

“Evocative, enticing, erotic.”

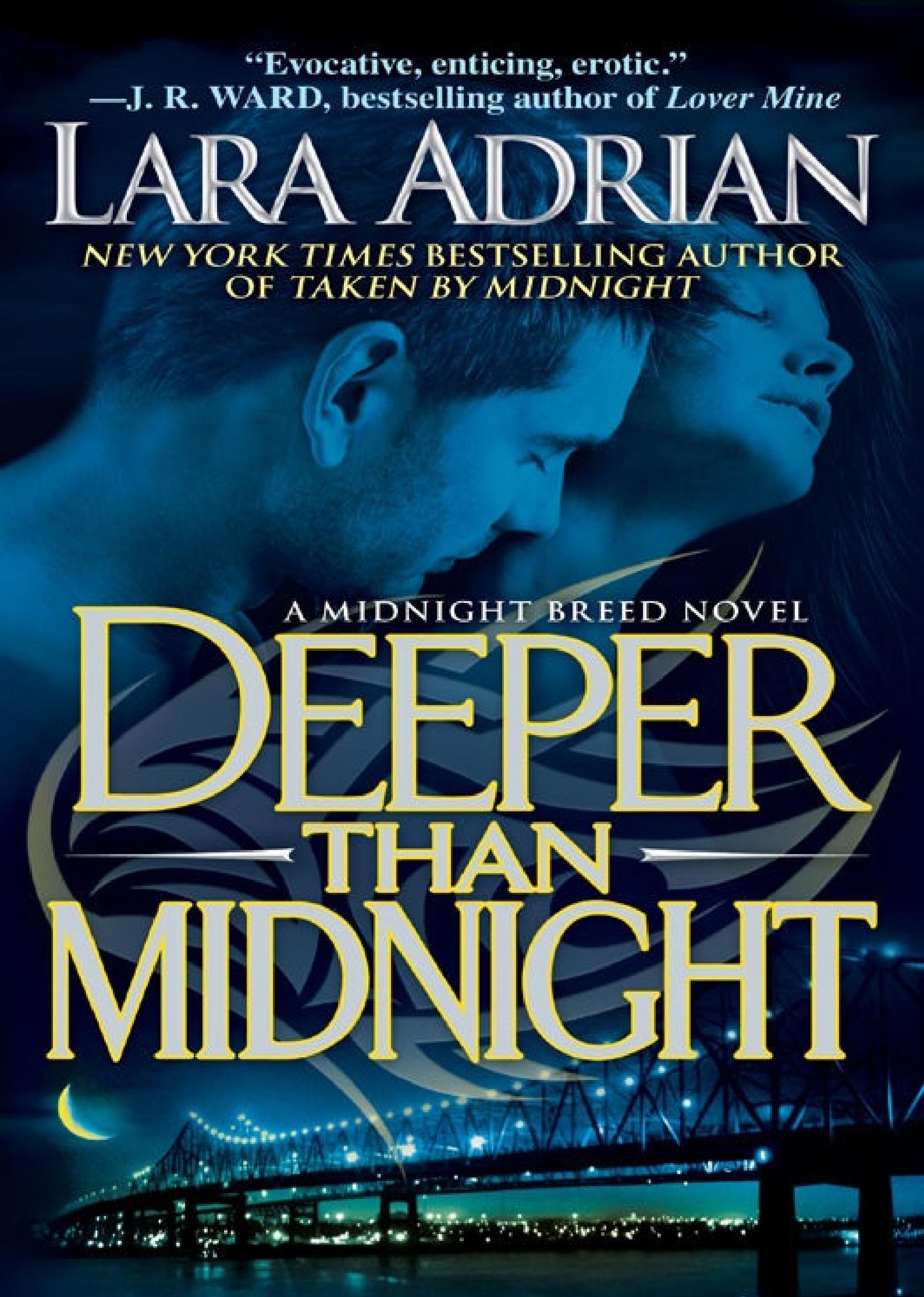
—J. R. WARD, bestselling author of *Lover Mine*

LARA ADRIAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *TAKEN BY MIDNIGHT*

