

Blood Vow: Black Dagger Legacy

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER  J. R. Ward returns with an all-new tale of paranormal passion in the world of the Black Dagger Brotherhood.

The Black Dagger Brotherhood continues to train the best of the best to join them in the deadly battle against the Lessening Society. Among the new recruits, Axe proves to be a cunning and vicious fighter-and also a loner isolated because of personal tragedy. When an aristocratic female needs a bodyguard, Axe takes the job, though he's unprepared for the animal attraction that flares between him and the one he is sworn to protect.

For Elise, who lost her first cousin to a grisly murder, Axe's dangerous appeal is enticing-and possibly a distraction from her grief. But as they delve deeper into her cousin's death, and their physical connection grows into so much more, Axe fears that the secrets he keeps and his tortured conscience will tear them apart.

Rhage, the Brother with the biggest heart, knows all about self-punishing, and he wants to help Axe reach his full potential. But when an unexpected arrival threatens Rhage and Mary's new family, he finds himself back in the trenches again, fighting against a destiny that will destroy all he holds most dear.

As Axe's past becomes known, and fate seems to be turning against Rhage, both males must reach deep-and pray that love, rather than anger, will be their lantern in the darkness.

Praise for Blood Vow

"Sharp, sexy, and funny."-New York Journal of Books

"Nonstop action, steamy sexual tension . . . and absorbing characters."-BookPage

"Packed with quietly gut-wrenching emotions, healing and sacrifice."-Under the Covers

Praise for J. R. Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood series

"Utterly absorbing."-Angela Knight

"To die for . . . I love this series!"-Suzanne Brockmann

J. R. Ward is the author of more than twenty previous novels, including those in her #1 New York Times bestselling Black Dagger Brotherhood series. She lives in the South with her family.

One

The Keys, Caldwell, New York

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here was a place in Axe's life for masks. Whether they were literal and hid your face, or figurative to protect your soul, he was supremely comfortable with camouflage. Knowledge, after all, was power only if it gave you insight into your enemy. If insight was applied to you?

He'd rather have a knife to his throat.

And everyone was his enemy.

Standing in a crowd of over a hundred sexually aroused humans, he was ready to feed his dark side--you know, toss some fresh meat over the chain--link fence of his sex drive and stand back as the meal was consumed, the gnawing hunger briefly satisfied.

It never lasted. But that was why he'd joined this club.

The Keys was a private, members--only gig, and there were only two rules. No minors. Always with consent.

After those conditions were satisfied? You could scratch the itch of whatever sin you wanted: glory holes, gang bangs, girls on girls on guys. There were rooms for fetishes, and pits for fucking, and every tie--up, chain--down, in--the--air you could ask for.

Especially here in the Cathedral.

Of all the spaces in the sprawling, multi--block compound, this was largest and the loftiest. Filled with swirls of white smoke, pierced by purple and blue lasers, empty of furniture and fixtures except for the altar, only the hardest of the hardcore were allowed in here.

And masks were always worn, even on nights when the rest of the club didn't require it.

Through the eye holes of his fitted skull plate, Axe looked up, way up, to the altar.

It was like a scene out of *The Silence of the Lambs*, a human body suspended high above the floor, arms outstretched, head tilting to the side, swaths of fabric fanning out like wings all around the torso. The Hannibal--arisons ended there, though. Not a man, a woman. Not clothed, but naked. Not real blood on the flesh, but a viscous wash that fell like rain from the ceiling, hitting her breasts, dripping over her stomach, licking down her thighs so that she glistened under the remote lights.

Not dead, but very much alive.

"Do you want that?" he was asked from behind.

Axe smiled and didn't bother hiding his fangs.

None of them knew that he was an actual vampire. And not as in a neo--Victorian Dracula--wannabe with cosmetically altered canines, high--heeled boots, and a fake black rinse through his already dark hair.

As in the real deal. Different DNA. Different traditions and language. Different biological imperative that, yes, involved drinking blood from a vampire of the opposite sex.

Different sex drive.

"Yeah, I'll take her first," he said.

As the staff member whistled loudly and put his hand up to summon the rolling scaffolding, a rush tripped and fell over the crowd, excitement building for the first show. And for a split second, Axe considered materializing up there just to freak them all out, just because he could, just because he liked creating chaos.

Instead, he scaled the front of the metal framework with the ease of a spider over its web.

When he was up at the woman's level, her body responded in a starving arch, her head falling back, her mouth opening, her eyes begging him. She wasn't drugged. She was achingly aware, the scent of her sex flaring, her flesh calling out for release.

She'd wanted him. Out of the many below, she'd wanted him specifically.

