



MASTIN LABS

The Ultimate Guide to Dark & Moody Photography



PHOTO: BRUNO REZZA
PRESET: PORTRA 800+2



PHOTO: BROOKE LARK
PRESET: SUPERIA 400



Create beautiful images you and your clients **love**.

Hey! I'm Kirk Mastin.

As the founder of Mastin Labs and the creator of authentic film presets, I'm excited to help you nail the dark and moody look so you can capture the mood behind the moment and thrive as a working artist.

The dark and moody look goes all the way back to the Renaissance, with classical painters like Caravaggio, Johannes Vermeer, and Rembrandt using dark and moody wardrobes, lighting, and backgrounds to achieve a deep, expressive look. Today, it's a go-to style for photographers looking to stand out and capture deep emotions – especially in boudoir photography, but also for portraits, weddings, engagements, fashion, and food.

But getting this look isn't as simple as underexposing your image or editing it in a dark and moody way; ninety percent of the magic happens the moment you take the photo.

By using the tips and tricks in this guide, you'll learn how to shoot and edit for a true dark and moody look you and your clients will love.

Rooting for you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kirk Mastin".

Kirk Mastin
Founder of Mastin Labs

How to Shoot Dark & Moody Photos

Follow these steps to create the foundation for a dark and moody look.



Wardrobe: Dress subjects in dark, earthy tones



Posing: Create a mood with the eyes



Location: Choose a dark or neutral setting



Light: Find dim, directional lighting



Lens: Use a wide to normal lens and normal to deep depth of field



Exposure: Expose for the highlights



PHOTO: GARAGE ISLAND CREW

WARDROBE

DRESS SUBJECTS IN DARK, EARTHY TONES

The right clothing will enhance your color palette and help you create the contrast you need for dark and moody images.

Before your session, guide your subjects to wear simple, dark clothing – without graphics or too much pattern – in reds, browns, and blacks. If your subject will be wearing lingerie, be sure to choose well-made pieces; the quality will show in the photo.

It's tough to hide imperfections like blemishes, clothing wrinkles, and lint in a dark and moody image, so you'll want to prep your subjects carefully to get the look you're going for and spend less time retouching later on.



PHOTO: STACEY KROLOW

POSING

CREATE A MOOD WITH THE EYES

The dark and moody look is all about conveying a mood – brooding, mysterious, emotional – and that starts with the eyes.

Take a page out of Tyra Banks' book and guide your subjects to “smize,” or “smile with your eyes.” Tell them to try squinting into the distance or taking a deep look at their surroundings.

The important thing is to keep your subjects from looking disconnected or shocked – we don’t want to see the whites of their eyes. The more you can help them relax and be present with their emotions, the better you’ll be able to capture that smoldering, seductive look.



LOCATION

CHOOSE A DARK OR NEUTRAL SETTING

Dark backdrops are ideal for a dark and moody look. Look for a historic hotel room, a chic Airbnb, or even a log cabin – or create your own backdrop by hanging dark sheets or towels and using a shallow depth of field.

The key here is to find a location with good window lighting; that's what'll allow you to create the contrast you need for a true dark and moody photo.

And if you're planning an outdoor session, look for brown foliage or naturally moody settings, like a dark alley or a forested road in the fog.



PHOTO: CHRIS ZIELECKI

LIGHT

FIND DIM, DIRECTIONAL LIGHTING

If you're shooting dark and moody photos indoors, window light is where it's at. It's perfect for creating contrast and providing the one-directional light source that'll set the tone for your images.

If you're planning to use the window, start by turning off all other lights in the room so you'll get clean light that's all the same color. Position your subject close to the window, with their face turned about three-quarters of the way toward the light.

Since so much of your subject will be in darkness, make sure to create good catchlights so their eyes don't look flat. If you want to add light, use a piece of white foam core, a reflector, or even a white towel to bounce window light onto your subject and control the shadows.

If you're not working with a window, candles can also be a great source of dim, one-directional light.

When you're shooting outside, the easiest time to shoot will be near sunset or in blue hour to get a nice dim light. Fog works as a great diffuser, too. You can also try moving your subject in and out of a light source, such as a beam coming through the trees.

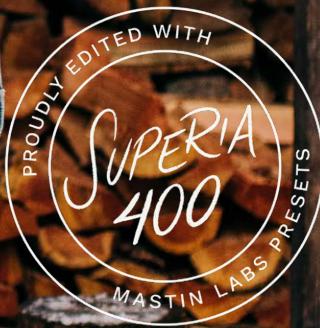


PHOTO: KIRK MASTIN

LENS

USE A WIDE TO NORMAL LENS AND NORMAL TO DEEP DEPTH OF FIELD

When you're shooting dark and moody, you're usually going for a more editorial look, like what you'd see in a fashion magazine.

