Dark Desire

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Prologue

Selena Blackwood wasn't a woman to be overlooked. Twenty-five years old. Blue eyes that could see sharply, yet also as fragile as ice under the winter sun. Her dark hair fell far past her shoulders, sleek on top, but soft curls played along her back as if they had a mind of their own. She didn't wear her beauty loudly—she wore it like a secret. She loved danger, but only when it didn't swallow her whole. Men with tattoos who told stories without words. Engines that roared when they started. Broad shoulders. Strong arms. A six-pack that wasn't just for the mirror, but shaped by discipline. And always... always taller than her. She wanted to have to look up. Not just literally. What she didn't know... was that danger sometimes looks back. Damon Volkov was thirty. Gray-green eyes that rarely gave anything away. His dark hair was combed tightly to one side, perfectly styled—as if control wasn't a choice, but a way of life. He didn't walk into a room. He took her over. He liked women smaller than him. Women he could surround himself with. Who looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and abandon. Attractive—yes. But most of all... impressionable. Damon didn't play games. He won them. And when he decided something was his... it stayed that way. They'd never met. But fate had long since decreed their paths would cross. A warm summer evening. The smell of gasoline. The sound of an engine approaching in the distance. Selena stood by the curb, her heart pounding for no reason she could explain. Some encounters don't feel like coincidences. They feel like warnings. And when Damon Volkov first saw her—under the soft glow of a streetlamp, her curls gleaming in the night—he knew one thing for certain: She wouldn't run away from him. The only question was... Would she?

Chapter 1

The motorcycle came to a stop three meters away from her.

Selena's breath caught. Not from fear. From something perilously close, yet fundamentally different. The machine was black, shiny, expensive. The kind of motorcycle that didn't belong on the street, but in a private collection. Or in the garage of someone who didn't follow rules, but made them.

The rider put his foot down on the asphalt. Tall. Broad. A leather jacket that fit perfectly around his shoulders. He removed his helmet in one fluid motion, and Selena felt her stomach tighten.

Gray-green eyes found hers immediately. As if he knew exactly where she was. As if he had been searching for her before he stopped.

"Engine broken?" His voice was low, calm, but something beneath it vibrated like an undercurrent. A dark promise she couldn't decipher.

Selena looked at her own motorcycle—an old Triumph that had never let her down, until tonight. The evening had been warm, the air still heavy with the heat that had built during the day. She'd wanted to go for a ride to clear her head, to escape the drudgery of her office job and the expectations her family placed on her. But the engine had stopped halfway, simply died, as if it had decided this was the moment to leave her stranded.

"Battery, I think," she said. Her voice sounded firmer than she felt. She'd learned to sound confident, even when she wasn't. It was a survival mechanism she'd honed over the years.

He stepped off his bike. Every movement controlled, deliberate. Like a predator who knows there's no need to rush. He came closer, and Selena had to tilt her head back to keep her eyes on him. He was tall, at least a head taller than her, and his presence filled the room in a way that was simultaneously oppressive and captivating.

Up close, she could see more detail. His face was angular, with a sharp jawline that looked as if he'd been carved from marble. A small scar ran through his left eyebrow, almost invisible, but just enough to suggest this wasn't a man who'd spent his entire life behind a desk. His hands were large, with long fingers that looked as if they could protect as well as destroy.

"May I?" He nodded toward her motorcycle.

She hesitated. Not because she didn't want to. But because something inside her warned that saying yes to this man meant more than she could fathom. There was something in his eyes, something in the way he looked at her, as if he already knew her better than she knew herself. As if he could see right through all the walls she'd so carefully constructed.

"Go ahead."

He bent down, his fingers running over the motorcycle with a familiarity that surprised her. No hesitation. No doubt. As if he knew what he was looking for before he even started. She watched him work, the concentration on his face, the way his muscles moved under his shirt as he reached for a hard-to-reach spot. There was a tattoo on his forearm; she couldn't quite see it, but it looked like wings or flames, something dark and detailed.

"Loose wire," he said after a few seconds. He turned something on, stood up, wiped his hands on his pants. "Try it now."

