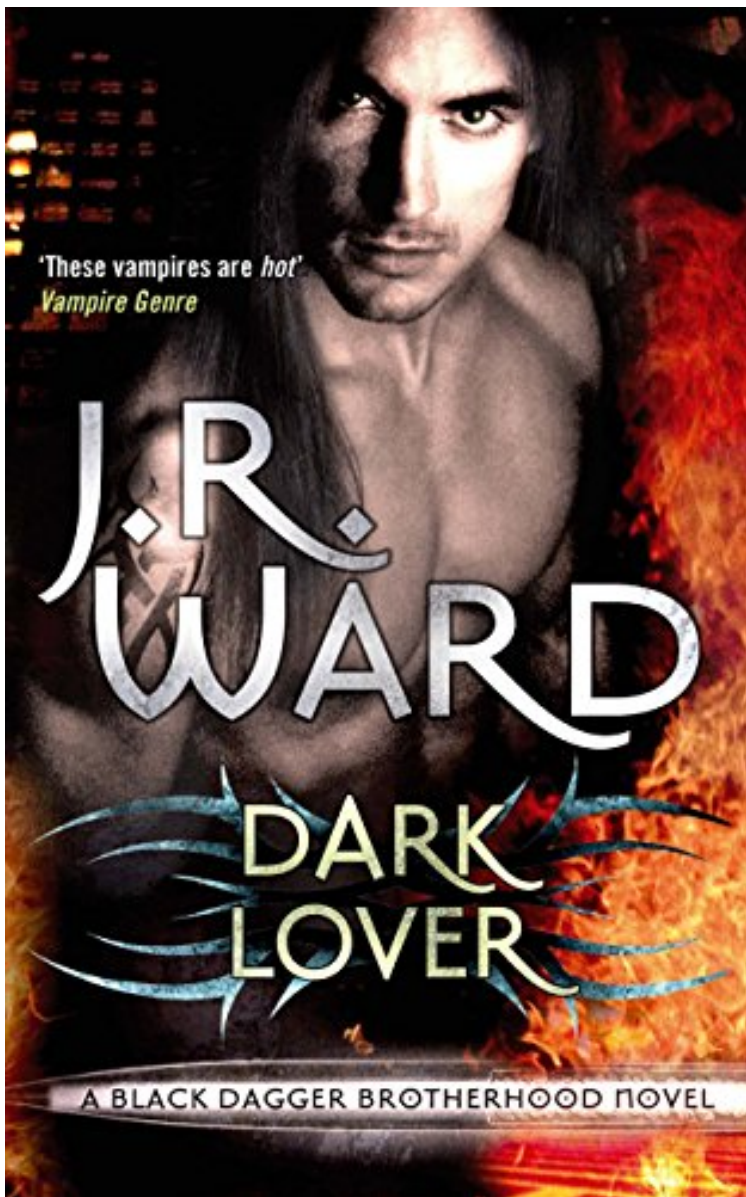


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Dark Lover: Number 1 in series



Par J.R. Ward
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Description : Description du produitIn the shadows of the night in Caldwell, New York, there's a deadly turf war going on between vampires and their slayers. There exists a secret band of brothers like no other-six vampire warriors, defenders of their race. Yet none of them relishes killing more than Wrath, the leader of The Black Dagger Brotherhood. The only purebred vampire left on earth, Wrath has a score to settle with the slayers who murdered his parents centuries ago. But, when one of his most trusted fighters is killed-leaving his half-breed daughter unaware of his existence or her fate-Wrath must usher her into the world of the undead-a world of sensuality beyond her wildest dreams.

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

between vampires and their slayers. There also exists a secret band of brothers like no other - six vampire warriors, defenders of their race. Among them, none relishes killing their enemies more than Wrath, the leader of the Black Dagger Brotherhood...The only pure-bred vampire left on the planet, Wrath has a score to settle with the slayers who murdered his parents centuries ago. But when one of his most trusted fighters is killed - orphaning a half-breed daughter unaware of her heritage or her fate - Wrath must usher the beautiful female into the world of the undead...Racked by a restlessness in her body that wasn't there before, Beth Randall is helpless against the dangerously sexy man who comes to her at night with shadows in his eyes. His tales of brotherhood and blood frighten her. But his touch ignites a dawning hunger that threatens to consume them both...ExtraitChapter OneDarius looked around the club, taking in the teeming, half-naked bodies on the dance floor. Screampers was packed tonight, full of women wearing leather and men who looked like they had advanced degrees in violent crime.Darius and his companion fit right in.Except they actually were killers.So youre really going to do this? Tohrment asked him.Darius glanced across the shallow table. The other vampires eyes met his own. Yeah. I am.Tohrment nursed his Scotch and smiled grimly. Only the very tips of his fangs showed. Youre crazy, D.You should know.Tohrment tilted his glass in deference. But youre raising the bar. You want to take an innocent girl, who has no idea what the hell shes getting into, and put her transition in the hands of someone like Wrath. Thats whacked.He isnt evil. In spite of the way he looks. Darius finished his beer. And show a little respect.I respect the hell out of him. But its a bad idea.I need him.You sure about that?A woman wearing a micromini, thigh-high boots, and a bustier made of chains trolled by their table. Her eyes glittered from behind two pounds of mascara, and she worked her walk as if her hips were double-jointed.Darius gave her a pass. Sex was not on his mind tonight.Shes my daughter, Tohr.Shes a half-breed, D. And you know how he feels about humans. Tohrment shook his head. My great-great-grandmother was one, and you dont see me yakking that up around him.Darius lifted his hand to catch their waitresses eye and pointed at his empty bottle and Tohrments nearly dry glass. Im not going to let another one of my children die. Not if theres a possibility I can save her. And anyway, theres no telling whether shell even go through the change. She could end up living a happy life, never knowing about my side. Its happened before.And he hoped his daughter would be spared. Because if she went through her transition, if she came out alive on the other side as a vampire, she was going to be hunted as they all were.Darius, if he does it at all, hell do it because he owes you. Not because he wants to.Ill take him any way I can get him.But what are you giving her? Hes about as nurturing as a sawed-off, and that first time can be rough, even if youve been prepared. Which she hasnt.Im going to talk to her.And hows that going to go? Youre just going to walk up to her and say, Hey, I know youve never seen me before, but Im your dad. Oh, and guess what? Youve won the evolutionary lottery: Youre a vampire. Lets go to Disneyland!I hate you right now.Tohrment leaned forward, his thick shoulders shifting under black leather. You know I got your back. Im just thinking you should reconsider. There was a heavy pause. Maybe I could do it.Darius shot him a dry look. You want to try and get back into your house after the fact? Wellsie will stake you through the heart and leave you for the sun, my friend.Tohrment winced. Good point.And then shell come looking for me.Both males shuddered.Besides Darius leaned back as the waitress put their drinks down. He waited until she left, even though hard-core rap was pumping all around them. Besides, were living in dangerous times. If something happens to meIll take care of her.Darius clapped his friend on the shoulder. I know you will.But Wrath is better. There was no jealousy in the remark. It was a statement of fact.Theres no one like him.And thank God for that, Tohrment said with a half smile.Their band of brothers, a tight circle of strong-backed warriors who traded information and fought together, were of the same opinion. Wrath was off the chain when it came to the business of vengeance, and he hunted their enemies with a single-minded purpose that bordered on the insane. He was the last of his line, the only purebred vampire left on the planet, and though his race revered him as its king, he despised his status.It was almost tragic that he was the best bet Darius half-breed daughter had of surviving. Wraths blood, so strong, so untainted, would increase the chances of her getting through the transition if it hit her. But Tohrment wasnt off the mark. It was like turning a virgin over to a thug.With a sudden rush, the crowd shifted, people backing into each other. They were making way for someone. Or something.Shit. Here he comes, Tohrment muttered. He tossed back his Scotch, swallowing it whole. No offense, but Im outtie. This is not a conversation I need to be a part of.Darius watched the sea of humans split as they steered clear of an imposing, dark shadow that towered over them. The flight response was a good survival reflex.Wrath was six feet, six inches of pure terror dressed in leather. His hair was long and black, falling straight from a widows peak. Wraparound sunglasses hid eyes that no one had ever seen revealed. Shoulders were twice the size of most males. With a face that was both aristocratic and