To achieve that look, opt for a 24mm to 35mm lens, or a 50mm for a tighter portrait. We recommend shooting wide – f/4-5.6 or narrower – to get a more interesting photo with all the details of the subject's clothing and background.

That said, shooting wide open just about always looks good, too. But if you want a true dark and moody photo, try playing with a more shallow depth of field.



PHOTO: ABBI HEARNE

MODE

SHOOT IN MANUAL MODE TO COMPENSATE FOR BACKLIGHTING

When you're shooting backlit, you'll want to shoot in manual mode so you can tell your camera to expose about two stops further than it wants to.

As you're setting up the shot, use live-view to adjust your settings and make sure your lighting looks exactly the way you want. Then, you can turn it off and shoot without worrying about it until you move to a new light situation.

You can also turn on your histogram and use it to make sure you're not under- or over-exposing as you go.

It's not about adjusting your camera to a specific setting – it's about figuring out what's right for the lighting you're working with in the moment.



How to Edit in a Dark & Moody Style

Complete the look with just a few quick adjustments.



Preset: Apply a dark & moody preset



Exposure: Preserve the contrast



White Balance & Tint: Err on the warm side



Bonus: Smooth blemishes as needed



PRESET

APPLY A DARK & MOODY PRESET

While you can get 90 percent of the way to a dark and moody look in-camera, the right preset can help you bring your images across the finish line quickly and easily.

A dark and moody image should be true to color and slightly desaturated. And as you edit, it might even start to look like a Renaissance oil painting. To achieve this look, we recommend post-processing with our [Portra Pushed](#), [Portra Original](#), or [Fujicolor Everyday](#) packs – available for [Lightroom](#) and [Capture One](#).

The presets in the Portra Pushed pack emulate the real look of pushed film and are perfect for getting that classic high-contrast, slightly desaturated, dark and moody look right out of the box – especially Portra 160+1 and 160+2.

Portra 160, inside our Portra Original pack, gives you a neutral, true-to-film base you can always adjust to get a dark and moody look.

In our Fujicolor Everyday pack, Superia 400 is a great way to get that high-contrast look and rich, lush tones, without the tinting in the shadows you'll see in the Portra Pushed presets. And Acros 100, the black and white film in our Fujicolor Everyday pack, gives you crisp whites and preserves the detail of your images – while creating a low-key, moody look.

Every preset we make follows the same [Mastin 3-Step Workflow™](#) to make your editing process as fast and easy as possible. You can simply apply the preset, adjust exposure, and adjust white balance and tint to get a timeless, true-to-film look every time.

[SHOP PORTRA PUSHED >](#)

[SHOP PORTRA ORIGINAL >](#)

[SHOP FUJICOLOR EVERYDAY >](#)



EXPOSURE

PRESERVE THE CONTRAST

The right amount of shadows and contrast are key to a true dark and moody photo. So whether you adjust your exposure up or down, be careful to preserve that contrast, and leave a little mystery by not bringing out all the detail in the shadows.

To really dial in your look, use one of the tone profiles that come with all our preset packs. The “soft” tone profiles reduce contrast and add detail to a given area, while the “hard” tone profiles add contrast and reduce detail.



PHOTO: THAIS VARELA
PRESET: PORTRA 800+1

WHITE BALANCE & TINT

ERR ON THE WARM SIDE

Adjust your white balance first, then your tint. The dark and moody look is usually on the warmer side, so sweep your white balance slider back and forth, making smaller sweeps each time, until you land on what looks right.

For tint, find several neutral points in your photo and keep an eye on those as you adjust. If you notice green or magenta popping up in neutral areas like black fabric, a patch of skin, or a white wall, then you probably need to dial it back.

Once you've nailed the white balance and tint in those neutral points, everything else should lock into place.



PHOTO: CHRIS ZIELECKI

BONUS

SMOOTH BLEMISHES AS NEEDED

Even with perfect makeup, there's almost always some amount of blemish healing that needs to happen for dark and moody images – especially in areas that are underexposed. We always recommend doing some skin smoothing; you can use the brushes in Lightroom or make your own.

Keep in mind that if you're planning to apply grain to a photo, you'll need to finish any retouching first. All our presets come with specific film grains that are perfect for adding an extra tough and emphasizing the moodiness of your image.

Get the dark and moody look in seconds with our preset packs for Lightroom, Adobe Camera Raw, and Capture One.



