded. James put the certificates on the desk. Two million, three hundred thousand. With men like Mr. diPietro, the more expensive the better, but the truth was, it was a good deal. For Reinhardt to stay in business, one had to balance volume and margin: too much margin, not enough volume. Besides, assuming Mr. diPietro stayed out of jail and/or bankruptcy, this was the kind of man James wanted to have a long relationship with. Mr. diPietro handed the ring back and studied the certs. Tell me about the others. James swallowed his surprise. Of course. Yes, of course. He proceeded from right to left through the tray and described the attributes of each ring, all the while wondering whether he had misread his client. He also had Terrence bring in six more, all over five carats. An hour later, Mr. diPietro sat back in the chair. The man had not stretched or wavered in his attention and there had been no quick checks of his BlackBerry or jokes to break the tension. He hadn't even glanced in passing at Janice, who was lovely. Total and complete absorption. James had to wonder about the woman whose finger would bear the ring. She'd be beautiful, naturally, but she'd have to be very independent and not very emotional. Generally speaking, even the most logical and successful man got a glint in his eye when he bought a ring like one of these for his woman whether it was the thrill of surprising her with something over the top or the pride that came with being able to afford something that only .01 percent of the population could, the men usually showed some emotion. Mr. diPietro was as cold and hard as the stones he regarded. Is there something else I might show

you? James said, deflating. Some rubies or sapphires, perhaps? The client reached inside his suit jacket and brought out a thin black wallet. Ill take the first one you showed me for two million even. As James blinked, Mr. diPietro put a credit card on the desktop. If Im giving you my money, I want you to work for it. And you will be discounting the stone, because your business needs repeat clients like myself. James took a moment to catch up with the fact that a transaction might actually occur. Ill appreciate your discerning eye, but the price is two million, three hundred thousand. Mr. diPietro tapped the card. Thats debit. Two million. Right now. James quickly did some math in his head. At that price he was still making about three hundred and fifty thousand on the piece. I believe I can do that, he said. Mr. diPietro did not sound surprised. Smart of you. What about sizing? Do you know what size your The seven-point-seven carats is the only size shes going to care about. Well take care of the rest later. As you wish. James typically encouraged the staff to engage with a client as he went back to set a purchase into its box and print out the valuation for insurance purposes. Tonight, though, he shook his head at them as Mr. diPietro palmed a cell phone and started dialing. As James worked in the back office, he heard Mr. diPietro talking on the phone. There was no teasing, Darling, I have something for you, or suggestive, Im coming to see you. No, Mr. diPietro was not calling his soon-to-be fiance, but rather someone named Tom about some kind of land issue. James swiped the card. As he waited for authorization, he steam-cleaned the ring again, periodically checking the green digital readout on the card machine. When he was told to call the banks twenty-four-hour line directly, he was not surprised given the purchase amount, and as soon as he got on with them, the representative requested to speak to Mr. diPietro. Transferring the call to the phone on the desk in the viewing room, James put his head through the door. Mr. diPietro They want to talk to me? The man extended his right hand, flashing that watch, and picked up the receiver. Before James could come and take the line off hold, Mr. diPietro did it himself and started talking. Yes, it is. Yes, I am. Yes. Yes. My mothers maiden name is OBrian. Yes. Thanks. He looked up at James as he put the call on hold again and the phone back in its seat. They have an authorization code for you. James bowed and went back to the office. When he reappeared, he was carrying a sleek red bag with satin handles and an envelope with the receipt in it. I hope you will call on us again if we may be of service. Mr. diPietro took what he now owned. I plan on getting engaged only once, but there will be anniversaries. Plenty of them. The staff stepped back to get out of his way and James had to hustle to open the stores door before Mr. diPietro came to it. After the man breezed through, James relocked the thing and looked out the window. The mans car was gorgeous as it took off, its engine