Selena started the engine. It roared to life, the sound familiar and reassuring in the quiet street.

She looked up at him. "Thank you."

"Damon." He extended his hand.

She took it. His grip was warm, firm, and he held on a little too long. Just long enough for her heartbeat to quicken. Just long enough for her to become aware of the warmth of his skin, of the calluses on his palm that spoke of physical labor, of something more real than the smooth hands of the men in the office.

"Selena."

"Beautiful name." His eyes slid over her face, her hair, her shoulders. Not intrusively, but deliberately. As if he were mapping her out. As if he were memorizing every detail for later use. "You often ride alone?"

"Often enough." She withdrew her hand, suddenly aware of how vulnerable she was. Alone on a deserted street with a strange man who was too beautiful to trust and too dangerous to ignore.

"Dangerous."

"That's the point." The words were out before she could stop them. It was true. She sought danger, but always on her own terms. Always with an escape route.

The corner of his mouth curled. Not a smile. Something darker. "You like danger?"

She kept her gaze on him, refusing to look away, refusing to be the first to blink in this silent confrontation. "As long as I'm in control."

He stepped closer. Not intrusively, but enough that the air between them shifted. She could smell his scent now, leather and something musky, something that teased her senses in a way she wasn't entirely sure about. "And if you lose it?"

Selena's heart pounded against her ribcage. The street suddenly felt narrower, the shadows deeper. "Then I'll leave."

"And if that's not an option?"

There was something in the air. Something she couldn't name, but she sensed it. Like electricity before a thunderstorm. Like the moment before you jump off a cliff. Her instincts were screaming at each other, half telling her to run, the other whispering to stay. "That's always an option," she said, but her voice sounded less convinced than she'd intended.

He looked at her as if he saw right through her. As if he could sense every uncertainty, every lie she told herself. "We'll see."

Before she could answer, before she could ask what he meant, he put on his helmet, swung his leg over his bike, and started it. The sound boomed through the street, echoing between the buildings, filling the silence that had hung between them.

"Careful, Selena." His voice sounded muffled through the visor, but she heard every syllable. Every warning. "The world is more dangerous than you think."

And then he drove off. The red taillights receded in the distance, disappeared around the corner, leaving her in the stillness of the night.

Selena stood there, her hands still warm from his touch, her heart still racing. She looked at the spot where he'd been standing, at the bike that was now functioning perfectly again, at the street that suddenly felt emptier. She would never see him again, she thought. It was a chance encounter, a stranger who had helped her, nothing more. By morning, she would have forgotten his face, his name would fade into a distant memory.

She was wrong.

She was so terribly wrong.

Because Damon Volkov wasn't a man you forgot. And he certainly wasn't a man who forgot something he wanted.

Selena started her engine, the vibrations familiar and reassuring beneath her, and drove home. But all the way, she felt his gaze burning into her back, as if he were still watching her, as if the distance between them meant nothing.

That night, as she lay in bed, she couldn't sleep. His face kept looming in the darkness. Those gray-green eyes. That voice that sounded like a promise and a threat at the same time.

The world is more dangerous than you think.

Why had he said that? Was it a warning? Or a prophecy?

She turned over, pulled the covers up, tried to still her thoughts. But deep down, she already knew something had changed. That that meeting hadn't been an ending, but a beginning.

And beginnings were always the most dangerous.

Because you never knew where they would end.

Chapter 2

Three days later, she saw him again.

Selena was sitting in her favorite café, a small corner of town where no one knew her and she wanted to keep her exactly that way. It was an unassuming space with brick walls, wooden tables covered in scratches and rings from coffee cups, and a scent of freshly ground beans that always felt comforting. This was her sanctuary, the place she went when the world got too loud, when the expectations of others weighed too heavily.

She had a book open, a thriller she'd been trying to finish for a week, but the words wouldn't stick. Her thoughts kept drifting back to gray-green eyes and a voice that sounded too confident. She'd told herself she'd forget him. That he'd just been a passerby, a brief interruption in her routine.

But her mind didn't keep that promise.

Careful, Selena.