Perfect for boudoir, indoor lifestyle, and adventure elopements



PHOTO: ABBI HEARNE

PHOTO: STACEY KROLW

Portra Pushed

The classic dark and moody look



"The Portra Pushed presets bring life to my images! They intensify the emotion and give images a gorgeous pop, while keeping the skin tones natural looking."

-Tereza Thomas, Location, Type of Photographer

Presets included: Portra 160+1, Portra 160+2, Portra 400+1, Portra 400+2, Portra 800+1, Portra 800+2

[SHOP PORTRA PUSHED FOR LIGHTROOM >](#)

[SHOP PORTRA PUSHED FOR CAPTURE ONE >](#)



PHOTO: KAYLA BAPTISTA



Perfect for natural light portraits, including families, fashion, and fine art

PHOTO: GAVIN HELLIER

Portra Original

The classic dark and moody look



"The iconic look I am able to achieve with these presets is unmatched. Portra Original is seriously a game changer!"

-Adriana A., Location, Type of Photographer

Presets included: Portra 160, Portra 400, Portra 800

[SHOP PORTRA ORIGINAL FOR LIGHTROOM >](#)

[SHOP PORTRA ORIGINAL FOR CAPTURE ONE >](#)



Perfect for everyday moments and professional photography



PHOTO: MANU PRATS

Fujicolor Everyday

The bold and balanced look



"Fujicolor Everyday nails the color palette I've always wanted, has vibrancy of color without feeling overdone, and includes my favorite black and white film Acros 100! This pack feels like a love letter just for me."

-Casey Cosley, Seattle, WA, Type of Photographer

Presets included: Superia 400, Fuji C200, Acros 100

[SHOP FUJICOLOR EVERYDAY FOR LIGHTROOM >](#)

[SHOP FUJICOLOR EVERYDAY FOR CAPTURE ONE >](#)

All presets include custom white balance, lens correction, tone profiles, and grain.



PHOTO: MARCOS VALDES
PRESET: PORTRA 160+1



PHOTO: TRINETTE REED
PRESET: GOLD 200



We're Mastin Labs—

Born from film. Made for you.

We're here for the underdog. The amateur. The everyday artist and the seasoned pro.

Our film emulation presets have helped more than 55,000 photographers create consistently beautiful images, reclaim time for their businesses and lives, and thrive as working artists.

And wherever you are on your journey, we're honored to support you, too.

JOIN THE MASTIN LABS COMMUNITY

Catch live edits, find your crew, and test out the presets on your photos inside our free Facebook community.

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CONNECT WITH US ON INSTAGRAM

And use the hashtag #MadeWithMastin for a chance to have your photos featured.

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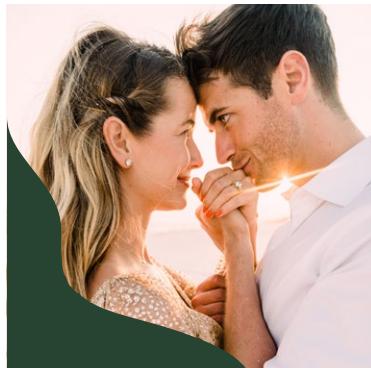
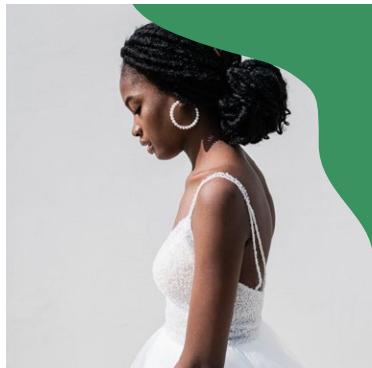
If you found this guide helpful, we'd love it if you'd send the signup page to a friend to keep the light and airy vibes going.

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Make clean, consistent images. Every time.

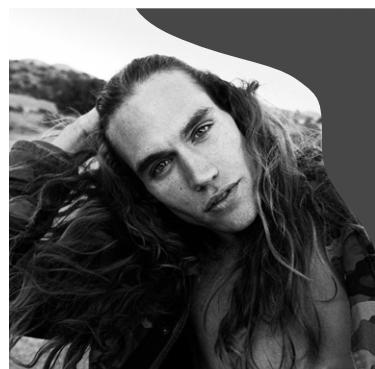
Say goodbye to hours of tweaking and discover the magic of an authentic film look with our preset packs for Lightroom, Adobe Camera Raw, and Capture One.

Shop the presets and find your new go-to.



[Fujicolor Original >](#)

Light & airy



[Portra Original >](#)

Clean & warm

[Ilford Original >](#)

Classic & deep

[Portra Pushed >](#)

Dark & moody



[Fujicolor Everyday >](#)

Bold, real-life color

[Adventure Everyday >](#)

Vibrant, modern, fun