A MIDNIGHT BREED NOVEL

DEEPER
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MIDNIGHT



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By Lara Adrian



KISS OF MIDNIGHT

KISS OF CRIMSON

MIDNIGHT AWAKENING

MIDNIGHT RISING

VEIL OF MIDNIGHT

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SHADES OF MIDNIGHT

TAKEN BY MIDNIGHT

DEEPER THAN MIDNIGHT

Deeper Than
Midnight

MIDNIGHT BREED SERIES
BOOK NINE



LARA ADRIAN



DELL
NEW YORK

Deeper Than Midnight is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For all the readers who have been asking me for a story
about Hunter since he first walked onto the page four
books ago. I hope you enjoy the ride!

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Thank you, first and foremost, to my wonderful editor Shauna Summers, for patience and guidance, for championing my books from the very beginning (and I mean day one, thirteen years ago in the slush pile!), and for continuing to shape me into a better writer each time we talk about my work.

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Excerpt from Darker After Midnight

CHAPTER One



The club was private, very much off the beaten path, and for damned good reason. Located at the far end of a narrow, ice-encrusted back alley of Boston's Chinatown district, the place catered to an exclusive, if discriminating, crowd. The only humans permitted inside the old brick building were the stable of attractive young women—and a few pretty men—kept on hand to satisfy the late-night clientele's every craving.

Concealed within the shadows of an arched vestibule at street level, the unmarked metal door gave no indication of what lay behind it, not that any local or tourist in their right mind would pause to wonder. The thick slab of steel was shielded by a tall iron grate. Outside the entrance, a big guard loomed like a gargoyle in a knit skullcap and black leather.

The male was Breed, as was the pair of warriors who emerged from the gloom of the alleyway. At the sound of their combat boots crunching in the snow and frozen filth of the pavement, the guard on watch lifted his head. Under a thick, bulbous nose, thin lips curled away from crooked teeth and the sharp tips of the vampire's fangs. Eyes narrowed at the uninvited newcomers, he exhaled a low snarl, his warm breath steaming from his nostrils to plume into the brittle December night air.

Hunter registered a current of tension in his patrol partner's movements as the two approached the vampire on guard. Sterling Chase had been twitchy ever since they'd left the Order's compound for tonight's mission. Now he walked at an aggressive pace, taking the lead, his fingers flexing and contracting where they rested none too subtly on the large-caliber semiautomatic pistol holstered on his weapons belt.

The guard took a step forward too, putting himself directly in their path. Large thighs spread, boots planted wide in warning on the pitted pavement as the vampire's big head lowered. The eyes that had been narrowed on them before in question now went tighter with recognition as they hit and settled on Chase. "You gotta be kidding me. What the hell do you want out here on Enforcement Agency turf, *warrior*?"

"Taggart," Chase said, more growl than greeting. "I see your career has

been in no danger of improving since I quit the Agency. Reduced to playing doorman for the local sip-and-strip, eh? What's next for you—security detail at the shopping mall?"

The agent pursed his lips around a ripe curse. "Takes some kind of balls to show your face, especially around here."

Chase's answering chuckle was neither threatened nor amused. "Try looking in a mirror sometime, then let's talk about who's got balls showing his face in public."

"This place is off-limits to all but the Enforcement Agency," the guard said, crossing beefy arms over a barrel chest. A barrel chest sporting the broad leather strap of a weapons holster, with still more hardware bristling around his waist. "The Order's got no business here."

"Yeah?" Chase grunted. "Tell that to Lucan Thorne. He's the one who will have your ass if you don't move it out of our way. Assuming the two of us standing here cooling our heels for no good reason don't decide to remove you ourselves."

Agent Taggart's mouth had clamped shut at the mention of Lucan, the Order's leader and one of the longest-lived, most formidable elders of the Breed nation. Now the wary gaze strayed from Chase to Hunter, who lingered behind his fellow warrior in measuring silence. Hunter had no quarrel with Taggart, but he had already calculated no less than five different ways to disable him—to kill him swiftly and surely, right where he stood—should the need arise.

