

Dark Desire 2

Romy Verbruggen

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Second Edition

Prologue

Some loves begin with a kiss.

Ours began with blood.

I always knew Damon wasn't a safe man.

He was fire in human form — beautiful to look at, deadly to touch. And yet I walked straight into his flames, as if I had never learned what it meant to burn.

We fought. Against each other. Against the world.
Against the past that closed in around us like a shadow.

But the danger was never only outside of us.

It was in him.

And maybe even more in me.

The night everything changed, I stood in the hallway of our house while rain lashed against the windows. My heart pounded too hard, as if it knew what I still refused to admit. Damon stood in front of me — dark, intense, with that look that always made me hesitate between fear and desire.

"Whatever happens," he whispered, his voice low and dangerously calm, "I will never let you go."

You.

That word had gained weight. More than he had ever felt. More than I had ever wanted.

Outside, a car came to a stop — too slow.

Inside, I felt old danger draw breath again.

We thought we had survived the storm.

But some storms don't disappear.

They wait.

Until you have something to take from you.

And this time, we had everything to lose.

Chapter 1

Six months later.

Damon stood by the window of their new apartment—smaller than the house they had once had, but safe, anonymous, a place where no one knew them. The city stretched out below, a different city now, far from where Ana was, far from the life they had built.

Far from their daughter.

His hand gripped the windowsill until his knuckles turned white. Every day was the same—waking up, realizing Ana was gone, and trying to find a reason to get out of bed. Some days he managed. Other days—other days he stayed there, staring at the ceiling, Selena's hand in his the only thing anchoring him to reality.

The court had ruled—"inability to provide a safe environment" due to their "involvement with criminal elements." It didn't matter that Damon had been clean for years. It didn't matter that they had always protected Ana. What mattered was that people had tried to abduct their daughter. Twice.

And the judge had decided that Ana would be better off—safer—with foster parents who had no dangerous past.

Selena had screamed in the courtroom. Begged. Damon had simply sat there, numb, as they carried Ana away—their little girl crying, her arms reaching back toward them.

"Mama! Papa!"

That final scream would haunt him until he died.

"You're going to be late." Selena's voice came from behind him, soft but edged with the constant concern that now lived in her tone. "Your therapy appointment is in twenty minutes."

"I know." He didn't turn around. "I—I just need to—"

"I know." She walked up to him, wrapping her arms around his waist from behind, her cheek resting against his back. "But you agreed. We both agreed—therapy, twice a week. It helps."

"Does it?" His voice was bitter. "Because I still feel—I still can't get her out of my head. Her face when she—"

"Stop." Selena tightened her hold. "We can't—if we stay in that moment, we won't survive this."

He finally turned, looking down at her. She looked better than she had months ago—not good, but better. The dark circles under her eyes had softened. She smiled sometimes now, even if it didn't always reach her eyes.

"How do you do it?" he asked. "How do you—function?"

"I don't." She touched his face, her thumb brushing over the scar from that night in the basement—a permanent reminder, like the ribs that still ached when it rained. "I fake it. Every day, I get up and I fake being okay. And sometimes—for short moments—it almost feels real."

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tight. She fit perfectly, as she always had. In chaos, in loss, in pain—they still had each other.

It felt like both everything and nothing at once.

"I love you," he whispered into her hair. "I don't know how I'd do this without you."

"Good thing you don't have to." She pulled back and looked at him. "Go. To therapy. Talk about what you need to talk about. And tonight—" Her hand slid down his chest, resting over his heart. "Tonight I'm here. We're here. Together."

He kissed her—slow, deep, pouring every unspoken emotion into it. When he pulled back, they were both breathless.

"Tonight," he agreed.

□

Therapy was difficult. It was always difficult.

Dr. Morrison was good at her job, patient and nonjudgmental. But talking about Ana, about the loss, about the guilt Damon carried—it was like reopening wounds that had barely begun to close.

"You can't keep punishing yourself," Dr. Morrison said, not for the first time. "What happened—the dangers your family faced—those weren't your fault."

"But they were." Damon's hands clenched. "Every threat, every attack—it came from my past. From choices I made."

"Choices you made to survive. Choices you stopped making when you could." She leaned forward. "Damon, you're not the man you were. But you're still suffering the consequences of his actions. That's—it's not fair, but it's reality."

"And Ana suffers too. Because of me."

"Ana is safe. She's cared for. And when she's older, when the situation is more stable—there is a chance you could have contact again. The judge did not close that door permanently."