growling, the bright lights of the street lamps reflecting off black paint as glossy as still water. As James turned away, he caught Janice leaning into another window, her eyes sharp. One could be quite sure she wasnt measuring the car as he had, but focusing on the driver instead. Odd, wasnt it. That which you could not have always seemed more valuable than what you did, and maybe that was why diPietro was so removed: He could afford all of what had been shown, so to him the transaction was no different from buying a newspaper or a can of Coke to the average person. There was nothing that the truly wealthy could not have, and how lucky they were. No offense, but I think Im going to take off. Jim put down his empty and grabbed for his leather jacket. Hed had his two Buds, and one more was going to put him into DUI territory, so it was time to pull out. I cant believe youre leaving alone, Adrian drawled, his eyes going over to Blue Dress. She was still standing beneath that ceiling light. And still staring. And still breathtaking. Yup, just me, myself, and I. Most men dont have your kind of self-control. Adrian smiled, the hoop in his lower lip glinting. Kind of impressive actually. Yeah, Im a saint, all right. Well, drive home safe so you can keep polishing that halo. Well see you tomorrow at the site. There was a round of palm slapping and then Jim was making his way through the crowd. As he went, he drew looks from the black-chained and spike-collared, probably in the same way all these Goths did when they were out at a mall: What the hell are you doing here? Guess Levis and a clean flannel shirt offended their leather-and-lace sensibilities. Jim chose a path that kept him far away from Blue Dress, and once he was outside, he took a deep breath like hed passed some kind of test. The cold air didnt bring quite the relief he wanted, though, and as he walked around to the back parking lot, his hand went to the pocket of his shirt. Hed quit smoking, and yet a year later, he was still reaching for the Marlboro Reds. His frickin habit was like having an amputated limb with phantom pain. As he made the corner and walked into the lot, he went past a row of cars that were parked grilles-in to the building. All of them were dirty, their flanks spackled with salt from the road treatments and months-old white-snow grime. His truck, which was way down at the end of the third row in, was exactly the same. He looked left and right as he went. This was a bad part of town, and if he were going to get jumped, he wanted to see what was coming at him. Not that he minded a good fight. Hed gotten into a lot of them in his younger years, and then been trained properly in

the military plus, thanks to his day job, he was in rock-hard shape. But it was always better to He stopped as a flash of gold winked at him from the ground. Crouching down, he picked up a thin gold ring, it was a hoop earring, one of those guys that plugged into itself. He cleaned the grunge off and glanced over at the cars.

Could have been dropped by anyone, and it wasn't very expensive. Why did you leave without me? Jim froze. Shit, her voice was as sexy as the rest of her. Straightening to his full height, he pivoted on his work boot and stared across the trunks of the cars. Blue Dress was about ten yards away, standing under a security light which made him wonder if she always chose spots that illuminated her. It's cold, he said. You should go back inside. I'm not cold. True enough. Hot as fuck would cover it. Well, I'm leaving. Alone? She came forward, her high heels tracking across the pitted asphalt. The closer she got, the better-looking she became. Shit, her lips were made for sex, deep red and slightly parted, and that hair of hers All he could think about was it falling over his bare chest and thighs. Jim shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He was much taller than she was, but the way she walked was a sucker punch to the solar plexus, immobilizing him with hot thoughts and vivid plans: Staring at her fine pale skin, he wondered if it was as soft as it seemed. Wondered a whole hell of a lot about what was under that dress. Wondered what she would feel like beneath his naked body. As she stopped in front of him, he had to take a deep breath. Where's your car? she said. Truck. Where is it? At that moment a cold breeze rolled in from the alley and she shivered a little, raising thin, lovely arms to wrap herself in a hug. Her dark eyes, which had been seductive in the club, abruptly became pleading and made her nearly impossible to turn away from. Was he going to do this? Was he going to fall into this warm pool of a woman, if only for a short time? Another gust came barreling in, and she stamped