As if he knew she wouldn't be. As if he knew her better than she thought. The bell above the door chimed. She didn't look up. She never did. It was one of her rules: not to look up at every sound, not to be curious about who came in. Here, she was invisible, and that was exactly how she wanted it.

Until she smelled his scent. Leather. Something sharp, something dark, like spices and smoke. And then that undercurrent of cologne that had to be expensive and perfectly chosen. A scent you didn't forget, that lodged itself in your memory and lingered there.

"Coincidentally."

Her heart leaped. She looked up, and there he was. Damon. Hands in his pockets, head tilted slightly as if he were studying her the way one studies a painting in a museum. Today he was wearing a dark shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, fully exposing the tattoo on his forearm. It was indeed flames, interwoven with what looked like Cyrillic letters. His hair was still perfect, every strand in its place, as if chaos had no access to his appearance. "I doubt that," she said. Her voice sounded calmer than she felt. Her hands gripped the book tighter, her fingers white against the dark cover.

He smiled. A genuine smile this time, but there was something hard beneath it. Something that didn't quite reach the eyes. "Smart girl."

"Are you following me?" The question was direct, sharp.

If he was stalking her, she wanted to know now. She wanted to shatter the illusion of coincidence before she could convince herself this was normal.

"I was here first." His voice was calm, matter-of-fact, as if he were merely stating a fact.

Selena's eyes slid to the counter. The barista, a young woman with purple hair and a nose piercing, nodded at Damon with a familiarity that spoke of how often he came here. She even smiled, a quick, warm smile that spoke of recognition. Of regular visits. Selena's stomach dropped. He hadn't lied.

"Can I sit down?"

She wanted to say no. She should say no. Every fiber in her body screamed that this was a bad idea, that this man was dangerous, that she should keep her distance. But her mouth formed other words.

"If you promise not to lie."

He sat down without waiting for her answer, as if her words were an invitation rather than a condition. He leaned back, arms crossed, completely at ease. As if this place, this moment, this space, was his. As if he belonged everywhere by sheer force of will.

"I don't lie, Selena. I just don't tell everything." His eyes held hers, forcing her to keep looking, to not look away.

"What's the difference?"

"Lies are deception. Silence is self-protection." He spoke the words slowly, as if giving her time to process them, to understand the nuance.

She closed her book with a soft thud. The sound echoed in the silence between them. "What do you need to protect yourself from?"

His eyes darkened. The grayish-green color deepened, almost turning gray. "From myself."

The air between them grew heavier. Selena felt something shift, as if she were standing on the edge of something she couldn't step away from. As if this conversation were a threshold, and if she crossed it, there would be no turning back. "You're dangerous," she said softly. It

wasn't a question. It was a conclusion, a truth she'd known from the moment she saw him.

"Yes." No denial. No apology. No attempt to soften it or explain it. Just a simple, honest yes.

The barista came to their table, smiled at Damon. "The usual?" she asked.

"Please, Maria." His voice changed when he spoke to her, became warmer, friendlier. A glimpse of someone else, someone who could perhaps be normal when he wanted to be.

Maria looked at Selena. "And for you?"

"Another cappuccino, please."

When Maria was gone, Selena looked at him again. "Why are you telling me that?" she asked. "That you're dangerous. Why are you warning me?"

"Because I want you to know before you decide."

"About what?"

He leaned forward, his face closer now, his voice lower. So softly that only she could hear it, so intimately that it felt like he was telling her a secret. "If you'll stay close to me."

Selena's heart skipped a beat. Blood pounded in her ears. "And if I say no?"

His gaze slid over her face, slowly, as if he were memorizing every line. From her forehead to her cheeks, from her nose to her lips, and back to her eyes. "Then I'll respect that."

"But?"

Something tugged at the corners of his mouth. Not a smile, but the promise of one. "But I won't stop thinking about you."

The words hit her like a physical blow. Direct. Honest. Too honest. She'd expected him to lie, to flirt, to play by the rules men usually followed. But this was raw. This was truth without embellishment.

She should have turned around. Should have gotten up. Should have walked out the door and never come back. Should have accepted that this was too much, too intense, too fast.

Instead, she asked, "What are you doing, Damon?"

He smiled. Slowly. Darkly. A smile that promised and warned at the same time. "Something you don't want to ask about."