"Five years." The number felt like a stone in his stomach. "At least five years before we can even petition for visitation."

"That's time to heal. To prove you can offer a stable life." Dr. Morrison's voice softened. "And it's time to rebuild your relationship with Selena. You've endured trauma, loss—things that destroy most couples. But you're still together. Focus on that."

□

He came home to an empty apartment. Selena had left a message—groceries, back around six.

Damon walked through the rooms, his fingers brushing surfaces. It still felt strange, this place—no echoes of Ana's

laughter, no toys scattered across the floor, no tiny feet running to greet him.

Just silence.

He found himself standing in what would have been Ana's room if they still had her. It was empty now—just four walls and a window. Selena refused to decorate it, refused to acknowledge that Ana wasn't coming back.

Damon understood. Some pains were too large to accept.

His phone buzzed. A message from Selena:

Stay where you are. Don't come outside. I'll explain when I get home.

He frowned and typed back: Is everything okay?

Yes. Trust me. Stay inside.

Unease gnawed at him, but he did as she asked. He paced the apartment, checking the window every few minutes.

Thirty minutes later, he heard her key in the lock. The door opened, and Selena rushed in—her eyes wild, her breathing uneven.

"What happened?" Damon was at her instantly. "Selena—"

"I saw her." The words came out like a sob. "At the supermarket. Ana. With her—with her foster mother."

Damon's heart stopped. "You—what—"

"She was in a cart. Laughing. She looked—God, Damon, she looked happy." Tears streamed down her face. "And I wanted—I wanted to run to her, to pick her up, but I couldn't. I just stood there and watched and—"

He pulled her into his arms, holding her as she shook with sobs. "I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry."

"She didn't even see me. Looked right through me." Selena's fingers gripped his shirt. "Our daughter, and she—she doesn't know me anymore."

"She's fifteen months old. She's too young to—" But the words felt hollow even as he said them.

"I want her back." Selena's voice was muffled against his chest. "I want our baby back."

"Me too." He kissed the top of her head. "Every day, every moment—me too."

They stood like that for a long time—two broken people clinging to each other, the only constant in a world that had taken everything from them.

□

That evening, neither of them could eat. Selena pushed at her food; Damon stared at his plate.

"We have to stop this," Selena said finally, her voice flat. "This—this suffering. It's killing us."

"How do you stop suffering over—"

"I don't know." She dropped her fork. "But I can't keep living like this. Walking around like a ghost, waiting for something that might never happen."

Damon reached across the table and took her hand. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting we try to live. Really live." Her fingers intertwined with his. "We still have each other. That has to mean something."

"It means everything."

"Then let's—" She paused, took a deep breath. "Let's remember who we were. Before Ana. Before everything got so complicated. We were happy, Damon. We had passion. We had—"

"Us," he finished. "We had us."

"Yes." A small smile—the first real one he had seen in months. "So let's find that again. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Now."

They stood at the same time, moving around the table until they met. Damon cupped her face, his forehead resting against hers.

"I'm afraid," he admitted. "Afraid that if we try to be happy without her, it'll feel like we're forgetting her."

"We will never forget her." Selena covered his hands with hers. "But we have to stop living inside the loss. We have to find each other again."

He kissed her—not the sad, desperate kisses they had shared for months. This was different. Hungry. Wanting. A reminder of what they had once had—and what they still could.

Her hands slid under his shirt, finding warm skin, tense muscle. "Bedroom," she breathed against his lips.

"Too far." He lifted her, her legs wrapping around him as he pressed her against the nearest wall.

"Here?" Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Here. Now." He kissed her neck, his teeth grazing sensitive skin. "I need you. I don't have patience for the bed."

"Then take me." Her head fell back against the wall. "No tenderness. No—no careful. Just—"

"Rough?"

"Yes." The word left her in a breath.

He pulled her close, urgency and need replacing hesitation. Their movements were intense, driven by months of buried grief and longing, the kind that demanded to be felt rather than spoken. The world narrowed to heat, to breath, to the sound of each other's names.

"I love you," Damon growled against her skin.

"Show me," Selena whispered, her fingers gripping him as if anchoring herself to something solid.

They lost themselves in each other—no past, no courtroom, no silence—only the present moment and the undeniable proof that they were still alive.

When it was over, they stayed tangled together, breathless, trembling.

"We're a mess," Selena murmured.

