

Lover Mine (Black Dagger Brotherhood, Book 8)

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The hot new novel in the Black Dagger Brotherhood by the #1 New York Times bestselling author

John Matthew has come a long way since he was found living among humans, his vampire nature unknown. Taken in by The Brotherhood, no one could guess what his true history was-or his true identity.

Xhex has long steeled herself against the attraction to John Matthew. Until fate intervenes and she discovers that love, like destiny, is inevitable.

Watch a Video

J. R. Ward lives in the South with her incredibly supportive husband and her beloved golden retriever. After graduating from law school, she began working in health care in Boston and spent many years as chief of staff for one of the premier academic medical centers in the nation.

Chapter One

Another fucking butterfly.

As R.I.P. looked at what was coming through the door of his tat shop, he knew he going to end up doing another fucking butterfly. Or two.

Given the pair of long, blond and bubbly that were jiggling their giggly way up to his receptionist, he was not going to be marking any skull and bones shit.

These Paris Hiltons and their we're-so-bad excitement had him looking at the clock... and wishing he closed now, instead of one a.m.

Man... the shit he did for money. Most of the time he could be all yeah, whatever about the lightweights who came in to get marked up, but tonight the bright ideas of cutie pies annoyed him. Hard to get enthused about the Miss Kitty set when he'd just spent three hours doing a memorial portrait for a biker who'd lost his best friend on the road. One was real life; the other a cartoon.

Mar, his receptionist, came over to him. "You got time to do a quickie?" Her pierced eyebrows went up as her eyes rolled. "Shouldn't take long."

"Yeah." He nodded to his padded chair. "Get the first one over here."

"They want to be done together."

Of course they did. "Fine. Get the rolling stool from the back."

As Mar disappeared behind a curtain, the two by the cash register held each others' hands

and twittered together. From time to time, both of them shot him wide looks, like with all his tats and his metal, he was an exotic tiger they'd come to admire at a zoo... and totally approved of.

Uh-huh. Right. He would cut his own balls off before he threw them as much as a pity fuck.

After Mar took their money, she brought them over and introduced them as Keri and Sarah. Which was more than he'd expected. He'd been bracing himself for Tiffany and Brittney.

"I want a rainbow carp," Keri said as she got into his chair with what she clearly intended to be an enticing arch. "Right here."

She pulled up her tight little shirt, undid the zipper on her jeans and pushed down the top of her pink thong. Her belly button had a hoop with a pink rhinestone heart dangling off of it and it was clear she into electrolysis.

"Fine," R.I.P. said. "How big."

Keri the Seductress seemed to deflate a little- as if her no doubt one hundred percent success rate with college football players had led her to assume he would pant all over the real estate she was showing him.

"Um... not too big. My parents would kill me if they knew I was doing this... so it can't show over a bikini bottom."

Of course not. "Two inches?" He held up his tatted hand and gave her a sense of dimension.

"Maybe... a little smaller."

With a black pen, he made a sketch on her, and after she asked him to stay on the inside of the lines, he snapped on his black gloves, got out a fresh needle, and tuned up his gun.

It took Keri about a second and a half to sport tears and hang onto Sarah's hand as if she were giving birth without an epidural. And that was the difference, wasn't it. There was a huge divide between the hardcore and the wannabe. Butterflies and carps and pretty little hearts were not-

The shop's door opened wide... and R.I.P. sat up a little straighter on his rolling stool.

The three men who walked in were not in military uniforms, but they were definitely not civilians. Dressed in black leather from their jackets to their pants to their shitkickers, they were huge men that sucked the walls of the shop in closer and shrunk the ceiling down tight. Lot of bulges hidden underneath that leather. The kinds made by guns and maybe knives.

With a subtle shift, R.I.P. moved in direction of his counter, where the emergency alarm button was.

The one on the left had mismatched eyes and gunmetal piercings and a killer's cool stare. The one on the right seemed a little closer to mainstream with his pretty-boy puss and the red hair- except for the fact that he carried himself like someone who'd been to war and back.

The one in the middle, however, was trouble. Slightly larger than his buddies, he had dark brown hair that was cut short and a classically handsome face- but his blue eyes were lifeless, with about as much reflection as old asphalt.

A dead man walking. With nothing to lose.

"Hey," R.I.P. called out to greet them. "You guys need some ink?"