And he was right. Because deep down, she knew the answer would change her world. That the answer would mean making a choice, and that choice would have consequences.

Maria returned with their coffee. Set the cups down against the wood with a soft clang. Selena took her cup, let the warmth seep into her hands, used it as an anchor against the storm of emotions raging inside her.

"Tell me something I can know," she said finally.

Damon took a sip of his coffee. Black, no sugar, as bitter as his smile had been. "What do you want to know?"

"Why are you here?"

"Because it's quiet. Because people leave me alone here." He glanced around the café, at the other tables where people were working or reading or talking quietly. "And because Maria makes the best coffee in town."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Import and export." The words sounded rehearsed, as if he'd said them a thousand times. A canned response to a question he didn't want to answer.

"Of what?"

"Of everything people need." He looked at her, and there was a challenge in his gaze. As if he wanted her to ask more. As if he wanted her to dig deeper.

But Selena wasn't stupid. She knew when to stop. "Sounds vague enough to be interesting."

"It is."

They both took a sip of coffee. The silence between them wasn't awkward, but charged. Full of things left unsaid. Full of questions left unasked.

"Why did you help me?" she asked. "That night. With my motorcycle." "Because you

needed help."

"That's not all."

He leaned back, his eyes half-closed as if considering his answer. "No," he admitted. "That's not all."

"And the rest?"

"Because you interested me. Because you were different from the women I usually meet. Because you were on a motorcycle instead of in a car. Because you weren't afraid when I stopped." He paused. "Because you looked at me as if you knew me."

"Did I?"

"Partly."

Selena felt a chill run down her spine. "And the rest?"

"You'll figure that out." He stood up, pulled out his wallet, and put money on the table. Too much money for two cups of coffee. "I have to go."

"When will I see you again?" The question was out before she could stop him. Before she could pretend she didn't want to know the answer. He looked down at her, and for the first time, she saw a softness in his gaze. Something that resembled tenderness, but was darker. "Fast enough, Selena. Faster than you want."

And then he was gone. He walked through the café as if he owned it, as if every step was planned, as if even his departure was a statement. The doorbell rang as he opened the door, and then he was gone in the bustle of the street.

Selena sat there, her coffee untouched, her heart pounding in her throat. She looked at the money on the table, at the way he'd laid it down casually, as if money had no value. As if nothing had value except what he wanted.

Maria came to the table and picked up the money. "He's a good guy," she said softly. "But also complicated."

"Do you know him well?"

Maria hesitated. "Well enough to know you have to be careful. But also well enough to

know he's not a bad person. Just... complicated."

"What do you mean?"

But Maria just shook her head. "You have to figure that out for yourself." And then she walked away, back to the bar, back to her work.

Selena stared at her book. The words still meant nothing. Her thoughts were elsewhere, with a man with gray-green eyes and a voice like silk and gravel. With a man who admitted he was dangerous, but who warned her instead of misleading her. She picked up her phone, opened Google, and typed in his name. Damon Volkov.

The search results were few and far between. A few private social media accounts. A business directory listing for an importing company. Nothing that told her anything. Nothing that explained who he really was.

She closed her phone, grabbed her bag, and stood up. It was time to go home. To think. To make a decision.

But as she walked out the door, she knew the decision had already been made. From the moment he'd stood next to her table. From the moment he admitted he'd keep thinking about her.

Because she couldn't stop thinking about him either.

And that was perhaps the most dangerous thing of all.

Chapter 3

The week that followed was a study in obsession.

Selena couldn't help it. Wherever she was, whatever she did, her thoughts kept returning to him. To those gray-green eyes that seemed to read her. To that voice that sounded like whiskey, warm and burning at the same time. To the way he moved, as if every movement had been choreographed beforehand, as if nothing he did was accidental.

At the office, she stared at her computer screen, oblivious to what was on it. Reports she had to review went unread. Emails piled up. Her colleagues started asking questions, tentative questions about if everything was okay, if she was feeling alright. She smiled and said yes, everything was fine, just tired, just busy. But the truth was, she was obsessed with a man she barely knew.

