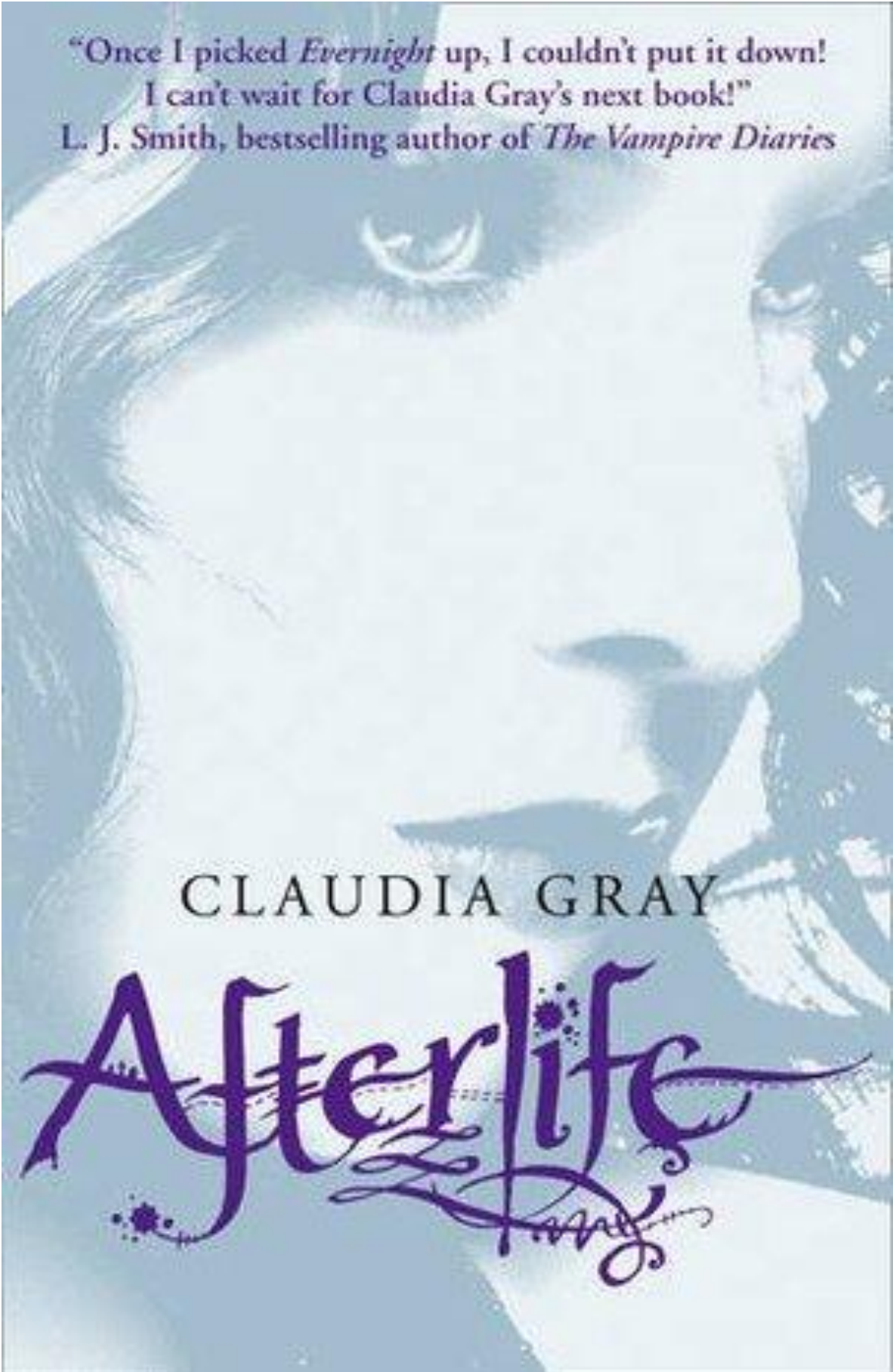


CLAUDIA GRAY

Afterlife

An Evernight novel
New York Times bestselling series



"Once I picked *Evernight* up, I couldn't put it down!
I can't wait for Claudia Gray's next book!"
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Afterlife

Book 1

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Chapter One

“SUNRISE IS COMING,” BALTHAZAR SAID.

Those were the first words anyone had spoken aloud in hours. Although I didn't want to hear anything Balthazar had to say — about this or anything else — I knew he was right. Vampires could always feel the approaching dawn deep in their bones.

Could Lucas feel it, too?