brutal, he looked like the king he was by birthright and the soldier he'd become by destiny. And that wave of menace rolling ahead of him was one hell of a calling card. As the cool hatred hit Darius, he tilted his fresh beer back and drank deeply. He hoped to God he was doing the right thing. Beth Randall looked up as her editor leaned his hip on her desk. His eyes went straight to the vee of her shirt. Working late again, he murmured. Hey, Dick. Shouldn't you be getting home to your wife and two kids? she mentally added. What are you doing? Editing a piece for Tony. You know, there are other ways of impressing me. Yeah, she could just imagine. Did you read my e-mail, Dick? I went down to the police station this afternoon and talked with Jos and Ricky. They swear a gun dealers moved into town. They've found two modified Magnums on drug dealers. Dick reached out to pat her shoulder, stroking it as he took his hand back. You just keep working the blotter. Let the big boys worry about the violent crimes. We wouldn't want anything to happen to that pretty face of yours. He smiled, eyes growing hooded as his gaze lingered on her lips. That stare routine had gotten old three years ago, she thought. Right after she'd started working for him. A paper bag. What she needed was a paper bag to pull over her head whenever she talked with him. Maybe with a picture of Mrs. Dick taped to the front. Would you like me to give you a ride home? he asked. Only if it were raining thumbtacks and hairpins, you leech. No, thanks. Beth turned back to her computer screen and hoped he'd take the hint. Eventually he wandered off, probably heading for the bar across the street that most of the reporters hit before going home. Caldwell, New York, wasn't exactly a hotbed of opportunity for any journalist, but Dick's big boys sure liked keeping up the appearance of carrying a heavy social burden. They relished cozying up to the bar at Charlies and talking about the days when they'd worked at bigger, more important papers. For the most part they were just like Dick: middle-aged, middle-of-the-road men who were competent, but not extraordinary at what they did. Caldwell was big enough and close enough to New York City to have the nasty business of violent crimes, drug busts, and prostitution, so they were kept busy. But the Caldwell Courier Journal was not the Times, and none of them was ever going to win a Pulitzer. It was rather sad. Yeah, well, look in the mirror, Beth thought. She was just a beat reporter. She'd never even worked at a national-level paper. So when she was in her fifties, unless things changed, she'd have to be at a free press polishing classifieds to have a shot at reflected glory from her CCJ days. She reached for the bag of M&Ms she'd been nursing. The damn thing was empty. Again. She should probably just go home. And pick up some Chinese down the street. On her way out of the newsroom, which was an open space cut up into cubicles by flimsy gray partitions, she hit her buddy Tony's stash of Twinkies. Tony ate all the time. For him, there was no breakfast, lunch, and dinner: Consumption was a binary proposition. If he was awake, something was going into his mouth, and to keep himself supplied, his desk was a treasure trove of caloric depravity. She peeled off the cellophane and couldn't believe she was biting into the artificial swill as she hit the lights and walked down the stairwell to Trade Street. Outside, the heat of July was a physical barrier between her and her apartment. Twelve straight blocks of hot and humid. Fortunately, the Chinese restaurant was halfway home and heavily air-conditioned. With any luck they'd be busy tonight, so she'd get to wait a while in the coolness. When she was finished with the Twinkie, she flipped open her phone, hit speed dial, and put in an order for beef with broccoli. As she walked along, she looked at the familiar, grim landmarks. Along this stretch of Trade Street, there were only bars, strip clubs, and the occasional tattoo parlor. The Chinese food place and the Tex-Mex buffet were the only two restaurants. The rest of the buildings, which had been used as offices in the twenties, when downtown had been thriving, were vacant. She knew every crack in the sidewalk; she could time the traffic lights. And the patois of sounds drifting out of open doors and windows offered no surprises either. McGriders Bar was playing blues; Zero Sum had bleating techno coming out of its glass entrance; and the karaoke machines were fired up at Rubens. Most of the places were reputable enough, but there were a couple she stayed away from on principle. Screamers in particular catered to a scary-ass clientele. That was one door she wouldn't go through without a police escort. As she measured the distance to the Chinese restaurant, a wave of fatigue hit her. God, it was humid. The air was so heavy she felt as if she were breathing water. She had a feeling the exhaustion wasn't just about the weather. She'd been pooped for weeks, and suspected she was dancing with depression. Her job was going nowhere. She was living in a place she didn't care about. She had few friends, no lover, and no romantic prospects. If she looked ahead ten years and pictured herself staying put in Caldwell with Dick and the big boys, she only saw more of the same routine: getting up, going to work, trying to make a difference, failing, going home alone. Maybe she just needed out. Out of Caldwell. Out of the CCJ. Out of the electronic family of her alarm clock and the phone on her desk and the TV that kept her dreams away while she slept. God knew there was nothing keeping her in town but habit. She hadn't spoken to any of her foster parents for years, so they