She didn't go back to the café. It was her choice, her own form of self-protection. If she didn't see him, maybe she could forget. Perhaps she could return to her normal life, to her safe routine. But even as she stayed away, she felt his absence like a physical pain, like a loss that had no right to be there.

At night, she lay awake, remembering every word he'd said. "I won't stop thinking about you." The words echoed in her head, a promise and a curse at the same time. Because she couldn't stop either. Couldn't stop wondering where he was, what he was doing, if he was thinking of her as he'd promised.

On Friday night, exactly a week after their last encounter, she sat on her couch at home. Her apartment was small but cozy, on the third floor of an old building downtown. She loved the high ceilings, the original wood floors, the large window overlooking the street below. Usually, she felt safe here, cut off from the world.

But tonight, it felt like a cage.

She'd poured a glass of wine, turned on the television without really looking. Her phone lay beside her, silent and innocent. She'd been checking him all evening, as if expecting a message from someone who didn't even have her number.

And then the doorbell rang.

Selena froze. It was almost ten o'clock. Too late for deliveries, too late for neighbors to borrow something. Her heart began to race, a primal instinct warning her that something

was wrong.

She stood up, walked to the intercom. "Yes?"

"Selena." His voice. That cursed voice she would recognize in a room full of people. "Let me in."

It wasn't a question. It was a command, delivered softly but unmistakably.

All the alarm bells in her head went off. He knew where she lived. He was here, at her apartment, without invitation, without warning. This was exactly the kind of situation her mother had warned her about, the kind of scenario she'd learned to avoid.

But her finger pressed the button anyway. The buzzer sounded, the downstairs door opened, and she heard his footsteps on the stairs. Slowly. Steadily. Like a heartbeat growing closer. She opened her own door before he could knock. And there he was. In a black shirt and dark jeans, his hair still perfect, his face unreadable. In his hand he held something, a small black bag with a logo she didn't recognize.

"How do you know where I live?" Her voice sounded sharper than she intended, fueled by adrenaline and uncertainty.

"That's not hard to figure out." He said it as if it was logical, as if it was self-evident that he'd sought out her private information.

"That's stalking."

"That's interest." He stepped forward, and she instinctively stepped back. He entered her apartment as if invited, closed the door behind him, and leaned his back against it. "You didn't come back to the café."

"I was busy."

"You were scared." Not a question. A statement.

Selena's jaw tightened. "For you?"

"For yourself." He looked around her apartment, taking it all in. The books on the shelves, the pictures on the wall, the plants by the window. "For what you might feel."

"You don't know me."

"Not yet." He pushed away from the door, came closer, and Selena forced herself not to flinch. To stand her ground. "But I want to."

"Why?"

"Because you're different. Because you don't smile at me like other women do. Because you're not impressed by my money or my name." He was close now, so close she could smell his scent again, that familiar leather and spices. "Because you're looking at me as if you're trying to decide if I'm a threat or a promise."

"And what are you?"

"Both." He lifted the bag. "I have something for you."

Selena looked at the bag, then at him. "I don't want gifts."

"It's not a gift. It's an invitation." He opened the bag and pulled out a dress. A black dress, elegant and simple, made of a fabric that flowed through his fingers like water. "Tomorrow night. There's a gala, a charity event. I want you to come with me."

"Why should I?"

"Because you're curious. Because you want to know who I am, what I do." He draped the dress over the back of her couch. "Because you've been as unable to think about anything else this past week as I have."

His words struck home. Selena felt her cheeks heat up, betrayed by her own body. "You're arrogant."

"I'm honest." He took another step closer. Now she could see the details of his face, the small scar through his eyebrow, the shadow of stubble on his jaw. "Come with me, Selena. Let me show you my world."

"And if I say no?"

"Then I'll respect that. Then I'll leave you alone." He paused, and for the first time, she saw a hint of doubt in his eyes. Something that resembled vulnerability, but maybe it was just a ploy, a way to manipulate her. "But I don't think you'll say no."

"Why not?"

"Because you're just as curious as I am. Because you've played it safe your whole life, and you're starting to wonder what it would feel like not to." He raised his hand, hesitated, then lowered it without touching her. "Because you love danger, and I'm the most dangerous thing you've ever encountered."