We sat in the projection room of an abandoned theater, where the poster-covered walls still bore marks from last night's battle. Vic, the only human in the room, dozed on Ranulf's shoulder, his sandy hair mussed from sleep; Ranulf sat quietly, bloodstained ax across his lap as though he expected more danger at any second. His long, thin face and bowl haircut had never made him look more like a medieval saint. Balthazar stood in the far corner of the room, keeping his distance out of respect for my grief. Yet his height and his broad shoulders meant he took up more than his share of room.

I cradled Lucas's head in my lap. Had I been alive, or a vampire, so many hours without moving would have made me stiff. As a ghost, though, freed of the demands of a physical body, I'd been able to hold him through the whole long night of his death. I brushed back my long red hair, trying not to notice that the ends had trailed in Lucas's blood.

Charity had murdered him in front of my eyes, taking advantage of Lucas's desire to protect me rather than himself. It was her latest and most horrible attempt to hurt me, driven by her hatred for anybody who mattered to Balthazar, her brother and sire. She'd violated a vampire taboo by biting someone another vampire had bitten first — who had, in effect, been prepared for the transformation from living to undead. Lucas was supposedly mine to turn, or no one's. But Charity hadn't cared about any taboos in a long time. She didn't care about anyone or anything except her twisted relationship with Balthazar.

Wherever she was now, she was no doubt reveling in the fact that she'd broken my heart, and that she'd thrust Lucas into the very last place he would ever want to be.

I'd rather be dead, Lucas had always said. When I was alive and so much more innocent, I had dreamed of him becoming a vampire with me. But he had been raised by the hunters of Black Cross, who loathed the undead and pursued them with the passion of a cult. Turning into a vampire had always been his ultimate nightmare.

Now that nightmare had come true. “How long?” I said.

“Minutes.” Balthazar took one step forward, saw the expression on my face, and came no closer. “Vic should go.”

“What's happening?” Vic's voice was scratchy with sleep. He pushed himself upright, and his expression shifted from confusion to horror as he looked at Lucas's body, bloody and pale on the floor. “Oh! — for a sec, I thought I'd just had a nightmare or something. But this — it's real.”

Balthazar shook his head. “I'm sorry, Vic, but you need to leave.”

I realized what Balthazar meant. My parents, who had always wanted me to follow in their footsteps, had told me about the first hours of the transition. When Lucas rose as a vampire, he would want fresh blood — want it desperately, as much as he could get. In the first frenzy of awakening, his hunger could push every other thought out of his mind.

He'd be hungry enough to kill.

Vic didn't know any of that.

“Come on, Balthazar. I’ve gone this far with you guys. I don’t want to leave Lucas now.”

“Balthazar is correct,” Ranulf said. “It is safer that you leave.”

“What do you mean, safer?”

“Vic, go,” I said. I hated to push him away, but if he didn’t understand what was going on here, he needed a dose of harsh reality. “If you want to survive, go.”

Vic’s face paled.

More gently, Balthazar added, “This is no place for the living. This belongs to the dead.”

Vic ran his hands through his shaggy hair, nodded once at Ranulf and walked out of the projection room. Probably he would head home, where he’d try to do something useful — clean house, maybe, or make food nobody else could eat. Human concerns seemed very distant at that moment.

Now that Vic had left, I could finally voice the thought that had been haunting me for hours. “Should we — ” My throat choked up, and I had to swallow hard. “Should we let this happen?”

“You mean that you believe we should destroy Lucas.” From anybody else, this would have sounded too harsh to bear; from Ranulf, it was simple, calm fact. “That we should prevent him from rising as a vampire, and accept this as his final death.”

“I don’t want to do that. I can’t begin to tell you how much I don’t want that,” I answered. Every word I spoke felt like blood being squeezed from my heart. “But I know it’s what Lucas would want.” Didn’t loving someone mean putting their wishes first, even with something as terrible as this?

Balthazar shook his head. “Don’t do it.”

“You sound very sure.” I tried to say it calmly. Still, I was so angry at Balthazar that I could hardly look at him; he’d brought Lucas into the battle against Charity, even though he knew Lucas was numb with grief and unable to fight at his best. It felt like Lucas’s death was as much his fault as Charity’s. “Are you just telling me what I want to hear?”

Balthazar frowned. “When have I ever done that? Bianca, listen to me. If you’d asked me the day before I became a vampire whether I’d want to rise as undead, I would have said no.”

“You would still say no, if you had the chance. If you could go back. Wouldn’t you?” I demanded.