"We always were." His fingers slid through her hair. "But we're our mess."

She smiled—truly smiled, her eyes finally matching. "When was the last time we felt like that?"

"Too long." He kissed her forehead.

"So we do it again?"

"Absolutely."

That night, they found each other again—not just in urgency, but in closeness, in laughter, in the slow rediscovery of skin and breath and warmth.

And for the first time in months, when Damon fell asleep, it wasn't with Ana's scream echoing in his ears.

It was with Selena's breathing soft against his neck, and the fragile understanding that—despite everything—they still had each other.

And maybe, just maybe, that would be enough.

For now.

It was enough.

Chapter 2

Two weeks later, they woke to sunlight streaming through the windows and a rare sense of lightness.

"Let's go somewhere," Selena said suddenly, her head resting on Damon's chest. "Away from here. Just—away."

"Where?" His fingers traced lazy patterns over her bare shoulder.

"I don't know. Somewhere we're not constantly—where we're not thinking about—" She stopped, still unable to say Ana's name without pain.

"The mountains?" Damon suggested. "There's a hiking trail about an hour from here. Nikolai told me about it—beautiful views, no people."

"Perfect." She kissed his chest. "Let's go today. Now."

An hour later they were in the car, leaving the city behind. Selena had packed a backpack with water, snacks, a blanket. Damon wore comfortable clothes—something he rarely did, accustomed to suits and formal shirts.

They looked—normal. Like any other couple enjoying a day outside.

Almost, you could forget their lives lay in pieces.

The trail was exactly what Nikolai had promised—lush green, thick trees, the sound of a creek in the distance. They walked hand in hand, talking about small things, avoiding the larger subjects that always lingered beneath the surface.

"Do you hear that?" Selena stopped suddenly, tilting her head.

Damon listened. There—faint but unmistakable—music. A bassline pulsing through the trees, the rhythm of drums.

"Is there—is there a festival here?" Selena's eyes lit up with curiosity.

"Not that I know of." Damon frowned. "Do you—want to check it out?"

"Yes." She was already tugging at his hand. "Come on."

They followed the sound, leaving the main path for a narrower trail that led deeper into the woods. The music grew louder, voices blending with it—laughter, shouting, the sound of people enjoying themselves.

Then they broke through the trees into an open field.

Selena's breath caught.

It was—magical. Dozens of people—maybe a hundred—dancing around a small stage where a band played. Not mainstream music, but something darker, electronic with tribal drums underneath. Lights were strung between trees, blinking in patterns. Stalls lined the edges—some selling drinks, others art, handmade jewelry.

It felt—hidden. Secret. Like something unofficial.

"This is—wow." Selena turned slowly, taking it all in.

A woman with dreadlocks and a wide smile approached them, holding two shot glasses filled with something glowing neon blue.

"Newcomers!" She pressed the glasses into their hands. "Welcome to the Midnight Gathering. First shots are on the house."

"What is it?" Damon asked, eyeing the liquid suspiciously.

"Magic." The woman winked. "Trust me. You'll like it."

Selena looked at Damon, a question in her eyes. He shrugged—why not? They had nothing left to lose.

"To new beginnings," Selena said, raising her glass.

"To forgetting," Damon added.

They downed the shots. It burned going down—sharp and sweet at once, with a herbal aftertaste Damon couldn't

identify. Almost immediately he felt something—a warmth spreading through his chest, a lightness in his head.

"What was in that?" Selena giggled, a sound he hadn't heard in months.

"Do you really want to know?" the woman grinned. "Just enjoy. Dance. Live." She disappeared into the crowd.

The music shifted—faster now, infectious. Selena began to move almost instinctively, her hips swaying with the beat.

"Dance with me," she said, holding out her hand.

"I don't dance—"

"Tonight you do." She pulled him into the crowd.

At first Damon was stiff, uncomfortable. But the music—and whatever had been in that shot—worked through him. His muscles loosened. His inhibitions blurred.

And Selena—God, Selena. She moved like he hadn't seen in years—free, wild, her body flowing with the music. Her eyes were closed, her head thrown back, completely lost in the moment.

He pulled her against him, his hands finding her hips, guiding her movements against his. They fit perfectly, as they always had, their bodies finding a rhythm that was more than just the music.

"This—" Selena opened her eyes and looked at him. "This feels good."

"Yes." His forehead pressed against hers. "It does."

They danced for what felt like minutes or hours. Time blurred. Other dancers brushed against them, all caught in the same collective trance.