Selena's heart pounded in her throat. She knew she had to say no. Knew this was madness. A strange man who had tracked down her address, who invited her to an event she knew nothing about, who admitted to being dangerous and made no attempt to hide it.

But he was right. She was curious. And more than that, she was fascinated. By him, by his confidence, by the way he looked at her as if she were the only person in the world.

"What kind of gala?" she asked. Not yes, but not no either.

"A benefit for childcare centers in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Very respectable, very legal." A smile played across his lips. "I'm on the organizing committee."

"You?" She couldn't keep the surprise from her voice.

"Even dangerous men can be philanthropic." He walked to the window, looked out at the street below. "My mother is Russian. She came here when she was eighteen, pregnant and alone. A daycare center helped her, gave her a place to stay until she could stand on her own two feet. I don't forget things like that."

It was the most personal thing he'd shared. A glimpse into his past, into where he came from. Selena felt something shift in her chest, a softening that was dangerous.

"What time?" she asked.

He turned, and the smile on his face was triumphant but not arrogant. As if he'd known she'd say yes but was glad he'd been right. "I'll pick you up at seven."

"I can come myself."

"I know. But I want to pick you up." He walked to the door, opened it, and paused in the doorway. "The dress fits you. I have a good eye for measurements."

Selena didn't want to ask how he knew that. Didn't want to think about how much he'd discovered about her without her knowledge. "Damon?"

He glanced over his shoulder.

"If this is a mistake—"

"Then we'll make it together." And then he was gone, his footsteps disappearing on the stairs, the door slamming shut downstairs.

Selena stood alone in her apartment. She walked to the couch and picked up the dress. The fabric was soft, expensive, the kind of garment she would never buy for herself. She held it up to her, looking in the mirror on the wall.

The woman looking back was a stranger. Her eyes were too bright, her cheeks too red. She looked excited. Alive. For the first time in months, she felt something beyond the humdrum of her daily routine.

She hung the dress in her closet, closed the door, and leaned her head against it.

What was she doing? This was madness. This was reckless. This was exactly the kind of situation she should avoid.

But she wasn't going to run away. Not now. Not yet.

She wanted to know who Damon Volkov really was. Wanted to see what his world was like. Wanted, for one night, to allow herself to do something dangerous.

She spent the rest of the evening mulling it over. She Googled the benefit, found information about the event. It was legitimate, an annual gala that raised thousands of euros for charity. The guest list was impressive: politicians, entrepreneurs, local celebrities. This wasn't some obscure back-alley event. This was mainstream, public, safe.

Or was that exactly what she was supposed to think?

She shook her head, trying to suppress her paranoia. Maybe Damon was just what he seemed: a businessman with a rough edge and an interest in her. Maybe she was driving herself crazy with scenarios that only existed in thrillers.

But then she remembered the way he'd looked at her. The intensity in his eyes. The certainty with which he'd said she wouldn't run away.

As if he already knew her. As if he already owned her.

And that was perhaps the most frightening thing of all. That night she slept poorly. Dreamed of gray-green eyes and hands that clung too tightly and a voice whispering that it was too late to flee. She woke several times, drenched in sweat, her heart racing.

When morning came, she felt exhausted but also strangely calm. As if she had made a decision without realizing it. As if her fate was already sealed.

She spent the day preparing. Took a long shower, washed her hair, and manicured her nails. Carefully chose her underwear, not because she expected anyone to see it, but because it gave her confidence. The ritual of getting ready was comforting, familiar.

At six o'clock she began to get dressed. The dress fit perfectly, as it had promised. It hugged the contours of her body without being too tight, elegant but not provocative. She wore her hair half-up, letting the curls at the bottom fall loosely over her bare shoulders. Minimal makeup: some mascara, a touch of blush, a nude lipstick. When she was finished, she looked in the mirror and barely recognized herself. She looked mature. Refined. Like the kind of woman who belonged at a gala, not riding a motorcycle through the city.

At exactly seven o'clock, the doorbell rang.