That caught him off guard. “We aren’t only talking about me. Think about your parents. About Patrice, and Ranulf, the other vampires you know. Would they really be better off rotting in their graves?”

Some vampires were okay, weren’t they? That was true of most of the ones I’d ever known. My parents had known centuries of happiness and love together. Lucas and I could have that, maybe. I knew he hated the idea of being a vampire — but only two short years ago, he’d hated all vampires with blind, unthinking prejudice. He’d come so far so quickly; surely he could come to accept himself in time.

It was worth a chance. It had to be. Everything in my heart told me that Lucas deserved another chance, and that we deserved another hope of being together.

I traced a finger across Lucas’s face: his forehead, his cheekbone and the outline of his lips. The heaviness and paleness of his body reminded me of a carving in stone — fixed, unliving, unchanging.

“It’s close,” Balthazar said. He came closer. “It’s time.”

Ranulf nodded. "I sense it as well. You should step away, Bianca."

"I'm not letting go of him."

"Just be ready to move, then. If you have to." Balthazar shifted his weight from one foot to the next, steadying his stance like a fighter preparing for battle.

It's going to be okay, Lucas, I thought, willing him to hear me past the divide between this world and the next. Wasn't he about to cross that divide to return to me? So maybe we were close enough for him to listen. We're dead, but we can still be together. Nothing matters more than that. We're stronger than death. Now nothing else ever has to come between us. You and I never have to be apart again.

I wanted him to believe that. I wanted to believe it, too.

Lucas's hand twitched.

I gasped — a reflex of the body I'd created, more a memory of what shock did to a living being than anything else.

"Be ready," Balthazar said. He was talking to Ranulf, not to me.

Shakily, I laid one hand upon Lucas's chest. I realized only then that I was waiting for a heartbeat. His heart would never beat again.

One of Lucas's feet shifted slightly, and his head turned a couple inches to the side. "Lucas?" I whispered. He needed to understand that he wasn't alone, before he realized anything else. "Can you hear me? It's Bianca. I'm waiting for you."

He didn't move.

"I love you so much." I wanted so badly to cry, but my ghostly body created no tears. "Please come back to me. Please." The fingers of his right hand straightened, muscles tensing, then curled back in toward his palm.

"Lucas, can you —"

"No!" Lucas shoved himself away from the floor, from me, stumbling to all fours. His eyes were wild, too dazed to truly see. "No!"

His back slammed against the wall. He stared at the three of us, his eyes displaying no recognition, no sanity. His hands pressed against the wall, fingers curved like claws, and I thought he might try to dig through it. Maybe it was a vampire instinct for digging your way out of a grave.

"Lucas, it's okay." I held my hands out, doing my best to remain completely solid and opaque. It was better to look as familiar as possible. "We're here with you."

"He doesn't know you yet," Balthazar said. "He's looking at us, but he can't see." Ranulf added, "He wants only blood."

At the word blood, Lucas's head tilted, like a predator catching the scent of prey. I realized that was the only word he'd recognized.

The man I loved had been reduced to an animal — to a monster, I realized, the sick, empty, murderous shell that Lucas had once believed every vampire to be.

Lucas's eyes narrowed. He bared his teeth, and with a shock I saw, for the first time, his vampire fangs. They altered his face so much that I hardly knew him, and that more than anything else tore at me. His posture shifted into a crouch, and I realized he was about to attack — any of us, all of us. Anything that moved. Me.

Balthazar moved first. He leaped — pounced — toward Lucas, colliding with him so forcefully that the wall behind them crunched and plaster dust fell from the ceiling. Lucas threw him off, but then Ranulf was on him in an attempt to push him into a corner.

"What are you doing?" I cried. "Stop hurting him!"

Balthazar shook his head as he rose from the floor. “This is the only thing he understands right now, Bianca. Dominance.”

Lucas pushed Ranulf backward, so hard that he thudded against me, and I stumbled into the old projector. Sharp metal jabbed into my shoulder. I felt pain, real pain, the kind I ‘d experienced back when I had a real body instead of this ghostly simulation. When I put my hand to my shoulder, I felt a lukewarm wetness beneath my fingers and pulled them away to see blood — silvery and strange. I hadn’t even realized that I still had blood now. The liquid gleamed like mercury. almost iridescent in the dim light.

The three — way fight in front of me was growing more violent — Balthazar’s foot to Lucas’s gut, Lucas’s fist to Ranulf’s jaw — but Balthazar saw that I was injured and shouted, “Bianca, stay back! You’re bleeding!”