wouldnt miss her. And the few friends she had were busy with their own families. When she heard a leering whistle behind her, she rolled her eyes. That was the problem with working near the bars. On occasion you picked up gawkers. The catcalls came next, and then, sure enough, two guys crossed the street at a jog and came after her. She looked around. She was heading away from the bars and into the long stretch of vacant buildings before the restaurants. The night was thick and dark, but at least there were streetlights and the occasional car passing. I like your black hair, the big one said as he fell into step beside her. Mind if I touch it? Beth knew better than to stop. They looked like college frat boys out for the summer, which meant they were just going to be annoying, but she didnt want to take any chances. Besides, the Chinese place was only five blocks up. She reached into her purse anyway, searching for her pepper spray. You need a ride somewhere? the big guy asked. My cars not far. Seriously, how bout you come with us? We could go for a little ride. He grinned and winked at his buddy, as if the smooth rap was definitely going to get him laid. The crony laughed and circled her, his thin blond hair flopping as he skipped. Lets ride her! the blond said. Damn it, where was her spray? The big one reached out, touching her hair, and she looked at him good and hard. With his polo shirt and his khaki shorts, he was BMOC handsome. Real all-American material. When he smiled at her, she sped up, focusing on the dim neon glow of the Chinese places sign. She was praying someone else would walk by, but heat had driven the pedestrian traffic indoors. There was no one around. You want to tell me your name? all-American asked. Her heart started banging in her chest. The spray was in her other bag. Four more blocks. Maybe Ill just pick a name for you. Let me think. Hows pussycat sound? The blond giggled. She swallowed and took out her cell phone, just in case she needed to call 911. Stay calm. Keep it together. She pictured how good the rush of air-conditioning in the restaurant was going to feel as she went inside. Maybe shed wait and call a cab, just to make sure she got home without being further harassed by them. Come on, pussycat, all-American cooed. I know youre going to like me. Only three more blocks. Just as she stepped off the curb to cross Tenth Street, he grabbed her around the waist. Her feet popped off the ground, and as he dragged her backward, he covered her mouth with a heavy palm. She fought like a madwoman, kicking and punching, and when she reached behind and belted him in the eye, his grip slipped. She lunged away from him, legs driving her heels hard into the pavement, breath trapped in her throat. A car went by out on Trade Street, and she yelled as its headlights flared. But then he got her again. Youre going to beg for it, bitch, all-American said in her ear as he put her in a choke hold. He wrenched her neck around until she thought it was going to snap and pulled her deeper into the shadows. She could smell his sweat and the college-boy cologne he wore, could hear the high-pitched laughter of his friend. An alley. They were taking her into an alley. Her stomach heaved, bile stinging her throat, and she jerked her body around furiously, trying to get free. Panic made her strong. But he was stronger. He pushed her behind a Dumpster and pressed his body into hers. She drove her elbow into his ribs and kicked some more. Goddamn it, get her arms! She got in one good heel punch to the blonds shins before he caught her wrists and held them over her head. Come on, bitch, youre going to like this, all-American growled, trying to get his knee between her legs. He ground her back against the buildings brick wall, holding her in place by the throat. He had to use his other hand to rip open her shirt, and as soon as her mouth was free, she screamed. He slapped her hard, and she felt her lip split open. Blood rushed onto her tongue, pain stunning her. You do that again and Im cutting your tongue out. All-Americans eyes boiled with hate and lust as he shoved up the white lace of her bra and exposed her breasts. Hell, I think Ill do that anyway. Hey, are those real? the blond asked, as if she would answer him. His buddy grabbed one of her nipples and pulled. She winced, tears making her vision swim. Or maybe her eyesight was going because she was hyperventilating. All-American laughed. I think shes natural. But you can find out for yourself when Im finished. As the blond giggled, some deep part of her brain kicked into gear and refused to let this happen. She forced herself to stop fighting and reached back to her self-defense training. Except for her heavy breathing, her body went still, and it took all-American a minute to notice. You want to play nice? he said, eyeing her with suspicion. She nodded slowly. Good. He leaned in, his breath filling her nose. She fought not to cringe at the rank smell of stale cigarettes and beer. But if you scream again, Im going to stab you. Do you understand me? She nodded once more. Let her go. The blond dropped her wrists and giggled, moving around them as if he were looking for the best angle. All-Americans hands were rough on her skin as he fondled her, and she held Tonys Twinkie down by force of will, her gag reflex pumping her throat. Even though she loathed the sensation of the palms pushing into her breasts, she reached for the fly of his pants. He was still holding her by the neck, and she was having trouble breathing, but the moment she touched his privates, he moaned and his grip loosened. With a hard jam of her hand, she grabbed his balls, twisted as hard as she

