

Excerpt from *Darker Than Love*

“So, how long have you worked at the bar?” the guy with the skull tattoos—the seemingly kinder one—asks when I remove my winter jacket and we sit down in the living room. With its Soviet-style orange wallpaper and brown drapes, this place looks like it hasn’t been renovated since the eighties, but the ratty couch we’re sitting on is surprisingly comfortable. Maybe I *will* take him up on his offer to sleep here. That is, if they don’t kill me and dump my body in the river before sunrise.

I think my captor was just testing my language skills with that proposal, but I can’t be sure.

“Mina?” the man prompts, and I realize I zoned out instead of answering his question. Now that some of the adrenaline is fading, the extreme exhaustion is back, muddling my thoughts and slowing my reactions. I want nothing more than to stretch out on this couch and fall asleep, but I might not wake up if I do.

The Russians might decide that what I heard merits killing me rather than just keeping me captive overnight.

“I’ve worked there for a couple of years,” I answer, my voice shaking. It’s easy to sound terrified... because I am.

I’m with two men who may want to kill me, and I’m in no state to defend myself.

The only thing that gives me hope is that they haven’t already done so. They could’ve easily murdered me in the alley; they didn’t need to bring me here for that. Of course, there’s another possibility, one that every woman must consider.

They might be planning to rape me before killing me, in which case bringing me here makes perfect sense.

The thought makes my stomach churn, the old memories threatening to crowd in, but underneath the fear and disgust is something darker, infinitely more fucked up. The brief sizzle of arousal I’d experienced at the bar was nothing compared to how it had felt when the dangerous stranger caged me against the wall, caressing my face with that cruel gentleness. My body—the weak, ruined body I’ve spent the past year hating—had come to life with such force, it was as if fireworks had ignited under my skin, liquifying my core and burning away my inhibitions.

Was he able to sense it?

Did he know how badly I wanted him to keep touching me?

I think he did. And more than that, I think he wanted to. His eyes—a hard, gem-like green—had watched me with the dark intensity of a predator, taking in every twitch of my lashes, every hitch of my breath. If we'd been alone, he might've kissed me... or killed me on the spot.

It's hard to tell with him.

“Do you like it? Working at the bar, I mean?” the tattooed man asks, bringing my attention back to him. Now *he* is easy to read. There's unmistakable male interest in the way he looks at me, an obvious gleam in his green eyes.

Wait a sec. *Green eyes?*

“Are you two brothers?” I blurt out, then silently curse myself. I'm so tired I'm not thinking straight. The last thing I need is for these two to imagine I'm gathering information on them, or—

“We are.” A smile lights up his broad face, softening his harsh features. “Twins, in fact.” Shit. I did *not* need to know that. The next thing I know, he'll be telling me his—

“I'm Ilya, by the way,” he says, extending one big paw toward me. “And my brother's name is Yan.”

Oh, fuck. I'm so screwed. They *are* going to kill me. “Nice to meet you,” I say weakly, shaking his hand on autopilot. My grip is as limp as my voice, but that's okay. I'm playing a damsel in distress, and the more convincing I am, the better.

Too bad the act is mostly real these days.

Ilya squeezes my hand gingerly, as if afraid of inadvertently crushing my bones, and hope nibbles at me. He wouldn't be so careful with me if they were planning to brutally rape and kill me, would he?

As if reading my thoughts, he gives me another smile, an even kinder one this time, and says gruffly, “I'm sorry about my brother. He's used to seeing enemies around every corner. You *will* walk away from this unharmed, I promise you, *malyshka*. We need to keep you overnight as a precaution, that's all.”

Strangely, I believe him. Or at least I believe that *he* intends me no harm. The jury is still out on his brother—who chooses that exact moment to walk in, carrying a cup of tea in one hand and two beers in the other.

My breath catches in my throat as he—Yan—sets the drinks on the coffee table in front of us and sits down between me and Ilya, unapologetically wedging himself into the too-small space. Instinctively, I scoot to the side, as far as the couch allows, but that’s only about six centimeters, and my leg ends up pressed against his, the heat of his body burning me even through the layers of our clothing.