one stiletto, then the other. Jim took off his leather jacket and closed the distance between them. With their eyes locked, he encircled her with what had warmed himself. I'm over here. She reached for his hand and took it. He led the way. Ford F-150s were not exactly great for hooking up, but there was enough room if you needed it and more to the point, the truck was all he had to offer. Jim helped her inside and then went around and got behind the wheel. The engine started quick and he turned the fan off, halting the blast of frigid air until things heated up. She moved across the seat to him, her breasts rising above the tight bands of her dress as she got closer. You're very kind. Kind was not the way he saw himself. Especially not now, given what was on his mind. Can't have a lady cold. Jim ran his eyes all over her. She was huddled in his beat-to-shit leather jacket, her face turned down, her long hair falling over her shoulder and curling up into her cleavage. She might have come across as a seducer, but the truth was she was a good girl who was in over her head. Do you want to talk? he said, because she deserved better than what he wanted from her. No. She shook her head. No, I want to do something. Okay, Jim was definitely not kind. He was a man who was a palms reach away from a beautiful woman, and even though she was giving off vulnerable vibes, playing therapist with her was not the sort of horizontal he was after. As her eyes lifted, they were orphan sad. Please kiss me? Jim held back, her expression putting the brakes on him and then some. You sure about this? She swept her hair over her shoulder and tucked it behind her ear. When she nodded, the dime-size diamond in her lobe flashed. Yes, very. Kiss me. When she held his stare and didn't look away, Jim leaned in, feeling ensnared and not minding in the slightest. Ill go slow. Oh God Her lips were every bit as soft as he'd imagined, and he stroked her mouth carefully with his own, afraid he would crush her. She was sweet, she was warm, and she trusted him to set the careful pace, welcoming his tongue inside of her, then later shifting back so that his palm could ease down from her face to her collarbone to her full breast. Which changed the tempo of things. Abruptly, she sat up and took off his jacket. Zippers in the back. His rough workman's hands found it quick, and he worried about marring the blue dress as he drew the fastening downward. And then he stopped thinking as she took the top from her breasts herself, revealing a satin-and-lace bra that probably cost as much as his truck. Through the fine material, her nipples were peaked, and in the shadows thrown by the dim light of the dash, they were feast-for-the-starved spectacular. My breasts are real, she said softly. He wanted me to get implants, but I don't want them. Jim frowned, thinking that whatever pig asshole had come up with that one deserved an eye operation performed by a tire iron. Don't do it. You're beautiful. Really? Her voice wavered. Truly. Her shy smile meant too much to him, piercing through his chest, going too deep. He knew all about the ugly side of life, had been through the kinds of things that could make a single day feel like it lasted a month, and he wished her none of that. Seemed, though, she'd had plenty of hard cracks herself. Jim reached over and turned the heater on to warm her. When he eased back, she swept aside one of the bras cups and framed herself with her hand, offering the nipple to him. You're amazing, he whispered. Jim bent down and captured her flesh with his lips, sucking on her gently. As she gasped and thrust her hands into his hair, her breast cushioned his mouth and he had a moment of raw lust, the kind that turned men into

animals. Except then he remembered the way she looked at him, and he knew he wasn't going to have sex with her. He was going to take care of her, here in the truck cab, with the heater going and the windows fogging up. He was going to show her how beautiful she was and how perfect her body looked and felt and tasted. But he wasn't taking anything for himself. Hell, maybe he wasn't all bad. You sure about that? his inner voice cut in. Are you really sure about that? No, he wasn't. But Jim laid her down on the seat and wadded his leather jacket into a pillow for her head and vowed to do the right thing. Man, she was drop-dead gorgeous, a lost, exotic bird who'd found a chicken coop for shelter. Why on God's green earth did she want him? Kiss me, she breathed. Just as he braced his weight on his heavy arms and leaned over her, he caught sight of the digital clock on the dash: 11:59. The very minute he had been born forty years before. What a happy birthday this had turned out to be.