could, and kned him in the nose as he crumbled. Adrenaline shot through her, and for a split second she wished his buddy would come at her instead of staring at her stupidly. Fuck you! she screamed at them both. Beth bolted out of the alley, holding her shirt together as she ran, and she didnt stop until she was at the door to her apartment building. Her hands were shaking so badly she could barely get her key in the locks. And it wasnt until she stood in front of her mirror in the bathroom that she realized tears were pouring down her face. Butch O'Neal looked up when the police radio under the dash of his unmarked patrol car went off. There was a male victim, down but breathing, in an alley not so far away. Butch checked his watch. A little after ten oclock, which meant the fun was just getting started. It was a Friday night in the early part of July, so the college turks were still fresh out of school and aching to compete in the Stupid Olympics. He figured the guy had either been mugged or taught a lesson. He hoped it was the latter. Butch grabbed the handset and told Dispatch hed head over even though he was a homicide detective, not a beat cop. He had two cases he was working right now, one floater in the Hudson River and a hit-and-run, but there was always room for something else. As far as he was concerned, the more time away from home, the better. The dirty dishes in his sink and the wrinkled sheets on his bed were not going to miss him. He hit the siren and the gas and thought, Lets hear it for the boys of summer. Chapter Two Walking through Screamers, Wrath sneered as the crowd tripped over itself to get out of his way. Fear and a morbid, lusty curiosity wafted out of their pores. He breathed in the rank odor. Cattle. All of them. From behind his dark glasses, his eyes strained against the dim lights, and he shut his lids. His vision was so bad that he was just as comfortable with total blindness. Focusing on his hearing, he sorted through the beats of the music, isolating the shuffling of feet, the whisper of words, the sound of another glass hitting the floor. If he ran into something, he didnt care. Whether it was a chair, a table, a human, hed just walk over the damn thing. He sensed Darius clearly because his was the only body in the place that wasnt reeking of panic. Although even the warrior was on edge tonight. Wrath opened his eyes when he stood in front of the other vampire. Darius was a blurry shape, his dark coloring and black clothes the only information Wraths vision gave him. Whered Tohrment go? he asked as he caught a whiff of Scotch. Hes taking a breather. Thanks for coming. Wrath lowered himself into a chair. He stared straight ahead and watched the crowd gradually swallow up the path hed made. He waited. The pounding beat of Ludacris faded into old-school Cypress Hill. This was going to be good. Darius was a real straight shooter who knew Wrath couldnt stand having his time wasted. If there was silence, something was up. Darius tipped back his beer, then let out a deep breath. My lord If you want something from me, dont lead with that, Wrath drawled, sensing a waitress approach them. He had the impression of big breasts and a strip of flesh between her tight shirt and her short skirt. You need a drink? she asked slowly. He was tempted to suggest she lay herself on the table and let him go to work on her carotid. Human blood wouldnt keep him alive for long, but it sure as hell tasted better than watered-down alcohol. Not right now, he said. His tight smile spiked her anxiety and gave her a shot of lust at the same time. He took her scent into his lungs. Not interested, he thought. The waitress nodded, but didnt move away. She kept staring at him, her short blond hair a halo in the darkness around her face. Spellbound, she seemed to have forgotten her own name, much less her job. And how annoying was that. Darius shifted impatiently. Thats all, he muttered. Were good. As she backed up, getting lost in the crowd, Wrath heard Darius clear his throat. Thanks for coming. You already said that. Yeah. Right. Ah, you and I go way back. We do. Weve fought some damn good fights together. Cut down a lot of lessers. Wrath nodded. The Black Dagger Brotherhood had been protecting the race against the Lessening Society for generations. There was Darius. Tohrment. The four others. The brothers were vastly outnumbered by lessers, de-souled humans who served a nasty-ass master, the Omega. But Wrath and his warriors managed to hold their own. And then some. Darius cleared his throat. After all these years D, youve got to cut to the point. Marissa needs to do a little business tonight. Do you want to use your room at my place again? You know I dont let anyone else stay there. Darius let out an awkward laugh. No doubt her brother would prefer you not show up at his house. Wrath crossed his arms over his chest, pushing the table out with his boot to give himself a little more room. He didnt give a crap that Marissas brother had delicate sensibilities and was offended by the life Wrath lived. Havers was a snob and a dilettante who had his head up his ass. He was totally incapable of understanding the kind of enemies the race had and what it took to defend the population. And just because the dear boy was offended, Wrath wasnt going to play dandy while civilians were getting slaughtered. He needed to be in the field with his warriors, not taking up space on some throne. So Havers could shove it. Although Marissa shouldnt have to deal with her brothers attitude. I just might take you up on that offer. Good. Now talk. I have a daughter. Wrath slowly turned his head. Since when? A while. Whos the mother? You dont know her. And sheah, she died. Darius's sorrow rose up around

him, the acrid smell of old pain cutting through the stench of human sweat, alcohol, and sex in the club. How old is she? Wrath demanded. He had a feeling where this might be headed. Twenty-five. Wrath cursed under his breath. Don't ask me, Darius. Don't ask me to do it. I have to. My lord, your blood is Call me that again and I'll close your mouth for you. Permanently. You don't understand. She's Wrath started to get up. Darius's hand grasped his forearm and then was quickly removed. She's half-human. Jesus Christ So she might not survive the transition if she goes through it. Look, if you help her, at least she has a chance of living. Your blood is so strong, it would increase the likelihood of her making it through the change as a half-breed. I'm not asking you to take her on as a shellan. Or to protect her, because I can do that. I'm just trying to Please. My other sons are dead. She's all that could be left of me. And I Her mother is one I loved. If it had been anyone else, Wrath would have used his favorite pair of words: fuck and off. As far as he was concerned, there were only two good positions for a human. A female on her back. And a male facedown and not breathing. But Darius was almost a friend. Or would have been one, if Wrath had let him get close. As Wrath stood up, he closed his