"Take me," she said. "Take--"

He reached out his gloved hand and closed her mouth with his fingertips. Bending over her, he bared his canines and went for her throat. But he didn't bite her. He ran the tip of one fang up her jugular.

With a jerk against the chains she had volunteered for, she orgasmed for him right then and there, the alchemy of the public display, the danger he represented, the kind of sex she needed, coalescing into a release that flushed her face and made her moan as she thrashed.

Down below, the pleasure she felt rippled through the teeming bodies.

And he was aroused, yes. But not like they were. Not like she was.

Never as any of them.

However, the screaming voice in his head that told him he was a piece of shit was dimmed down by the sex. The fire of his rage against himself was doused by the distraction. The packed house of recriminations under his real skull were, momentarily, displaced.

So yes, this worked for everyone.

Reaching up to his own throat, he released the cord of his cloak and dropped the heavy weight from his shoulders. He had black leathers on and nothing else but his tattoos and piercings.

Axe's hands went to her body and traveled, with his mouth, everywhere.

And the storm he was deliberately creating raked over the decimated landscape of his soul, obscuring the ragged, desolated mess he was.

She was getting what she required, and so was he.

Good thing. He needed to be at the Black Dagger Brotherhood training center in about an hour, in some kind of shape to continue his education. Being a soldier in the fight against the Lessening Society? Walking the line between life and death?

Now that was finally going to get him what he was after.

Inner peace through acts of war: Because he had to believe if you were facing off with the undead, surely you were too busy trying to stay alive to worry about anything else.

Fucking perfect.

State University of New York, Caldwell Campus

Elise, blooded daughter of the Princeps Felixe the Younger, smiled at the human male across the library table from her. "Of course I'd stay late. I'm not going to leave you to deal with all this by yourself."

"All this" was a debris field of final papers sufficient to cover every square inch of surface except for two feet in front of her and two feet in front of Professor Troy Becke. Although the submissions for Psych 342 had been filed electronically, Troy believed in printing them out for grading purposes--and after having been through midterms with the man, Elise had to agree. There was something different about holding the work in your hands and being able to write your thoughts down. It had to do with the lack of speed, she'd decided.

Too easy to scan if you were doing things electronically, and she was such a quick typist: having to handwrite things gave her time to really think things through.

Troy sat back and stretched. "Well, considering it's ten o'clock at night only days before Christmas, I'd say it's yeoman's duty."

As he smiled at her, she measured him. He was tall for a human, and he had bright blue eyes and the sort of face that was so open and friendly, it could make you forget that you were a stranger posing in a strange land, a foreigner who had come to visit and stayed because they were captivated by the freedom that was enjoyed by the natives.

"So that was my last one." She put the printout on her stack of graded papers on the left and twisted in the chair to crack her spine, a little sunburst of relief easing at her waist. "You know, this was a good group of students. They really got it--"

"I'm sorry," he interjected.

Elise frowned. "Why? I'm your teaching assistant. This is my job. Besides, I'm learning even more now. . . ."

She let her voice trail off because she was pretty sure Troy wasn't hearing a thing she was saying. He was looking around at the stacks that bracketed them in their alcove, his eyes not really focused.

As a vampire among humans, Elise was always a little twitchy, and she hopped on the scan train, glancing about in case Troy had sensed something she had not.

The Foster Newmann library was a place where students went to study even though print was dead and notes were now taken on laptops and chalk no longer existed in classrooms. Four stories high, and marked by stretches of shelving that were broken up by sitting areas, the facility was a place where she always felt safe, with nothing but her studies and her ambitions before her.

It was when she was at home, in her father's mansion, that she was hunted. Pursued. Threatened.

Although that was just allegorically speaking.

Noticing nothing, she rubbed her eyes, the reality that she was going to have to return to that big old house making her head pound.

Seven years into her studies and she was starting to get close to her goal. Thanks to an undergrad major in psych, she had been allowed into the Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology program without a master's. Her goal was to go into a private counseling practice for the race when she was finally finished, specializing in PTSD.

After the raids of two years before, there were a lot of vampires suffering from traumatic loss, and so few avenues for anyone to seek social workers and counseling.

Of course, the raids had also slowed her down, too, her father insisting that she cease her studies and decamp with her aunt, uncle, and first cousin out to a safe house far from Caldwell. As soon as they had come back, however, she had gotten on track again-- although tragedy had struck once more, making it all so much harder for her.

She hated lying to her sire every night. Hated the subterfuge about where she was going and who she was with. But what other choice did she have? The small window of freedom she'd been granted had been slammed shut.

Especially after her first cousin had been beaten to death four weeks ago.