"He does." The one with the piercings nodded at his blue-eyed buddy. "And he's got the design. It's a shoulder spread."

R.I.P. gave his instincts a chance to weigh in on the project. The men didn't eye Mar inappropriately. There was no casing of the cash register and no one went for their metal. They waited politely- but with expectation. Like either he did what they wanted, or they'd find someone else who would.

He eased back into position, thinking they were his peeps. "Cool. I'll be finished in no time here."

Mar spoke up from behind the counter. "We were supposed to be closing in less than an hour-"

"But I'll do you," R.I.P. told the one in the center. "You don't worry about the time."

"I think I'll stay," Mar said, eyeing the one with the piercings.

The blue-eyed guy's hands came up and moved with distinct gestures. After he was finished, the pierced one translated, "He says thanks. And he's brought his own ink if that's okay."

Not exactly the norm, but R.I.P. had no trouble being flexible for the right customer. "No, prob. my man."

He got back to work with the carp and Keri resumed her bitten lip and little girl moaning routine. When he was finished, he was not at all surprised that Sarah, after having watched her friend go through "agony," decided that she wanted a refund instead of some pretty, rainbow colored ink of her own.

Which was good news. It meant that he could get to work on the guy with the dead eyes right away.

As he snapped off his black gloves and cleaned up, he wondered what in the hell the design was going to look like. And exactly how long it was going to take Mar to get inside the pierced guy's pants.

Former was likely to be fairly good.

And the latter... he'd give that about ten minutes because she'd caught the guy's mismatched stare and Mar was a fast worker. Not just behind the counter.

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Across town, away from the bars and tat shops on Trade Street, in an enclave of brownstones and cobbled lanes, Xhex stood in a bay window and stared out of wavy antique glass.

She was naked and cold and bruised.

But she was not weak.

Down below, on the sidewalk, a human female strolled along with a little yappy dog on a string and on a cell phone up to her ear. Across the lane, people in other elegant walk-ups were drinking and eating and reading. Cars went by slowly both out of respect for the neighbors and fear for their suspension systems on the uneven street.

The human peanut gallery couldn't see or hear her. And not just because the capacities of that other race were so diminished in comparison to those of vampires.

Or in her case, half-symphath vampires.

Even if she turned the ceiling light on and screamed until her voice box gave out, even if she waved her arms until they fell out of their sockets, the men and women who were all around would just keep up whatever they were doing, unaware that she was trapped in this bedroom, thick in their midst. And it wasn't as if she could pick up the bureau or the bedside table and break the glass. Same with kicking down the door or crawling through the bathroom vent.

She'd tried all that.

The assassin in her had to be impressed by the pervasive nature of her invisible cell: there was, quite literally, no way to get around, through or out of it.

Turning away from the window, she paced around the king size bed with its silk sheets and

horrible memories... and went by the marble bathroom... and kept going by the door that led out into the hall. Given the way things went with her captor, it wasn't as if she needed more exercise, but she couldn't keep still, her body twitchy and humming.

She'd done this against-her-will once before. Knew how the mind, like a starved body, could cannibalize itself after too long if you didn't feed it something to churn over.

Her favorite distraction? Mixed drinks. After having worked in clubs for years, she knew legions of cocktails and concoctions and she ran through them, picturing the bottles and and the glasses and the pouring and the ice and the spice.

That Bartender-pedia thing had kept her sane.

Up until now, she had banked on a mistake, a slip up, an opportunity for escape. None had come and that hope was starting to fade, exposing a huge black hole that was ready to eat her. So she just kept making drinks in her head and searching for her opening.

Her past experience helped in a strange way. Whatever happened here, however bad it got, however much it hurt physically, it was nothing compared to what she'd been through before.

This was the minor leagues.

Or... at least she told herself that. Sometimes it felt worse.

More with the pacing, past the two bay windows in front, by the bureau and then around the bed again. This time she went into the bathroom. There were no razors or brushes or combs, just some towels that were slightly damp and a bar of soap or two.

When Lash had abducted her, using the same kind of magic that was keeping her in this suite of rooms, he had brought her to this elegant crib of his and their first night and day together had been indicative of how it was going to be.

In the mirror over the double sinks, she saw herself and performed a dispassionate review of her body. There were bruises all over her... cuts and scrapes, too. He was brutal in what he did, but she fought back because it was her nature- so it was hard to tell what marks had been made by him and what had been incidental to what she'd done to the bastard.