eyes. Hatred washed through him, directed into the center of his own chest. He despised himself for walking away, but he just wasn't the kind of male who could help some poor half-breed through such a painful and dangerous time. Gentleness and mercy were not in his makeup. I can't do it. Not even for you. Darius's agony hit him in a great swell, and Wrath actually swayed under the emotion's force. He squeezed the vampire's shoulder. If you really love her, do her a favor. Ask someone else. Wrath turned and stalked out of the bar. On his way to the door he wiped the memory of himself from every human cerebral cortex in the place. The strong ones would think they had dreamed him. The weak ones wouldn't remember him at all. Out on the street, he headed for a dark corner behind Screamer's so that he could dematerialize. He passed a woman deep throating some guy in the shadows, a bum who'd collapsed in a stupor, a drug dealer arguing on a cell phone about the going price for crack. Wrath knew the moment he was followed. And who it was. The sweet smell of baby powder was a dead giveaway. He smiled widely, opened his leather jacket, and took out one of his hira shuriken. The stainless-steel throwing star felt comfortable in his palm. Three ounces of death ready to hit the airwaves. With the weapon in his hand, Wrath didn't change his stride, even though he wanted to rush into the shadows. He was spoiling for a fight after shutting down Darius, and the Lessening Society member behind him had perfect fucking timing. Killing the soulless human was just what he needed to take the edge off. As he drew the lesser into the dense darkness, Wrath's body primed for the fight, his heart pumping steadily, the muscles in his arms and thighs twitching in anticipation. His ears picked up the sound of a gun being cocked, and he triangulated the weapon's aim. It was pointed at the back of his head. In a fluid motion, he wheeled around just as the bullet exploded out of the muzzle. He ducked and threw the star, which flashed silver and twirled in a deadly arc. It caught the lesser right in the neck, splitting his throat open before continuing on its path into the darkness. The gun dropped to the ground, clattering across the asphalt. The lesser grabbed his neck with both hands and fell to his knees. Wrath walked over and went through its pockets. He took the wallet and the cell phone he found and put them into his jacket. And then he withdrew a long, black-bladed knife from his chest holster. He was disappointed the fight hadn't lasted longer, but going by the dark, curly hair and relatively inept attack, this was a new recruit. With a quick thrust, he pushed the lesser onto its back, flipped the weapon in the air, and caught the handle with a swipe of his palm. The blade plunged into flesh, cut through bone, reached the black void where the heart had been. With a strangled sound, the lesser disintegrated in a flash of light. Wrath wiped the blade off on his leather pants, slipped it back where it belonged, and stood up. He looked around. And then dematerialized himself. Darius had a third beer. A couple of Goth lovelies dropped by, looking for a chance to help him forget his troubles. He passed on the invites. He left the bar and walked over to his BMW 650i, which was parked illegally in the alley behind the club. Like any vampire worth his salt, he could dematerialize at will and travel over vast distances, but that was a hard trick to pull off if you had to carry anything heavy. And not something you wanted to do in public. Besides, a fine car was a joy to behold. Darius got into the Beemer and shut the door. From out of the sky rain started to fall, dappling the windshield with fat tears. He wasn't out of options. The talk of Marissa's brother had gotten him thinking. Havers was a physician, a dedicated healer of the race. Maybe he could help. It was certainly worth a try. Distracted with plans, Darius put the key in the ignition and twisted. The starter wheezed. He turned the key again and then had a terrible premonition as he heard a rhythmic clicking. The bomb, which had been attached to the undercarriage of the car and hardwired into the electrical system, went off. As his body was incinerated by a blast of white heat, his last thought was of the daughter who had yet to meet him. And now never would. Chapter Three Beth took a forty-five-minute shower, used half a bottle of body wash, and nearly melted the cheap wallpaper off

the bathroom walls because she kept the water so hot. She dried off, threw on her bathrobe, and tried not to catch another shot of her reflection in the mirror. Her lip was a mess. She stepped out into her cramped studio apartment. The air conditioner had died a couple of weeks ago, so the room was nearly as smothering as the bathroom. She eyed her two windows and the sliding door that led out to a wilted courtyard. She wanted to open them all, but checked the locks instead. Even though her nerves were shot, at least her body was rebounding fast. Her appetite had returned with a vengeance, as if it were pissed at the diversion of dinner, and she went around to her galley kitchen. The chicken leftovers from four nights ago even seemed inviting, but when she cracked the foil package, she caught a whiff of sweat socks. She pitched the load and tossed a Lean Cuisine into the microwave. She ate the macaroni and cheese standing up, holding the little plastic tray in her palm with a pot holder. It wasn't enough, didn't even make a dent in her hunger, so she had another one. The idea of putting on twenty pounds in one night was damned appealing; it really was. She couldn't help the way her face looked, but she was willing to bet that Neanderthal misogynist attacker of hers preferred his victims with a tight ass. She blinked her eyes, trying to get his face out of her mind. God, she could still feel his hands, those awful, heavy palms bruising her breasts. She needed to file a report. She should go down to the station. Except she didn't want to leave her apartment. At least not until morning. She went over to the futon she used as a couch and a bed and curled her legs in tight to her body. Her stomach was doing a slow churn job on the mac and cheese, waves of nausea followed by marching rows of shivers