Another tray of shots passed by—this time red. Selena grabbed two without hesitation and handed one to Damon.

"Another?"

"Why not." He was already past caution, past restraint.

They drank, eyes locked. This one burned less, went down smoother—but hit harder. Damon felt his head spin pleasantly. Everything felt heightened—the sound of Selena's laughter, the warmth of her skin, the way her body moved against his.

"I want you," he whispered in her ear, his hands sliding lower.

"Here?" Her eyes flashed playfully. "With all these people around?"

"Somewhere." He kissed her neck. "Now."

Selena glanced around. No one was paying attention—everyone lost in their own world. Beyond the lights, the trees offered shadow and privacy.

"Come." She took his hand and led him away from the dance floor.

They found a darker spot among the trees—far enough for privacy, close enough that the bass still vibrated through the ground.

Damon pulled her close, kissing her hungrily. Selena tugged at his shirt, fingers digging into his back.

"We could get caught," he murmured.

"Let them." She smiled against his lips. "I don't want to wait."

The rest of the world fell away—music, lights, people—until there was only them, breathless and urgent. They clung to each other as if proving something: that they were still alive, still capable of desire, still capable of feeling something other than grief.

Afterward they laughed softly, adjusting their clothes, hands still brushing against each other as if unwilling to break contact.

"We really just did that," Selena said, flushed and glowing.

"Yes," Damon replied, laughing—a raw, real sound. "We did."

They returned to the festival hand in hand.

The night blurred into more dancing, more drinks, more moments where their bodies pressed together without shame. They kissed openly in the middle of the crowd, uncaring who saw them.

"I think I'm drunk," Selena admitted eventually, leaning into him.

"I know I am," Damon laughed. "But I'm also—happy. First time in—I don't even remember."

"Me too." She rested against him. "Can we just stay here forever?"

"I wish we could." He kissed the top of her head. "But this—this is good. For now, it's enough."

They stayed until the sky began to lighten, until the music softened and the crowd thinned.

The walk back to the car was slower, filled with laughter and stumbling steps. Damon's head spun—not just from alcohol, but from joy. Real, unfiltered joy.

"Today was—" Selena began.

"I know." He opened the passenger door for her. "It was perfect."

They drove home in silence, but it was a comfortable silence. Her hand rested on his thigh, his covering hers.

Back at the apartment, sunlight flooded through the windows.

"We're a mess," Selena said, studying their reflections in the hallway mirror—wild hair, smudged makeup, wrinkled clothes.

"A beautiful mess." Damon wrapped his arms around her from behind.

For a moment, they simply looked—happy. Like they once had.

"I want more nights like this," Selena whispered. "More moments where we just—are."

"Then we'll have them." He turned her to face him. "We'll build something new. Piece by piece."

"Without Ana." The words came out quietly, the truth they'd both avoided.

"For now without Ana," Damon corrected gently. "But not forever. I refuse to believe it's forever."

"And if it is?"

"Then we still have each other." He touched her face. "And maybe—maybe that's enough to build on."

They kissed—soft this time, tender. Not desperate, not wild. Something that felt like hope.

"Bed," Selena murmured.

"Shower first," he grinned. "We smell like—I don't even know what."

"Weed and sweat and freedom," she laughed. "Come on."

Under the hot spray of the shower, they washed each other slowly, gently. His hands moved over her with tenderness now rather than urgency.

"I love you," he said, resting his forehead against hers beneath the water. "I know I say it a lot, but—"

"Say it again," she whispered.

"I love you, Selena. More than life. More than breathing. You're why I keep going."

"Me too." She wrapped her arms around him. "We're the reason. Not the pain. Not the loss. Us."

They went to bed clean and exhausted, curling together under the blankets.

For the first time in months, they fell asleep without fear, without nightmares.

Just two people holding each other.
And—for now—that was enough.
More than enough.
It was everything.

Chapter 3

The Midnight Gathering became their escape. Every two weeks, when the moon was full, Damon and Selena returned to the forest, to the music, to the freedom they couldn't find anywhere else.

It was their third time when they met them.

Selena was dancing, her eyes closed, lost in the beat. Damon was at the bar waiting for drinks when a woman leaned beside him—wild red hair, tattoos winding along her arms, eyes so green they almost glowed in the flickering light.

"Your girlfriend dances beautifully," she said, nodding toward Selena.

"My wife," Damon corrected automatically.