It was what Hunter had been trained to do. Born and bred to be a weapon wielded by the merciless hand of the Order's chief adversary, he was long accustomed to viewing the world in logical, unemotional terms.

He no longer served the villain called Dragos, but his deadly skills remained at the core of who, and what, he was. Hunter was lethal—unfailingly so—and in that instantaneous connection of his gaze and Taggart's, he saw that grim understanding reflected in the other male's eyes.

Agent Taggart blinked, then took a step back, removing himself from Hunter's stare and clearing the path to the door of the club.

"I thought you might be willing to reconsider," Chase said, as he and Hunter strode to the iron grate and entered the Enforcement Agency hangout.

The door must have been soundproof. Inside the dark club, loud music thumped in time with multicolored, spinning lights that lit a central stage made of mirrored glass. The only dancers were the trio of half-naked humans gyrating together in front of an audience of leering, hot-eyed vampires seated in booths and at tables on the floor below the stage.

Hunter watched the long-haired blonde in the center wind herself around a Lucite pole that climbed up from the floor of the stage to the ceiling. Swiveling her hips, she lifted one of her enormous, unnaturally round breasts up to meet her snakelike tongue. As she toyed with the pierced nipple, the other dancers, a tattooed woman with spiked purple hair and a dark-eyed young man who barely fit inside the shiny red vinyl pouch slung around his

hips, moved to opposite sides of the mirrored stage and began their own solo routines.

The club reeked of stale perfume and sweat, but the musty tang couldn't mask the trace scent of fresh human blood. Hunter followed the olfactory trail with his gaze. It led to a far corner booth, where a vampire in the standard-issue Enforcement Agency dark suit and white shirt fed judiciously from the pale throat of a naked, moaning woman sprawled across his lap. Still more Breed males drank from other human blood Hosts, while some in the vampire-run establishment seemed intent on satisfying more carnal needs.

Beside him near the door, Chase had gone as still as stone. A low, rumbling growl leaked from the back of his throat. Hunter spared the feeding and onstage spectacle little more than an assessing glance, but Chase's gaze was fixed and hungry, as openly riveted as any of the other Breed males gathered there. Perhaps more so.

Hunter was far more interested in the handful of heads that were now turning their way within the crowd of Enforcement Agents. Their arrival had been noticed, and the simmering looks from every pair of eyes that landed on them now said the situation could get ugly very quickly.

No sooner had Hunter registered the possibility, one of the glaring vampires reclined on a nearby sofa got up to confront them. The male was large, as were his two companions who rose to join him as he cut a clean path through the crowd. All three were visibly armed beneath their finely cut, dark suits.

"Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in," drawled the agent in the lead, a trace of the South in his slowly measured words and in his refined, almost delicate, features. "How many decades of service with the Agency, yet you never would have deigned to join any of us in a place like this."

Chase's mouth curved, barely concealing his elongated fangs. "You sound disappointed, Murdock. This shit was never my speed."

"No, you always held yourself above temptation," the vampire replied, his gaze as shrewd as his answering smile. "So careful. So rigidly disciplined, even in your appetites. But things change. People change, don't they, Chase? If you see something you like in here, you need only say so. For old times' sake, if nothing else, hmm?"

"We've come for information about an Agent named Freyne," Hunter interjected when Chase's reply seemed to take longer than necessary. "As soon as we have what we need, we'll leave."

"Is that so?" Murdock considered him with a curious tilt of his head. Hunter saw the vampire's gaze drift subtly away from his face to note the *dermaglyphs* that tracked up the sides of his neck and around his nape. It took only a moment for the male to discern that Hunter's elaborate pattern of skin markings indicated he was Gen One, a rarity among the Breed.

Hunter was nothing close to the ages of his fellow Gen One warriors, Lucan or Tegan. However, sired by one of the race's Ancients, his blood was every bit as pure. Like his Gen One brethren, his strength and power was roughly that of ten later-generation vampires. It was his rearing as one of Dragos's

personal army of assassins—a secret upbringing known by the Order alone—that made him far more lethal than Murdock and these couple dozen Agents in the club combined.