passing over her skin. A soft meow brought her head up. Hey, Boo, she said, wiggling her fingers listlessly. The poor guy had run for cover when she'd come through the door tearing her clothes off and throwing them across the room. Meowing again, the black cat padded over. His wide green eyes looked worried as he leaped into her lap with grace. Sorry about the drama, she murmured, making room for him. He rubbed his head against her shoulder, purring. His body was warm, his weight grounding. She didn't know how long she sat there stroking his fine, soft fur, but when the phone rang, she jumped. As she reached for the receiver, she managed to keep pace with the petting. Years of living with Boo had honed her cat/phone coordination skills to perfection. Hello? she said, thinking it was past midnight, which ruled out telemarketers and suggested either work or some sicko crank-calling her. Yo, B-lady. Get your dancing shoes on. Some guys car blew up outside of Screamer's. With him in it. Beth closed her eyes and wanted to weep. Jos de la Cruz was one of the city's police detectives, but he was also a friend of sorts. As were most of the men and women in blue, come to think of it. Because she spent so much time at the station, she'd gotten to know them all pretty well, although Jos was one of her favorites. Hey, you there? Tell him. Tell him what happened. Just open your mouth. Shame and remembered horror tightened her vocal cords. I'm here, Jos. She pushed her dark hair out of her face and cleared her throat. I can't come tonight. Yeah, right. When you ever turn down a good tip? He laughed easily. Oh, but take it smooth. Hard-ass is on the case. Hard-ass was Homicide Detective Brian O'Neal, better known as Butch. Or just plain sir. I really can't make it tonight. You getting busy with someone? Curiosity spiked his voice. Jos was married. Happily. But she knew down at the station that they all speculated about her. A woman who looked like her without a man? Something had to be up. Well, are you? God, no. No. There was a stretch of silence as her friend's cop radar obviously kicked in. What's up? I'm fine. Just tired. I'll come to the station tomorrow. She'd file the report then. Tomorrow she'd be strong enough to go through what had happened without breaking down. Do I need to do a drive-by? No, but thanks. I'm okay. She hung up. Fifteen minutes later she was in a pair of freshly laundered jeans and a floppy shirt that covered her butt and then some. She called for a cab. Before she left she rummaged through her closet until she found her other purse. She grabbed the pepper spray and held it hard in her hand as she stepped out of her apartment. In the two miles between her front door and the bomb scene, she was going to find her voice. And she was going to tell Jos everything. As much as she hated the idea of reliving the attack, she wasn't going to let that asshole walk free and do the same thing to someone else. And even if he was never caught, at least she would have done her part to try to nail him. Wrath materialized in the drawing room of Darius's house. Damn, he'd forgotten how well the vampire lived. Even though D was a warrior, he had the tastes of an aristocrat and it made sense. He'd started life as a highborn princeps, and fine living was still of value to him. His nineteenth-century mansion was well cared for, filled with antiques and works of art. It was also secure as a bank vault. But the drawing room's soft yellow walls hurt Wrath's eyes. What a pleasant surprise, my lord. Fritz, the butler, came in from the front hall and bowed deeply while shutting off the lights to ease Wrath's squint. As usual, the old male was dressed in black livery. He'd been with Darius for about a hundred or so years and was adoggen, which meant he could go out in the day but aged faster than vampires did. His subspecies had been serving aristocrats and warriors for millennia. Will you be with us for long, my

lord? Wrath shook his head. Not if he could help it. Hour, tops. Your room is ready. Should you need me, I am here. Fritz bent at the waist again and walked backward out of the room, closing the double doors behind him. Wrath went over to a seven-foot-tall portrait of what hed been told was a French king. He put his hand on the right side of the heavy gold frame, and the canvas pivoted to reveal a dark stone hall lit with gas lamps. Stepping inside, he took a set of stairs deep into the earth. At the bottom landing there were two doors. One went to Darius's sumptuous quarters. The other opened to what Wrath supposed was a home away from home for him. Most days he slept in a warehouse in New York City, in an interior room made out of steel with a lock system along the lines of Fort Knox. But he would never invite Marissa there. Or even any of the brothers. His privacy was precious. As he stepped inside, candles mounted into the walls flared around the room at his will. Their golden glow barely made headway against the darkness. In deference to Wrath's eyesight, Darius had painted the walls and twenty-foot-high ceiling black. In one corner there was a massive bed with black satin sheets and a thicket of pillows. Across the way was a leather couch, a wide-screen TV, and a door that opened into a black marble bathroom. There was also a closet full of weapons and clothes. For some reason, Darius was always bugging him to stay at the mansion. It was a goddamned mystery. There wasn't a defense issue, because Darius could handle himself. And the idea that a vampire like D would be lonely was ludicrous. Wrath sensed Marissa before she came into the room. The scent of the ocean, a clean breeze, preceded her. Let's get this over with, he thought. He was itching to get back to the streets. Hed had only a taste of battle, and tonight he wanted to gorge himself. He turned around. As Marissa bowed her slight body to him, he sensed devotion and uneasiness weaving together in the air around her. My lord, she said. From what little he could see, she was wearing some kind of flowing white chiffon thing, and her long blond hair cascaded over her shoulders and down her back. He knew she dressed to try to please him, and he wished like hell she wouldn't make the effort. He took off his leather jacket and the chest holster he carried