"Even better." The woman grinned. "I'm Raven. And that—" She pointed toward a man on the dance floor, moving not far from Selena. "That's my husband, Cain."

Damon followed her gaze. The man was tall, muscular, long dark hair tied back in a knot. He moved with a fluidity that made Damon's own dancing seem stiff by comparison, hands raised, body completely surrendered to the music.

"Nice to meet you," Damon said politely, unsure why this woman was talking to him.

"You come here often," Raven said—not a question. "We've seen you. The last two times. You both—" She paused, studying him. "You both have a story. A dark one."

Damon stiffened. "I don't know what you—"

"Relax." Raven laughed. "We all have stories here. That's why we come. To escape. To forget. For a few hours, we're just—free."

The bartender handed Damon the drinks. He hesitated, then said, "Do you—do you want to meet my wife?"

"I'd love to." Raven's smile widened.

They walked together to the dance floor. Selena opened her eyes when Damon touched her shoulder, her smile fading slightly when she saw the stranger.

"Selena, this is Raven," Damon said, handing her a drink. "And her husband is—"

"Right there." Raven waved Cain over. He came immediately, his arm automatically sliding around her waist when he reached her.

"These are Damon and Selena," Raven said. "I thought—we might have things in common."

Selena exchanged a glance with Damon. There was something in the way Raven looked at them—less curiosity, more recognition. As if she saw something others missed.

"Let's go somewhere quieter," Cain suggested, his voice deep and smooth. "It's too loud here."

They found a spot at the edge of the festival where the music could still be heard but wasn't overwhelming. They sat on logs arranged in a loose circle like an impromptu camp.

"So," Raven said, leaning against Cain. "Tell us. What brings you here? Besides the music."

Selena looked at Damon. He gave a small nod.

"We lost—we lost someone," Selena said carefully. "Someone very important. And this—this helps. Forgetting, even for a little while."

"Your daughter." Not a question. Raven's eyes softened with understanding.

"How—" Selena's breath caught.

"We can see it. In the way you dance. In the way you hold each other—like you're terrified to let go." Raven reached over and touched Selena's hand. "We lost someone too. Not a child—Cain's brother. Two years ago."

"He was—more than a brother," Cain added, his jaw tightening. "He was my best friend. Murdered. Wrong place, wrong time."

"I'm—I'm sorry," Damon said.

"We are too. For your loss," Cain replied. "Pain like that—it changes you. Makes you—different."

"Sharper," Raven said. "Rougher around the edges."

"Yes." Selena felt something loosen in her chest. Someone who understood. "Exactly."

"So you come here," Raven continued. "You let go. For a few hours, you forget the pain. You're just—you."

"How do you—how do you understand—"

"Because we do the same," Cain said with a small grin. "We come here, we drink, we dance, we let ourselves feel something other than grief."

"And each other," Raven added, her hand sliding to Cain's thigh. "We have each other. That's how we survive."

There was something in the way she touched him—possessive yet open, unashamed. Damon recognized it because he and Selena were the same.

"You understand," Selena said softly.

"We do," Raven confirmed. "Some pains don't disappear. They just fade at the edges. You learn to live around them."

The conversation flowed more easily after that. They talked about music, favorite drinks, ridiculous festival stories. Beneath it all was an unspoken understanding: We are alike. We are broken, but still here.

"Come dance with us," Raven said eventually, standing and offering her hand to Selena. "Both of you."

On the dance floor, the four of them formed their own small circle. The music was faster now, the rhythm pulsing through Selena like a second heartbeat.

Raven danced the way she seemed to do everything—fully, without hesitation. Her body moved against Cain's, then away, then back again—a dance that was both performance and intimacy.

"They're intense," Selena murmured in Damon's ear.

"Like us," he replied.

And it was true. When Cain pulled Raven against him, when she turned and kissed him deeply without caring who watched, Selena saw a reflection of herself and Damon.

It was like looking in a mirror.

"You two are beautiful together," Raven said later as they paused for drinks. "Truly beautiful. You have—that thing. That connection people talk about but rarely find."

"So do you," Selena replied. And she meant it. The way Cain looked at Raven—possessive, admiring, fiercely devoted—reminded her of Damon.

"We try," Cain said with a grin. "We fight hard. But we make up harder."

"Subtle," Raven laughed, swatting his arm.

"Never claimed to be." He kissed her temple.