Chase seemed to snap out of his distraction at last. “What can you tell us about Freyne?”

Murdock shrugged. “He’s dead. But then, I expect you already know that. Freyne and his unit were all killed last week while on a mission to retrieve a kidnapped Darkhaven youth.” He gave a slow shake of his head. “Quite the pity. Not only did the Agency lose several good men, but their mission objective proved less than satisfactory as well.”

“Less than satisfactory,” Chase scoffed. “Yeah, you could say that. From what the Order understands, the mission to rescue Kellan Archer was fucked six ways from Sunday. The boy, his father, and grandfather—hell, the entire Archer family—all of them wiped out in a single night.”

Hunter said nothing, letting Chase bait the hook as he saw fit. Most of what he charged was true. The night of the rescue attempt had been a blood-soaked one that had ended with too much death, the worst of it being dealt to the members of Kellan Archer’s family.

But contrary to Chase’s assertion, there had been survivors. Two, to be exact. Both of them had been secreted away from the carnage of that night and were now safe in the protective custody of the Order at their private compound.

“I won’t disagree that things could have ended better, for both the Agency and the civilians who lost their lives. Mistakes, although regrettable, do happen. Unfortunately, we may never be certain where to place the blame for last week’s tragedy.”

Chase chuckled under his breath. “Don’t be so sure. I know you and Freyne went way back. Hell, I know half the men in this club traded favors with him on a regular basis. Freyne was an asshole, but he knew how to recognize opportunity when he saw it. His biggest problem was his mouth. If he was mixed up in something that can be tied back to the kidnapping of Kellan Archer or the attack that left the Archer Darkhaven in rubble—and just for argument’s sake, let’s say I’m goddamned sure Freyne was involved—then the odds are good he told someone about it. I’m willing to bet he bragged to at least one loser sitting in this shithole of a club.”

Murdock’s expression had been tightening with every second that Chase spoke, his eyes beginning to transform in fury, dark irises sparking with amber light for every decibel that Chase’s voice rose into the crowd.

Now half the room had paused to stare in their direction. Several males got up from their seats, human blood Hosts and half-drugged lap dancers pushed roughly aside as a growing horde of offended Agents began to converge on Chase and Hunter.

Chase didn’t wait for the mob to attack.

With a raw snarl, he leapt into the knot of vampires, nothing but a flash of swinging fists and gnashing teeth and fangs.

Hunter had no choice but to join the fray. He waded into the violent throng, his sole focus on his partner and the intent to pull him out of this in one piece. He threw off every comer with hardly any effort, disturbed by the feral way Chase was fighting. His face was drawn taut and wild as he landed blow after blow on the crush of bodies pressing in on him from all sides. His fangs were huge, filling his mouth. His eyes burned like coals in his skull.

“Chase!” Hunter shouted, cursing as a fountain of Breed blood shot airborne—his patrol partner’s or another male’s, he couldn’t be sure.

Nor did he have much chance to figure it out.

A blur of movement on the other side of the club caught Hunter’s eye. He swung his gaze toward it and found Murdock staring back at him, a cell phone pressed to his ear.

An unmistakable panic bled into Murdock’s features as their gazes locked over the brawling crowd. His guilt was obvious now, written in the whitening tension around his mouth and in the beads of perspiration that sprang up on his brow to glisten in the swirling lights of the empty stage. The Agent spoke swiftly into his phone now, his feet carrying him in an anxious rush toward the back of the place.

In the fraction of a second it took for Hunter to toss aside a charging Agent, Murdock had vanished from sight.

“Son of a bitch.” Hunter vaulted past the fracas, forced to abandon Chase to pursue what he knew to be the very lead they’d been hoping to find tonight.

He broke into a run, relying on his Gen One speed to carry him into the back of the club and through a door that was still ajar, swinging onto the narrow brick corridor where Murdock had fled. There was no sign of him either left or right in the alleyway, but the sharp echo of running footsteps on an adjacent side street carried on the frigid breeze.