He’s shed the suede winter jacket he was wearing earlier, and is now dressed like he was in the bar, in the stylish dress pants and button-up shirt. Except his sleeves are rolled up, exposing muscular forearms lightly dusted with dark hair.

He’s strong, this ruthless captor of mine. Strong and superbly fit, his body a deadly weapon under those perfectly tailored clothes.

“Tea,” he says in that smooth, deep voice of his, so different from his brother’s rougher tones. “As per the princess’s request.”

“Thank you,” I mumble, reaching for the cup. My hands are visibly shaking, my breathing is shallow, and I’m sweating—and none of it is an act. I can smell the clean, masculine scent of his cologne—something sensual and airy, like pepper and sandalwood—and his nearness unsettles me, making my insides riot with a confusing mixture of fear and desire. Even if he wasn’t danger personified, I’d be drawn to his magnetic good looks, but knowing what I know about him—about what he does and what he might do to me—I can’t control my helpless response to him.

Even my tiredness recedes, leaving me jittery and high, as if I’d downed two liters of espresso.

I’m acutely aware of his gaze on me as I bring the cup to my lips and take a sip, suppressing a hiss at the scalding temperature of the water. I’m trying not to look at him, to just focus on my tea, but I can’t help staring at his hands as he reaches over and grabs a beer, then twists off the cap with a practiced motion. His fingers are long and masculine, and though his nails are neatly groomed, the calluses on the edges of his thumbs belie the elegance of his appearance.

This is a man used to doing things with his hands.

Terrible, violent things.

A normal woman would be repulsed by the thought, but my heart hammers faster, and an aching pulse starts between my legs, my underwear dampening with liquid heat. The darkness in him calls to me, making me feel alive in a way I've never experienced before.

It's as if like recognizes like, the wrongness in me craving the same in him.

Ilya picks up the remaining bottle, his hands thick and rough, with a few tattoos on the back. There's no pretense in him, no attempt to hide what he is behind an elegant mask. "To new friends," he says, clinking his bottle against his brother's and then, more gently, against my cup of tea. I risk a glance at him, but catch Yan's hard green gaze instead.

I quickly look away, but not before a betraying flush crawls up my neck and covers my face. "To new friends," I repeat, staring into my cup as if I might see my fate written in the tea leaves. I'm not sure I want Yan to know about the effect he has on me—though he probably already does.

I'm not exactly at the top of my game tonight.

"Yes, to new friends," Yan murmurs, his large hand landing on my knee and squeezing it lightly.

Startled, I look over at him and see him tipping back the beer, his strong throat working as he swallows. It's a strangely sensual sight, and my insides clench as he lowers the bottle and meets my gaze, his eyes darkly intent as the hand on my knee moves a couple of inches up my thigh, closer to where I'm wet and aching.

Oh God.

He knows.

He definitely knows.

"Ilya," he says quietly, still holding my gaze. "Make us a couple of sandwiches, will you? I think Mina here is hungry."

"She is?" Ilya sounds confused as he stands up, and I look up to find him frowning at us—specifically, at my thigh, where Yan's hand is resting so possessively. Slowly, tension permeates his big body, his hands flexing at his sides as his gaze swings to his brother's face.

"I don't think she's hungry," he bites out, his voice low and hard. His eyes cut to me. "Are you, Mina?"

I swallow thickly, unsure of what the right answer is. If I'm reading this right, Yan has just staked some sort of an exclusive claim on me, one that I would reinforce if I admitted to this made-up hunger.

Is that what I want?

To send away the brother who's been nice to me, so I could be alone with the man who proposed dumping my body in the river?

"A... a sandwich would be nice." The words don't seem to belong to me, yet it's my voice saying them, even as my brain scrambles to figure out the implications. "That is, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

Ilya's mouth thins. "Fine. I'll see what we have in the fridge."

And turning around, he stalks off, leaving me on the couch with his brother.