CHAPTER 3

Vin diPietro sat on a silk-covered sofa in a living room decorated in gold, red and creamy white. The black marble floors were covered with antique rugs, the bookcases were filled with first editions, and all around his collection of crystal, ebony, and bronze statuary gleamed. But the real showstopper was the view of the city over to the right. Thanks to a glass wall that ran the entire length of the room, Caldwell's twin bridges and all of its skyscrapers were as much a part of the decorations as the drapes and the floor coverings and the objets d'art. The sprawling vista was urban splendor at its best, a vast, glimmering landscape that was never the same, even though the buildings didn't change. Vin's duplex in the Commodore took up all of the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth floors of the luxury high-rise, for a total of ten thousand square feet. He had six bedrooms, a maids suite, an exercise room, and a movie theater. Eight bathrooms. Four parking spaces in the underground parking garage. And inside everything was exactly as he wanted it, every square of marble, slab of granite, yard of fabric, plank of hardwood, foot of carpet all of it had been hand-picked from the best of the best by him. He was ready to move out. With the way things were going, he figured he'd be ready to hand over the keys to its next owner in another four months. Maybe three, depending on how fast the crews were at the construction site. If this condo was nice, what Vin was building on the banks of the Hudson River was going to make the duplex look like subsidized housing. He'd had to buy up a half dozen old hunting lodges and camps to get the kind of acreage and shoreline he wanted, but everything had fallen into place. He'd razed the shacks, cleared the land, and dug a cellar hole big enough to play football in. The crew was framing now and working on the roof; then his fleet of electricians would install the house's central nervous system and his plumbers would put in the arteries. Finally, it would be the detail crap with the counters and tiles, the appliances and fixtures, and the decorators. It was all coming together, just like magic. And not only about where he would live. In front of him, on the glass-topped table, was the velvet box from Reinhardt's. As the grandfather clock in the hall struck midnight, Vin sat back into the sofa cushions and crossed his legs. He was not a romantic, never had been, and neither was Devina, which was only one of the reasons they were perfect together. She gave him his space, kept herself busy, and was always ready to hop on a plane when he needed her to. And she didn't want children, which was a huge plus. He couldn't go there. Sins of the fathers and all that. He and Devina hadn't known each other for all that long, but when it was right, it was right. Kind of like buying land to develop. You just knew as you stared over the ground that here is where I need to be building. Looking out at the city from a perch high above so many others, he thought of the house he'd grown up in. Back then, his view had been of the crappy little two-story next door, and he'd spent a lot of nights trying to see past where he was from. Over the din of his mother and father's drunken fighting, the only thing he'd wanted was out. Out from under his parents. Out of that pathetic lower-middleclass neighborhood. Out of himself and what separated him from everyone else. And what do you know, that was exactly what had happened. He infinitely preferred this life, this landscape. He'd sacrificed a lot to get up here, but luck had always been with him like magic. But then, the harder you worked, the luckier you got. And damn everything and everyone, this was where he was going to stay. When Vin checked his watch again, forty-five minutes had passed. And then another half hour. Just as he reached forward and palmed the velvet box, the click and release of the front door brought his head around. Out in the hall, stilettos clipped on the marble and came down toward him. Or passed him was more like it. As Devina walked by the living room's archway, she was taking off her white mink, exposing a blue Herve Leger dress she'd bought with his money. Talk about knockout: Her body's perfect curves were showing those fabric bands who was in charge, her long legs had better lines than the red-soled Louboutins she had on, and her dark hair gleamed brighter than the crystal chandelier over her head. Resplendent. As always. Where have you been? he asked. She froze and looked over at him. I didn't know you were home. I've been waiting for you. You should have called. She had spectacular eyes, almond shaped and darker than her hair. I would have come if you'd called. Thought I'd surprise you. You don't do