What was that supposed to mean? Surely vampires didn’t drink wraiths’ blood, so there was no danger of my driving Lucas further into a killing frenzy. At that moment, I wasn’t sure he could become more frenzied than he already was. Younger and weaker he might be, but desperation goaded him on, made him fierce. It was possible he might defeat Ranulf and Balthazar both. I couldn’t bear to see that, but I didn’t think I could stand the alternative either. My fear sharpened — and became anger.

Enough of this.

I pushed myself toward them, blood on my fingertips, and flung out my hand as I cried, “Stop!” Droplets of silvery blood splattered through the air as all three of the guys shrank back.

At my side, Balthazar whispered, “Don’t get into this.”

Ignoring him, I stepped directly in front of Lucas. He had backed against the wall, glancing around wildly as though he could think of nothing but escape — or, perhaps, in search of living prey. Death had sharpened his features, making him both more beautiful and infinitely frightening. The only features that remained ilie same were his eyes.

So I focused only on his eyes. “Lucas, it’s me. It’s Bianca.”

He said nothing, just stared at me, utterly motionless. I realized he wasn’t breathing — most vampires did just as force of habit, but it seemed that death had claimed him entirely. No way was I going to let that happen.

“Lucas,” I repeated. “I know you can hear me. The guy I love is still in there. Come back to me.” Once again, I longed for the release of tears.

“Death couldn’t keep me from you. And it can’t keep you from me, not if you don’t let it.”

Lucas didn’t speak, but some of the tension left his body, relaxing his hands and his shoulders. He still looked edgy, almost crazed, but some semblance of control had returned to him.

What could I do? Was there anything I could say that would get through to him? Someiliing he would remember . . .

When Lucas had first learned that I was born to two vampires, he had to overcome his revulsion of the undead in order to hold true to his love for me. If he could remember what it had meant for him to accept me for what I was, maybe he could begin to face what he, too, had become.

Haltingly, I spoke his words as they came back to me: “Even though you’re a vampire — it doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

Lucas blinked, and for the first time since he had risen from the dead, his eyes seemed to fully focus. I realized that his fangs had retracted, leaving only the unearthly pallor

and beauty of the vampire. In every other way, he looked human. He looked like himself.

He whispered, "Bianca?"

"It's me. Oh, Lucas, it's me."

Lucas clutched me to him in an impossibly tight embrace, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. I felt hot tears against my shoulder; I wished I could cry, too. Our legs gave out at the same time, and we sank to the floor together.

I glanced over my shoulder to tell Balthazar and Ranulf to leave us, but they were already halfway out the door.

Once we were alone, I ran my hands through Lucas's hair, stroked his back, and kissed his cheek. "You made it back," I said. "We're together. We'll be okay."

"I never thought I'd see you again. I thought you were dead."

"I am. We both are."

"Then how — how is this real?"

"I've become a wraith. Only, wraiths like me who were born to it, born to two vampires — we have powers the others don't. I can have a body if I want, at least for a while. If I'd realized before ... if I could have told you... this would never have had to happen."

"Don't say it." His voice was strangled.

We rested our foreheads against each other, and the contact should have been comforting, but we were both so cold.

"My body feels heavy. Wrong. Dead." Lucas's hands tightened on my shoulders. "And yet there's this hunger making me wild. Driving me insane. You're back in my arms — I'd lost you forever, and here you are — but the only thing I can think about, the only thing I want — " He couldn't finish; he didn't have to. I knew all he wanted was blood.

"It will get better." My parents had always told me so, and weren't most of the vampires of Evernight proof of that?

Lucas didn't seem to believe me, but he said, dutifully, "Gotta hang on."

"Right."

For a few moments, we simply held each other. The faded film-star faces on the tattered movie posters around us seemed to be watching us, an audience of dark, soulless eyes. When I leaned against Lucas's shoulder, I tried to breathe in the familiar scent of his skin, but that was gone. Either his scent had been lost when he died, or I no longer had a sense of smell like I had before, or both. So many things had been taken from us.

But not each other, I reminded myself. We have to remember that.

First I had to get him out of this place, where he had been murdered. We needed to go someplace better, more familiar. Vic's house, I decided. We'd hidden out there for the past month or so this summer, while Vic's family vacationed in Italy. Our little makeshift apartment in the wine cellar Wouldn't be that much more comforting — it was where I had died just the day before — but maybe we could remain there until we figured out what to do.