As the night wore on, the line between the two couples softened. They danced together—sometimes as pairs, sometimes shifting positions innocently, all caught in the music.

When Selena found herself dancing beside Cain while Damon and Raven weren't far away, it didn't feel strange. It felt natural. As if four people, each carrying their own darkness, had found a place where they could breathe.

"Your husband loves you," Cain said quietly as they moved. "I can see it. In the way he looks at you—like you're the only person in the room."

"Your wife too," Selena said with a smile. "It's rare, isn't it? This kind of love."

"Damn rare," Cain agreed. "Hold on to it. No matter what."

When they drifted back to their own partners, it felt like coming home.

"I love you," Selena whispered, wrapping her arms around Damon's neck.

"I love you too." He lifted her slightly, spinning her. "Always."

They kissed, and for a moment she forgot everything—the pain, the loss. There was only this: his lips, his hands holding her, the music pulsing around them.

When they pulled apart, Raven and Cain stood nearby, wrapped up in each other the same way.

"Until next time," Raven said as the music began to slow. "You'll come back, right?"

"Yes," Selena answered without hesitation. "We'll come back."

They exchanged numbers—burner phones, all four understanding the need for discretion—and promised to meet again at the next gathering.

On the drive home, Selena's hand rested on Damon's thigh.

"They were like us," she said.

"I know." His hand covered hers. "It felt good. Meeting people who understand."

"Do you think—we'll really become friends?"

"Maybe," Damon said with a faint smile. "Stranger things have happened."

Two weeks later, at the next Midnight Gathering, Raven and Cain were already there waiting. They greeted Damon and Selena like old friends—with hugs and laughter.

That night, they danced closer. Drank more. Talked deeper.

"Cain and I have a rule," Raven said during a quieter moment, her words slightly slurred from alcohol. "Total honesty. Always. No secrets, no lies. Even when it hurts."

"How—how does that work?" Selena asked. "Aren't some things better left unsaid?"

"No," Raven said firmly. "Because unspoken things rot. They grow. And eventually, they destroy you." She glanced at Cain. "Tell them. About Marie."

Cain's jaw tightened. "Raven—"

"They need to know. If we're going to be real friends—they should know."

He sighed and took a long drink. "Three years ago, I—I cheated. Once. It meant nothing. But I told Raven the next day."

Selena's eyes widened. Damon stiffened beside her.

"I forgave him," Raven said steadily. "Because he was honest. If he'd lied—if I'd found out another way—we wouldn't be here."

"It almost destroyed us anyway," Cain admitted. "But going through it together made us stronger. Our rule about honesty—it became iron."

"We tell each other everything," Raven said. "Every fear, every desire, every dark thought. And we don't judge. We just accept."

Selena looked at Damon. Could he see the question in her eyes? Could we do that?

"We try," Damon said slowly. "To be honest. But some things—some things are hard to share."

"The hardest things are the most important," Cain said. "Trust me."

Later, as they danced, Selena felt something shift. These people—these strangers who no longer felt like strangers—had something. An openness that was frightening but freeing.

"What do you think?" Damon whispered in her ear.

"I think—we can learn from them." She turned in his arms. "Total honesty. Even when it scares us."

"Even when it hurts?"

"Especially when it hurts." She kissed him. "No more secrets. Not between us."

"Deal." He kissed her back, deep and lingering. "Starting now."

The night carried on, and for the first time in months, Selena felt hope. Not yet hope that Ana would return—but hope that she and Damon could become more than survivors.

That they could thrive.

Together.

With people who understood.

And maybe—just maybe—that was enough to build something new.

A new life.

A new beginning.

Another chance at happiness.

Even in the dark.

Especially in the dark.

Chapter 4

The friendship with Raven and Cain grew faster than Selena had expected.

Within a month they weren't just meeting at the festivals, but outside of them too—quiet dinners in obscure restaurants, late-night walks through the city, spontaneous visits to each other's apartments.

"Your apartment is—small," Raven remarked during their first visit, looking around. There was no judgment in her voice, only observation.

"We downsized," Damon said simply. He didn't give details—not about why, not about Ana. Some wounds were still too fresh.

But Raven nodded as if she understood without asking. "Cain and I live in a loft. Industrial district. It's—raw. But it's ours."

"Show us," Selena said impulsively. "Now. I want to see where you live."

Raven and Cain exchanged a look—a whole conversation in a second.

"Okay," Cain said at last. "But—there are rules. In our space, we're—we're our full selves. No filters. If that's too much—"

"It's not," Damon interrupted. "We can handle it."