his daggers in. Damn his parents. Why had they given him a female like her? So fragile. Then again, considering the shape hed been in before his transition, maybe they'd worried anyone sturdier would have hurt him. Wrath flexed his arms, his biceps curling up thick, one shoulder cracking from the force. If they could only see him now. Their little boy had turned into a righteous, cold killer. Probably better they were dead, he thought. They wouldn't have approved of what hed become. Then again, if they'd been allowed to live into old age, he would have been different. Marissa shifted nervously. Im sorry to disturb you. But I cannot wait any longer. Wrath headed for the bathroom. You need me, I come. He turned on the water and rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt. With steam rising from the rush of the faucet, he cleaned the grime, sweat, and death from his hands. Then he worked the bar of soap up his arms, covering with suds the ritualistic tattoos that ran down the insides of his forearms. He rinsed, dried himself, and walked over to the couch. He sat and waited, grinding his teeth. They'd been doing this for how long? Centuries. But every time it took Marissa a while before she could approach him. If it had been anyone else, his patience would have snapped within moments, but he cut her some slack. Truth was, he felt sorry for her because shed been forced to become his shellan. Hed told her time and again that hed release her of their covenant, free her to find a true mate, one who would not only kill anything that threatened her, but would love her, too. Funny thing was, Marissa wouldn't give up on him, as fragile as she might be. He figured she probably feared no other female would have him, that none would feed the beast when he needed it and then their race would lose their strongest line. Their king. Their leader who wasn't willing to lead. Yeah, he was one hell of a catch. He stayed away from her unless he had to drink, which wasn't often because of his lineage. She never knew where he was or what he was doing. She passed the long days alone in her brother's house, sacrificing her life to keep alive the last purebred vampire, the only one with not a single drop of human blood in him. Frankly, he didn't know how she stood it or him. Abruptly, he felt like cursing. Tonight was stacking up to be a real party for his ego. Darius. Now her. Wrath's eyes followed her as she moved around the room, circling him, getting closer. He forced his face to relax, kept his breathing even, made his body still. This was the hardest part of being with her. He panicked at not being free to move, and he knew when she started to feed, the choking sensation would get worse. You have been busy, my lord? she said softly. He nodded, thinking that if he was lucky, he was going to get even busier before dawn came. Marissa finally stood before him, and he could feel her hunger cutting through her uneasiness. He sensed her desire, too. She wanted him, but he blocked out that particular emotion of hers. There was no way he was going to have sex with her. He couldn't imagine putting Marissa through the things hed done to other female bodies. And hed never wanted her that way. Not even in the beginning. Come here, he said, gesturing with his hand. He dropped his forearm on his thigh, wrist up. You're starving. You shouldn't wait so long to call on me. Marissa lowered herself to the floor

at his knees, her gown pooling around her body and his feet. Her fingers were warm on his skin as she softly ran her hand over his tattoos, stroking the black characters that detailed his lineage in the old language. She was close enough so he caught the movement of her mouth opening, her fangs flashing white before she sank them into his vein. Wrath closed his eyes, laying his head back as she drank. The panic came on him fast and hard. He curled his free arm around the edge of the couch, his muscles straining as he gripped the corner to keep his body in place. Calm, he needed to stay calm. It was going to be over soon, and then he'd be free. When Marissa lifted her head ten minutes later, he bolted upright and walked off the anxiety, feeling a sick relief that he could now move around. As soon as he had his shit together, he went over to her. She was replete, absorbing the strength that came to her as their blood mixed. He didn't like the look of her lying on the floor, so he picked her up and was thinking about calling Fritz to take her back to her brothers house when there was a rhythmic knock on the door. Wrath glared across the room, carried her to the bed, and laid her down. Thank you, my lord, she murmured. I will take myself home. He paused. And then pulled a sheet over her legs before walking over and cracking open the door. Fritz was all jazzed up about something. Wrath slid outside, closing the door tight. He was about to ask what the hell would warrant the disruption when the butler's scent permeated his irritation. He knew without asking that death had paid another visit. And Darius was gone. Master How? he growled. The pain he would deal with later. First he needed details. Ah, the car. Clearly the butler was having trouble holding it together, his voice reedy and thin as his old body. A bomb, my lord. The car. Outside of the club. Torment called. He saw it happen. Wrath thought of the lesser he'd taken down. He wished he knew whether it had been the one who'd done the deed. The bastards had no honor anymore. At least their precursors, going back for centuries, had fought like warriors. This new breed were cowards who hid behind technology. Call the brotherhood, he ground out. Tell them to come now. Yes, of course. And master? Darius asked me to give this to you. The butler held something out if you were not with him when he died. Wrath took the envelope and went back into the chamber, having no compassion to offer Fritz or anyone else. Marissa was gone, which was good for her. He tucked Darius's last missive into the waistband of his leather pants. And let his rage out. The candles exploded and fell to the floor as a whirlwind of viciousness swirled around him, growing tighter, faster, darker until the furniture flipped off the floor and traveled in a circle around him. He leaned back his head and roared.