Hunter took off after him, rounding the corner just as a big black sedan screeched to a halt at the curb. The back door was thrown open from the inside. Murdock jumped in, slammed it tight behind him as the car’s engine roared to life once more.

Hunter was already plowing toward it when the tires smoked on the ice and asphalt, then, with a leap of screaming metal and machinery, the vehicle swung into the street and sped off like a demon into the night.

Hunter wasted not so much as an instant. Leaping for the side of the nearest brick building, he grabbed hold of a rusted fire escape and all but catapulted himself up onto the roof. He ran, combat boots chewing up asphalt tiles as he hoofed it from one rooftop to another, keeping a visual track on the fleeing vehicle dodging late-night traffic on the street below.

When the car gunned it around a corner onto a dark bit of empty straightaway, Hunter launched himself into the air. He came down onto the roof of the sedan with a bone-jarring crash. The pain of impact registered, but for less than a moment. He held on, feeling only calm determination as the driver tried to shake him off with a side-to-side sawing motion of the wheels.

The car jerked and swerved, but Hunter stayed put. Splayed spread-eagle on

the roof, the fingers of one hand digging into the top rim of the windshield, he swung his other hand down and freed his 9mm from its holster at the small of his back. The driver tried another round of zigzag on the street, narrowly missing a parked delivery truck in his attempt to shake off his unwanted passenger.

Semiauto gripped in his hand, Hunter heaved himself into a catlike flip off the roof and onto the hood of the speeding sedan. Lying flat, he took aim on the driver, finger coolly poised on the trigger, ready to blow away the male behind the wheel so he could get his hands on Murdock and wring the traitorous bastard of all his secrets.

The moment slowed, and there was an instant—just the barest flicker of time—when surprise took him aback.

The driver wore a thick black collar around his neck. His head was shaved bald, most of his scalp covered with a tangled network of *dermaglyphs*.

He was one of Dragos's assassins.

A Hunter, like him.

A Gen One, born and raised to kill, like him.

Hunter's surprise was swiftly eclipsed by duty. He was more than willing to eradicate the male. It had been his pledge to the Order when he joined them—his personal vow to wipe out every last one of Dragos's homegrown killing machines.

Before Dragos had the chance to unleash the full measure of his evil on the world.

The tendons in Hunter's finger contracted in the split second it took for him to realign the business end of his Beretta with the center of the assassin's forehead. He started to squeeze the trigger, then felt the car clamp up tight beneath him as the driver drove the brake pedal into the floor.

Rubber and metal smoking in protest, the sedan stopped short.

Hunter's body kept moving, sailing through the air and landing several hundred feet ahead on the cold pavement. He rolled out of the tumble and was on his feet like nothing happened, pistol raised and firing round after round into the unmoving car.

He saw Murdock slide out of the backseat and dash for his escape into a shadowed back alley, but there was no time to deal with him before the Gen One was out of the car as well, the barrel of a large-caliber pistol locked and loaded, trained squarely on Hunter. They faced off, the assassin's weapon raised to kill, eyes cold with the same emotionless determination that centered Hunter in his stance on the iced-up patch of asphalt.

Bullets exploded from the two guns at the same time.

Hunter dodged out of harm's way in what felt to him like calculated slow motion. He knew his opponent would have done the same as Hunter's round sped toward him. Another hail of gunfire erupted, a rain of bullets this time as both vampires unloaded their magazines on each other. Neither of them took anything more than a superficial hit.

They were too evenly matched, trained in the same methods. They were

both hard to kill, and prepared to take the fight to their final breath.

In a blur of motion and lethal intent, the pair of them ditched their empty firearms and took their battle hand to hand.

Hunter deflected the rapid-fire upper-torso blows that the assassin led with as he roared up on him. There was a kick that might have connected with his jaw if not for a sharp tilt of his head, then another strike aimed at his groin, but diverted when Hunter grabbed the assassin's boot and twisted him into a midair spin.