The loft was exactly what Raven had described—exposed brick walls, high ceilings, massive windows overlooking the city. But it was also intimate. Candles everywhere, soft throws draped over furniture, artwork on the walls ranging from beautiful to unsettling.

"This is—impressive," Selena said, turning slowly to take it all in.

"Thank you." Raven tossed her jacket over a chair. "Drinks? We have—actually, we have everything."

They settled in the living area—Raven and Cain on one couch, Damon and Selena on another. Whiskey was poured, music set low.

"So," Raven said, tucking her legs beneath her. "Full honesty time. Ask us anything. Whatever you want. We answer truthfully."

Selena hesitated. "Why—why are you so open? With us? You barely know us."

"Because we recognize something," Cain said. "You're like us—people who've suffered, who've lost, who are trying to find a way to live with it."

"And because," Raven added, "we're tired of pretending. In the normal world, we have to act like we're—normal. Happy. Stable. But here, with you—we can be who we really are."

"And who is that?" Damon asked.

Raven and Cain looked at each other again. Then Raven spoke.

"People who carry darkness. Cain has hurt people. In his past. Not without reason, but—he's done it. And I—I have my own demons. Addiction. Self-destruction. We've both done things we're ashamed of."

"But we don't judge each other," Cain said. "We accept. Completely. That's how we work."

Selena felt something loosen in her chest. "Damon has—he has a past. A dark one. Violence, crime—things that ultimately cost us Ana."

It was the first time she had said Ana's name aloud in weeks. Damon's hand found hers immediately, squeezing.

"Tell us," Raven said softly. "If you want. We're listening."

And so—slowly, haltingly—they told their story. Damon's past with the Russian mafia. Viktor. The threats. Ana's first kidnapping. The second. The court case that had taken their daughter away.

When they finished, Selena's face was wet with tears. Damon's jaw was tight, his eyes dry but hard.

Raven stood, crossed the room, and knelt in front of Selena. "That's—I can't imagine. I'm so sorry."

"But it's not over," Cain said. "The court case—there's always appeal. Ways to fight."

"We tried," Damon said flatly. "Every lawyer says the same thing—we have to wait. Prove stability. Five years minimum before we can even petition for visitation rights."

"Five years isn't forever," Raven said. "And in the meantime—you build something. You heal. So that when you get her back, you're ready."

It was what their therapist had said. But hearing it from someone who understood—someone who wasn't paid to care—hit differently.

"Thank you," Selena whispered. "For understanding."

The evening shifted after that—lighter, yet deeper. They talked about everything—fears, desires, fantasies they had never spoken aloud.

"I'm afraid," Selena admitted after her third glass of whiskey, "that Damon will leave me. That he'll realize he's better off without me."

"Never." Damon's arm tightened around her. "That will never happen."

"But what if—"

"No what-ifs." He made her look at him. "I will never let you go. You are—you're the only constant in my life. The only thing that makes sense."

"I felt the same about Cain," Raven said. "After his brother died, I thought—thought he'd leave me. Sink so deep into grief there'd be no room left for me."

"I almost did," Cain admitted. "The first six months—I was a mess. Drank too much, fought too much, pushed Raven away every time she tried to help."

"What changed?" Damon asked.

"She did." Cain looked at Raven with an intensity that made the room feel smaller. "She refused to leave. No matter how hard I pushed, she stayed. And eventually—I realized I didn't want to grieve alone. I wanted to live. With her."

"That's how I feel," Selena said. "Like grieving is—easier, almost. Living is harder. It takes effort."

"But it's worth it," Raven said. "Trust me."

As the night wore on, the conversation grew more intimate—not necessarily sexual, but personal in a way that felt unguarded.

"Can I ask you something?" Cain said suddenly. "Something maybe too personal?"

"Try," Damon replied.

"You two—your intimacy. Is it—is it still the same? After everything?"

Selena felt her cheeks warm, but Raven squeezed her hand encouragingly.

"It's different," Damon admitted. "Sometimes desperate. Like we're trying to prove we're still alive. Other times—it feels like the only thing that still feels real."

"Yes," Cain nodded. "Exactly. After Liam died, Raven and I—we couldn't stop touching each other. Not always sexually, just—contact. Reassurance."

"We barely slept," Raven added. "For months. We were afraid—afraid that if we slept, we'd wake up and it would somehow be worse."