surprises. Vin got to his feet and kept the box hidden within his palm. How was your night? Good. Where did you go? She folded the fur over her arm. Just to a club. As he came up to her, Vin opened his mouth, his hand tightening on what he'd bought for her. Be my wife. Devina frowned. Are you okay? Be my wife. Devina, be my wife. He narrowed his eyes on her lips. They were puffier than usual. Redder. And for once she had no lipstick on. The conclusion he slammed into teed off a brief, vivid memory of his mother and father. The pair of them were screaming at each other and throwing things, both drunk off their asses. The subject was what it always had been, and he could hear his father's raging voice clear as day: Who were you with? What the hell you been doing, woman? After that, the next thing on the agenda would be his mother's ashtray banging off the wall. Thanks to all the practice she got, she had good arm strength, but the vodka tended to throw off her aim, so she hit his father's head only one out of every ten shots. Vin slipped the ring box into the pocket of his suit coat. You have a good time? Devina narrowed her eyes like she was having trouble judging his mood. I just went out for a little bit. He nodded, wondering whether her hair's tousled effect was styling or another man's hands. Good. I'm glad. I'm just going to go do some work. Okay. Vin turned and walked through the living room and into the library and down to his study. All the while, he kept his eyes on the walls of glass and the view. His father had believed two things about women: You could never trust them; and they would walk all over you if you gave them the upper hand. And as much as Vin didn't want any legacy from that son of a bitch, he couldn't shake the memories he had of his dad. The guy had always been convinced his wife was cheating on him, which had been hard to believe. Vin's old lady had bleached her hair only twice a year, sported circles under her eyes the color of thunderclouds, and had a wardrobe limited to a housecoat that she cleaned with the same frequency the Clairol box made it home. The woman never left the house, smoked like a bonfire, and had alcohol breath that could melt paint off a car. Yet his father somehow thought men would be attracted to that. Or that she, who never lifted a finger unless there was a cigarette to light, regularly summoned the gumption to go out and find joes whose taste in chicks ran toward ashtrays and empties. They'd both beaten him. At least until he'd gotten old enough to move faster than they could. And probably the kindest thing they did for him as parents was killing each other when he was seventeen, which was pretty fucking pathetic. When Vin got to his study, he took a seat behind the marble-topped desk and faced off at his office away from the office. He had two computers, a phone with six lines on it, a fax, and a pair of bronze lamps. Chair was bloodred leather. Carpet was the color of the birds-eye maple paneling. Drapes were black and cream and red. Tucking the ring between one of the lamps and the phone console, he swiveled away from business and resumed his watch over the city. Be my wife, Devina. I've changed into something more comfortable. Vin looked over his shoulder and got a load of his woman, who was now draped in see-through black. He swiveled his chair around. You certainly did. As she came over to him, her breasts swayed back and forth beneath the sheer fabric and he could feel himself harden. He'd always loved her breasts. When she'd told him she wanted implants, he'd nixed that idea fast. She was perfect. I'm really sorry I wasn't here when you wanted me, she said, sweeping that translucent robe out and easing down onto her knees in front of him. I truly am. Vin lifted his hand and ran his thumb back and forth over her full lower lip. What happened to your lipstick? I washed my face in the bathroom. Then why is your eyeliner still on. I reapplied it. Her voice was smooth. I had my phone with me the entire time. You told me you had a late meeting. Yes, I did. Devina put her hands on his thighs and leaned in, her breasts swelling over the bodice of her gown. God, she smelled good. I'm sorry, she moaned before she kissed his neck and dug her nails into his legs. Let me make it up to you. She closed her lips on his skin and sucked. Presentation de l'diteur Redemption isn't a word Jim Heron knows much about - his specialty is revenge and, to him, sin is all relative. But everything changes when he becomes a fallen angel and is charged with saving the souls of seven people from the seven deadly sins. And failure is not an option. Vin Di Pietro long ago gave himself up to his business - until fate intervenes in the form of a tough-talking, Harley-riding, self-professed saviour, and a woman who makes him question his destiny. With an ancient evil ready to claim him, Vin has to work with a fallen angel not only to win his beloved over...but to redeem his very soul.