"Come on." I took one of his hands in mine. The coral bracelet he'd given me for my last birthday jangled at my wrist. "They're waiting for us outside."

"Who's waiting for us?" Lucas couldn't seem to focus; it was like he was listening to a cell phone at the same time he was trying to listen to me. Not in a rude way; he just couldn't help it, which was worse.

“Balthazar — and Vic and Ranulf, too. They came back from Italy after you e-mailed them. Remember?”

Lucas nodded. His hand tightened around mine, so hard it nearly hurt. Lucas didn't seem to have any way to judge his new strength — and this despite the fact that he already had enhanced power from having been bitten. He worked his jaw, as if practicing biting down, over and over.

If he needed me to be the steady one, I would be. Of course I was better at being dead, I decided; I'd had a whole day's practice. It had taken me a few hours to get the hang of being noncorporeal. So no wonder it would take him a while to deal with becoming a vampire.

We left the projection room and walked out through the abandoned theater. The scene in the lobby wasn't pretty: Beheaded vampires lay crumpled on the floor, and I tried not to look at any of the abandoned heads. Vampires didn't bleed much after death — no heartbeat to pump out the blood — but I noticed Lucas looking hungrily at the few droplets on the floor.

“I know You're hungry,” I said, trying to comfort him.

“You don't know. You can't know. There's nothing like this.” Lucas's grimace revealed his fangs. Just the sight of blood had brought them out again. When I had been alive, part vampire, I had experienced the desperate yearning for blood, but I suspected Lucas was right: The craving he felt now had intensified beyond anything I'd ever known.

We walked outside to see Balthazar, alone, leaning on his car in the otherwise empty parking lot. His shadow stretched out, long and broad, in the beam of the nearby streetlamp. Balthazar spoke to me first. “Vic was hanging around out front. The only way Ranulf could get him to leave was to go along.”

“Okay,” I said as we reached him. “Let's just get out of here. I never want to see this place again.”

Balthazar didn't move; he and Lucas just stared at each other. For years, they'd loathed one another; only in the aftermath of my death had they been able to work together. Now, though, what I saw between them was total understanding.

“I'm sorry.” Lucas's voice was rough. “Some of the stuff I said to you — about choices, being a vampire, and everything like that — Jesus. I get it now.”

“I wish you didn't. I wish you'd never had to understand.” Balthazar closed his eyes for a second, maybe remembering his own transformation centuries ago. “Come on. We'll get you something to drink.”

With a pang, I realized that Lucas and Balthazar understood each other now on a level that I would never fully grasp. For some reason, it felt like a loss. Or maybe in that moment, with Lucas seemingly so far from me in spirit, everything felt like a loss.

Balthazar drove us back toward the nicer neighborhood in Philadelphia where Vic lived. Lucas and I sat together in the backseat, his hand gripping mine tightly, his gaze focused in the distance beyond the windshield. Sometimes he frowned and closed his eyes like a person in the throes of a migraine; his feet moved restlessly against the floorboards, as though he were pushing back, or attempting to push through. He didn't want to be here, to be contained — everything around him now was just one more thing between him and the blood he needed. I knew better than to try to get him to talk. After he'd had something to drink, then he would be okay. He had to be.

Balthazar broke the wretched silence by turning on the radio, classic jazz, the kind of thing my dad used to listen to around the house. As Billie Holiday crooned about foolish things, I wondered what my parents would say now, and whether there was any advice they could have given us. We'd parted badly before I ran off with Lucas at the beginning of the summer; at the moment, I missed them so much it hurt. What would they think of everything that had happened in the past couple of days?

I glanced at Lucas — the pale cool stillness of his flesh, the way that death had brightened his eyes and carved out his cheekbones — and thought bleakly, Well, they always wanted me to end up with a nice vampire boy.

The car turned onto the road where Vic lived, an upscale area with broad yards separating the palatial homes. As every house had a four — car garage, we rarely saw other cars out on the street, but there were three right in front of Vic's house. Not the usual kinds of Mercedes or Jaguars that drove around here either — these were beat — up trucks and station wagons. Something about this began to feel familiar.

Then I realized nearly a dozen people were standing in the street and in Vic's yard. When I glimpsed a stake in one man's hands, I realized at least that some of them were armed.

"Is this Charity's tribe?" Balthazar said. "Is she still after Lucas?"

I remembered the e-mails Lucas had sent out just before my death, when he'd been so desperate that he'd asked anyone and everyone for help, even people we had every reason to expect to turn against us. His messages had been answered.

"It's not Charity," I whispered. "It's Black Cross."