Elise still couldn't believe Al-li-shon was gone, and her father, uncle, and aunt were likewise in a state of renewed shock--or at least, she assumed they were. No one was talking about the loss, the sadness, the anger. But they were reacting to it, for sure: Elise's father was so tense and grim, it was as if he were going to snap at any moment. Her aunt had been locked up in her bedroom for a month. And her uncle was a ghost who wandered around, throwing no shadows, casting no footfalls.

Meanwhile, Elise was sneaking out of the mansion to go to school. But come on. She had worked for years and years to get this far, and if anything, the way her family was handling Al-li-shon's loss was exactly why the race needed good, well--trained psychologists.

Stuffing things under the proverbial rug was a recipe for interpersonal disaster.

"I'm just tired," Troy said.

Yanking herself out of introspection, she looked at the man. Her first thought was that he was hiding something. Her second was that she had to know what it was.

"Is there anything I can help with?"

He shook his head. "No, the problem's on my side."

As he tried to smile, she caught the scent of something in the air. Something . . .

"I think you better go." He leaned down for the duffel bag he'd brought the exams in and started shuffling stacks of papers into it. "The roads will be getting bad because of the snow."

"Troy. Can you please talk to me?"

He got up, tucking his loose shirt into his khaki slacks. "It's all good. And I guess I won't see you until after New Year's."

Elise frowned. "I thought you wanted me to do the syllabus planning with you for Psych four--oh--one, two twenty--eight, and the seminar on Bipolar Two? I have tomorrow night free--"

"I don't think that's a good idea, Elise."

What the heck was that scent--

Oh. Wow.

With a flush, she realized what it was. Especially as his eyes shifted away from her: He was aroused. Because of her.

He was seriously, sexually aroused. And he was not happy about it.

"Troy."

Her professor put his hand up. "Look, it's nothing you've done. It's not you, honest."

As he didn't go any further than that, she found herself wishing he would just come out with it all. Not because she was necessarily attracted to him, but she hated anything that was hidden. She had had more than enough of that from her family's perennial stiff--upper--lip way of handling life's inevitable unpleasantnesses.

Besides, it wasn't as if she wasn't attracted to him. He was appealing in an unthreatening kind of way. Smart, funny, and a heartthrob to his female students for sure. God knew she'd seen plenty of the humans he taught stare at him like he was a god.

And maybe she had thought about what it would be like with him. The touching. The kissing. The . . . other things.

She had no male prospects currently and that was not going to change anytime soon. Especially given the fact that she was fouled in the eyes of the glymera.

Not that anyone knew that, as the male she had lain with that one time had been killed in raids.

"I am of age," she heard herself say.

His eyes flipped to hers. "What?"

"I am not young. Too young, I mean. For what's on your mind."

Troy's gaze flared as if that was the last thing he'd expected her to say. And then he looked at her lips.

Yes, she thought. He was safe, this human. He would never hurt her or pressure her, as that kind of aggression was not in his nature--and even if it was, she could easily overpower him. Besides, she was never going to be mated, would never have a life wholly outside of her father's control, never experience anything more than the distilled life stories in her course books.

"Elise." He scrubbed his palm down over his face. "Oh, God . . ."

"What? And no, I'm not going to pretend I don't know what we're talking about here."

"There are rules. Between professors and students."

"You're not teaching any classes of mine."

"You're my T.A."

"I make my own decisions, no one else does."

At least that was true here, in the slice of life she had in the human world. And she would be damned if some rule in a society that was not her own was going to keep her from doing what she wanted. She got way too much of that in her species.

Troy laughed in a harsh rush. "I can't believe we're having this conversation. I mean, I've had it in my head with you a thousand times. I just never thought it would actually happen."

"Well, I don't car..."

Other Books

Hr: The Summer Bride: Pengantin Musim Panas, Daisy Chance hidup mandiri dan memiliki impian besar. Dengan bakat luar biasanya dalam merancang pakaian, tujuan hidup Daisy adalah menjadi seorang pembuat gaun paling terkenal di London. Dia bekerja keras siang dan malam dengan keyakinan bahwa impiannya akan tercapai, sampai suatu saat seorang pria liar dari Irlandia dengan sesumbar mengatakan bahwa cara yang dilakukannya sungguh salah. Patrick Flynn hidup kaya raya dan berambisi tinggi. Dia masuk ke lingkungan Society untuk menemukan calon istri dari kalangan aristokrat. Alih-alih dia merasakan ketertarikan pada seorang gadis keras kepala yang berbicara terlalu blakblakan. Gadis itu pilihan yang salah, tetapi sanggup membuat jantung Flynn berdebar tak keruan.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ . Daisy Chance hidup mandiri dan memiliki impian besar."