Chapter Four

By the time Beth's cab dropped her off outside of Screamer's, the crime scene was alive. Lights flashed blue and white from the squad cars that blocked off access to the alley. The bomb squad's boxy, armored vehicle had shown up. Cops milled around, both uniformed and plainclothed. And the requisite crowd of drunken kibitzers had set up shop at the action's periphery, smoking and talking. In her time as a reporter, she'd found that murder was a community event in Caldwell. Well, certainly for everyone except the man or woman who'd actually done the dying. For the victim, she had to imagine death was an alone kind of thing, even if he or she were staring into the face of the killer. Some bridges you crossed on your own, no matter who drove you to the edge. Beth brought her sleeve up to her mouth. The smell of burned metal, a tangy chemical sting, filled her nose. Hey, Beth! One of the cops motioned her over. If you want a closer look, go through Screamer's to the back. There's a corridor. Actually, I'm here to see Jos. Is he around? The cop craned his neck, searching the crowd. He was here a minute ago. Maybe he headed back to the station. Ricky! You see Jos? Butch O'Neal stepped in front of her, silencing the other cop with a dark look. Isn't this a surprise. Beth stepped back. Hard-ass was a lot of man. Big body, deep voice, attitude to spare. She supposed a lot of women must be attracted to him, because God knew he was a looker in that rough, tough kind of way. But Beth had never felt a spark. Not that she ever did when it came to men. So, Randall, what's doing? He popped a piece of gum in his mouth, wadding up the foil into a tight little ball. His jaw went to work like he was frustrated, not so much chewing as grinding. I'm here for Jos. Not for the scene. Sure you are. His gaze narrowed on her face. With his dark brows and deep-set eyes, he always looked a little angry, but abruptly his expression got worse. Would you come with me for a sec? I really want Jos. Her arm was taken in a tight grip. Just come over here. Butch backed her into a secluded corner of the alley, away from the commotion. What the hell happened to your face? She put her hand up and covered her split lip. She must still be in shock, because she'd forgotten all about it. Let me repeat the question, he said. What the hell happened to you? I, ah Her throat closed up. I was. She was not going to cry. Not in front of Hard-ass. I want Jos. He's not here, so you can't have him. Now talk. Butch braced his arms on either side of her body, as if he sensed she might run. He was only a couple of inches taller than she was, but he had at least seventy pounds of muscle on her. Fear kicked in like an ice pick punching through her chest, but she'd had quite enough of being physically bullied tonight. Back off, O'Neal. She put her palms squarely on his chest and pushed. He moved. A little. Beth, tell me. If you don't let me go her

eyes held his. I'm going to do an exposé on your interrogation techniques. You know, the ones that require X-rays and casts after you're through? His eyes narrowed again. And then he pulled his arms away from her body, holding his hands up as if he were surrendering. Fine. He left her and went back into the fray. She collapsed against the building, feeling as if her legs were never going to work right again. She looked down, trying to gather her strength, and squinted at something metal. She bent her knees, getting down on her haunches. It was a martial-arts throwing star. Hey, Ricky! she called out. The cop came loping over, and she pointed to the ground. Evidence. She left him to do his job and hurried out to Trade Street to catch a cab. She just couldn't keep it together any longer. Tomorrow she would file an official report with Jos. First thing in the morning. When Wrath reappeared in the drawing room, he was back in control. His weapons were strapped on, and his jacket was heavy in his hand, filled with the throwing stars and knives he liked to use. Torment was the first of the brotherhood to arrive. His eyes were all fired up, pain and vengeance making the dark blue glow so vividly even Wrath caught the flash of color. As Tohr settled back against one of Darius's yellow walls, Vishous came into the room. The goatee he'd recently grown made him seem even more sinister than usual, although the tattoo around his left eye was what really put him into ominous territory. Tonight his Red Sox hat was pulled down tight so the complex markings on his temple barely showed. As always, his black driving glove, used to keep his left hand from inadvertently making contact with anyone, was in place. Which was a good thing. A goddamned public service. Rhage followed, his cocky attitude dialed down in deference to what had brought the brothers together. Rhage was a towering male, big, powerful, stronger than all the other warriors. He was also a sex legend in the vampire world, Hollywood beautiful with the drive to rival a barnful of stallions. Females, vampire and human alike, would trample their own young to get at him. At least until they got a peek at his dark side. When Rhage's beast came out, everyone, the brothers included, looked for shelter and took up praying. Phury was the last, walking through the front door with his limp barely noticeable. His prosthetic lower leg had recently been updated, and he was sporting a state-of-the-art titanium-and-carbon composite number now. The combination of rods, joints, and bolts was screwed into the base of his right shitkicker. With his fantastic mane of multicolored hair, Phury should have been in Hollywood's league with the ladies, but he'd stuck solid to his vow of celibacy. There was room for one and only one love in his life, and it had been slowly killing him for years. *Revue de presse* Praise for Dark Lover Dark fantasy lovers, you just got served. *New York Times* bestselling author Lynn Viehl 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! *New York Times* bestselling author Nicole Jordan It's not easy to find a new twist on the vampire myth, but Ward succeeds beautifully. This dark and compelling world is filled with enticing romance as well as perilous adventure. The Black Dagger Brotherhood series promises tons of thrills and chills. *RT Book s* You will lose yourself in this world; it is different, creative, dark, violent, and flat-out amazing. *All About Romance* J. R. Ward takes you deep into her intense, dark world of vampires and holds you captive until her last breathless word.... Sure to satisfy lovers of vampire romance everywhere. *Affaire de Coeur* Praise for the novels of the Black Dagger Brotherhood J. R. Ward's urban fantasy romance series is so popular I don't think there's a reader today who hasn't at least heard of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. *USA Today* J. R. Ward's unique band of brothers is to die for. I love this series! *New York Times* bestselling author Suzanne Brockmann Utterly absorbing and deliciously erotic.... The Brotherhood is the hottest collection of studs in romance. *New York Times* bestselling author Angela Knight Best new series I've read in years! Tautly written, wickedly sexy and just plain fun. *New York Times* bestselling author Lisa Gardner