Selena grabbed her bag, a small black clutch she'd bought years ago for a wedding and never used since. Her hands trembled slightly as she opened the door.

Damon stood in the hallway, and for the first time, she saw him in a suit. Dark gray, tailored, with a white shirt and no tie. He looked like he'd stepped off a movie set, unrealistically handsome, unrealistically perfect.

His eyes traveled over her, slowly, from her face to her feet and back again. "You're beautiful."

"Thank you." Her voice was husky. She cleared her throat. "You look good too."

"Ready?"

She nodded, locked the door behind her, and followed him down the stairs. Outside was a black Mercedes, shiny and expensive. He opened the door for her, waited for her to get in before closing it.

When he sat down next to her and started the engine, Selena felt a final wave of doubt. This was her last chance to say no, to get out, to return to her safe life.

But she said nothing. And as they drove away, down the street and into the city, she knew there was no turning back.

The night had begun. And whatever happened, she would see it through to the end.

Chapter 4

The drive to the gala took twenty minutes, but to Selena, it felt like an eternity and a heartbeat all rolled into one.

Damon drove with the same controlled precision with which he seemed to do everything. His hands rested loosely on the steering wheel, his eyes on the road, but Selena felt him aware of every breath she took, every small movement she made. The car smelled of leather and his cologne, a scent that was now becoming familiar in a way both comforting and unsettling.

"Nervous?" he asked without taking his eyes off the road.

"Should I be?"

He did look at her now, a quick glance that saw more than she wanted to show. "It depends."

"What about?"

"What about what you expect from tonight." He shifted smoothly, navigating the traffic as if the other cars were merely obstacles in a course he'd driven a thousand times. "If you're expecting a normal evening, then no. If you're expecting tonight to change your life... then maybe." Selena's heart leaped. "You're dramatic."

"I'm realistic." He turned onto a street she recognized, the old town where the most expensive buildings stood. "You're going to meet people who are important in my world. They'll draw conclusions about who you are, about what you mean to me."

"And what do I mean to you?"

He parked in front of an imposing building with a glass and steel facade, a modern structure nestled among the historic buildings. A uniformed doorman was already approaching the car. Damon turned off the engine, turned to her, and the intensity in his eyes took her breath away.

"I'm still trying to figure that out." His voice was low, almost rough. "But what I do know is that I don't want to share you. Not tonight. Not ever."

Before she could answer, he got out. He walked around the car and opened her door. He

extended his hand to her, a gesture both courteous and possessive. Selena took his hand, felt the warmth of his skin against hers, and let him help her up.

The doorman nodded respectfully to Damon. "Mr. Volkov. Good evening."

"Good evening, Thomas." Damon gave the man his keys, then placed his hand on Selena's lower back. A light touch, but enough to guide her, to make it clear to anyone watching that she belonged to him.

They walked to the entrance. Through glass doors into a foyer that looked like something out of an architectural magazine. High ceilings, a chandelier that sparkled like a starry night sky, marble floors that gleamed as if freshly polished. People were everywhere: women in dresses that cost more than Selena's monthly salary, men in suits custom-made by tailors whose names she didn't even know.

And everyone was looking at Damon.

It was subtle, but unmistakable. Looks that lingered too long, whispers that died down as he passed, a kind of reverence mixed with something resembling fear. He didn't respond, simply walked on as if oblivious to the attention, but Selena sensed the power emanating from him. This was his territory. These people knew him. And more than that, they respected him. Or feared him.

A woman in a silver dress approached them. She was in her early forties, elegant in a way that spoke of old money and good genes. Her smile was warm, but her eyes were sharp as she looked at Selena.

"Damon, I didn't expect you to bring anyone." Her voice had a French accent, slight but distinct.

"Isabelle." Damon kissed her on both cheeks, a greeting familiar enough to suggest history. "This is Selena Blackwood. Selena, this is Isabelle Laurent, one of the organizers of tonight's event."

"Nice to meet you." Selena extended her hand.

Isabelle took it, her handshake firm but brief. "Charming. Where did you meet?"

"A happy coincidence," Damon said before Selena could answer. His hand moved from her lower back to her side, a possessive gesture that was unmistakable. "How's the proceeds going?"