Get his ass naked in front of some glass, and she'd bet her last breath he didn't look any better than she did.

Eye for an eye.

The unfortunately corollary was that he liked that she met fire with fire. The more they fought, the more he got turned on, and she sensed he was surprised at his own emotions. For the first couple of days, he'd been in punishment mode, trying to take out of her what

she'd done to his last girlfriend- those bullets she'd put in that bitch's chest had really ticked his shit off. But then things had changed. He'd started to talk less about his ex and more about body parts and fantasies involving blood and a future that include her bearing his spawn.

Pillow talk for the sociopath.

Now his eyes glowed for another reason when he came to her, and if he knocked her out, she usually came around with him wrapped around her body.

Xhex turned to the door, and froze before taking another step.

Someone was downstairs.

Leaving the bathroom, she went to the door that led out into the hall and inhaled slow and deep. As the scent of sweaty road kill wafted into her sinuses, it was clear whatever was hoofing around down below was a lesser- but it wasn't Lash.

Nope, this was his minion, who came every night before he arrived to make him something to eat. Which meant Lash was on the way to the brownstone.

Man, wasn't it just her luck: She gets snatched by the only member of the Lessening Society who ate and fucked. The rest of them were impotent as a ninety year old and existed on an air diet, but Lash? Fucker was fully functional.

Going back over to the window, she put her hand out toward the glass. The boundary that marked her prison was an energy field that felt like a prickling heat as she came into contact with it. The damn thing was like an Invisi-fence for things bigger than dogs- with the added bene of no collar being required.

There was a little give in it... as she pressed forward, there was a hint of flexibility, but only up to a point. Then the molecules that were agitated pulled together and the burning sensation got so acute she had to shake her hand out and walk off the pain.

As she so often did, in the time before Lash came back to her, her mind drifted to the male she tried never to think of.

Especially if Lash was around. It was unclear how much her captor could get into her head, but she didn't want to take chances. If the bastard got an itch that that mute soldier was her well-of-soul, as her people it, he would use that against her... and John.

An image of the male came to her mind, his blue eyes resonating in her mind so clearly, she could see the flecks of navy in them. God, those beautiful blue eyes.

She could remember when she first met him, back when he was a pretrans. He had looked at her with such awe and wonder, as if she were larger-than-life, a revelation. Of course, at

that point, all she knew was that he was packing heat in ZeroSum, and as head of security for the club, she'd been hell bent on disarming him and throwing him out into the street. But then she'd learned the Blind King was his whard and that had changed everything.

Following the happy little newflash about who he was rooming with, John was not just welcomed to be armed, he was a special guest along with his two boys. After that, he'd come in regularly and had always watched her, those blue eyes on her wherever she was. And then he'd transitioned. Holy hell, had he turned into a big one and abruptly that stare had something hot added to the gentle shyness.

It had taken a lot to kill that kindness. But true to her assassin's nature, she'd managed to do the warmth in.

Focusing on the street below, she thought of that time they had been together at her basement place. After the sex, when he'd tried to kiss her, when his blue eyes had glowed with the trademark vulnerability and compassion and warmth she'd come to associate with him, she'd pulled away and shut him down.

It was a case of lost nerve. She just couldn't handle the pressure of all that hearts-and-flowers stuff... or the responsibility that came with being around someone who felt like that about her... or the reality that she had the capacity to love him back.

The payback had been the death of that special look.

The solace she took was that among the males who were likely to try and come after her... Rehvenge, iAm and Trez, the Brotherhood... John Matthew was not on a crusade. If he was searching for her, it was because he had to as a soldier, not because he was compelled to as part of a personal, suicide mission.

No, John Matthew wouldn't be on the warpath because of how he felt about her.

And having already watched a male of worth destroy himself trying to rescue her, at least she didn't have to do that again.

As the smell of fresh grilling steak permeated the brownstone, she shut off her thoughts and gathered her will around her like a suit of armor.

Her "lover" was coming home soon so she needed to batten down her mental hatches and get ready for tonight's battle. Pervasive exhaustion dragged at her, but her will ushered that deadweight out on its ass. She needed to feed, even more than she needed a proper sleep, but neither of those were happening anytime soon.

It was a question of putting one foot in front of the other until something broke.

That and taking hunks of flesh out of the male who dared to hold her against her will.

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