The assassin regained his footing with little trouble, coming right back for more. He threw a punch and Hunter grabbed his fist, crushing bones as he tightened his grip then came around to use his body as a lever while he wrenched the outstretched arm backward at the elbow. The joint broke with a sharp *crack*, yet the assassin merely grunted, the only indication he gave of the certain pain he was feeling. The damaged arm hung useless at his side as he pivoted to throw another punch at Hunter's face. The blow connected, tearing the skin just above his right eye and hitting so hard, Hunter's vision filled with stars. He shook off the momentary daze, just in time to intercept a second assault—fist and foot coming at him in the same instant.

Back and forth it went, both males breathing hard from the exertion, both bleeding from where the other had managed to get the upper hand. Neither would ask for mercy, no matter how long or bloody their combat became.

Mercy was a concept foreign to them, the flip side of pity. Two things that had been beaten out of their lexicon from the time they were boys.

The only thing worse than mercy or pity was failure, and as Hunter took hold of his opponent's broken arm and drove the big male down to the ground with his knee planted in the middle of the assassin's spine, he saw the acknowledgment of imminent failure flicker like a dark flame in the Gen One's cold eyes.

He had lost this battle.

He knew it, just as Hunter knew it when a clear shot at the thick black collar around the assassin's neck presented itself to him in that next instant.

Hunter reached out with his free hand to grab one of the discarded pistols from its place on the pavement. He flipped it around in his hand, wielding the metal butt like a hammer, then brought it down on the collar that ringed the assassin's neck.

Again, and harder now, a blow that put a dent in the impenetrable material that housed a diabolical device. A device crafted by Dragos and his laboratory for a single purpose: to ensure the loyalty and obedience of the deadly army he'd bred to serve him.

Hunter heard a small *hum* as the tampered casing triggered the coming detonation. Dragos's assassin reached up with his good hand—whether to ascertain the threat or to attempt to stop it, Hunter would never be sure.

He rolled away ... just as the ultraviolet rays were released from within the collar.

There was a flash of searing light—there and gone in an instant—as the

lethal beam severed the assassin's head in one clean motion.

As the street was plunged back into darkness, Hunter stared at the smoldering corpse of the male who had been like him in so many ways. A brother, though there was no kinship among any of the killers in Dragos's personal army.

He felt no remorse for the dead assassin before him, only a vague sense of satisfaction that there was one less to carry out Dragos's twisted schemes.

He would not rest until there were none.

CHAPTER

Two



As founder and leader of the Order—hell, as a Gen One Breed male with some nine hundred years of life and then some under his belt—Lucan Thorne was not accustomed to taking an earful from anyone.

Yet he listened in smoldering silence as a high-ranking Enforcement Agent by the name of Mathias Rowan filled him in on what had gone down a couple of hours ago in one of the Agency’s private hangouts in Chinatown. The very club where he’d sent two of the Order’s warriors, Chase and Hunter, on patrol that night. He could hardly pretend surprise to hear that things had gotten out of hand, or that there had been a shit storm of violence and Chase had ended up in the middle of it.

Or rather, at the start, middle, and end of it, according to Rowan.

Under normal circumstances, neither Lucan personally nor the Order as a whole would give a damn about ruffled feathers within the Agency. For as long as they’d existed, the Order and the Enforcement Agency had operated on their own terms, by their own brands of laws. Lucan had founded the Order based on justice and action; the Agency’s credo had been mired in politics and empire building from the beginning.

That didn’t mean there weren’t good, trustworthy men among their ranks—Mathias Rowan being one of those notable exceptions. Sterling Chase had been another. It wasn’t much more than a year ago that Chase had been part of the Enforcement Agency’s elite, a well-bred, well-connected, well-mannered golden boy whose career trajectory might have known no bounds.

And now?

Lucan’s mouth pressed flat in grim consideration as he paced alone in the living room of the private quarters that he and his Breedmate, Gabrielle, shared at the Order’s underground headquarters. He couldn’t discount that Chase had been a valuable asset to the Order since he’d traded in his starched white shirts and natty Agency suits for basic black combat fatigues and the give-no-quarter methods of a warrior. He’d come on board fully committed to the Order’s goals and missions. He’d been a quick study on patrols and had covered more than one of the warriors’ asses in the heat of their battles.