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Leilanna's POV

"Miss Velmor, you're going to apologize to Mr. Darkov," the dean said, folding his hands together with exaggerated calm.

I blinked. I didn't say anything at first. I stared at him like maybe I misheard.

"Excuse me?" I said, my voice rising before I could stop it. "Apologize? For what, exactly? For sitting next to him like a normal human being?"

Dean Hargrave sighed, already looking exhausted. His fingers came up to pinch the bridge of his nose like I was a headache he couldn't medicate.

"I just sat beside him," I snapped. "That's all. He's the one who went feral. He kicked my seat. I fell on the floor so hard I could've cracked my damn spine. So no, I'm not apologizing."

From the other side of the office, Damon shifted in his leather chair with all the lazy smugness of a cat sunbathing after killing a bird. He didn't even pretend to hide the smirk on his face.

"Sounds accurate," he murmured. "You fall real loud, Velmor. You sure you're not part drama club?"

I whipped my head toward him, eyes narrowing. "You sure your dick still works after I nailed it?"

Dean Hargrave let out a groan, dragging both hands down his face now. "God help me..."

We were seated across from him like middle schoolers sent to the principal's office, only this was college, and the boy beside me wasn't just any brat. He was Damon Darkov. Poison in a hoodie.

He looked like he was enjoying every second of this.

The dean sat forward, voice dipping into that warning tone educators used when they were this close to kicking furniture.

"Miss Velmor. You're new here. You may not understand how things work yet, so let me make this clear."

Great. Here it came. The lecture.

“Mr. Darkov comes from a long-standing family of contributors to this university. His conduct, while not always perfect, is monitored closely. But yours...”

He turned to me, leveling a look I’d seen too many times at too many schools.

“...yours is being watched very carefully. This is your sixth school, isn’t it? You’ve been suspended three times in two years. Fighting. Insulting faculty. Property damage?”

I stiffened in my seat.

“That’s all context,” I said coldly. “You read the paperwork, right? You saw what they did to me first?”

“Regardless,” the dean said, holding up a hand. “You’re on your last chance here. This is a prestigious institution, not a rehabilitation center for impulsive behavior. If you want to stay, you’ll need to learn how to conduct yourself, especially around students like Mr. Darkov.”

Students like Mr. Darkov. There it was. The golden pass.

I turned toward Damon, who was now sitting with one leg crossed over the other, drumming his fingers along the armrest like he was enjoying a silent concert.

“You gonna say anything?” I asked him, my voice clipped.

He tilted his head. “What for? I’m not the one crying about falling out of a chair.”

“You kicked it!”

“And you punched me. Twice.” He gestured to his jaw, where the bruise was just starting to tint purple beneath his cheekbone. “It’s cute that you’re acting like the victim, though.”

My blood boiled.

Dean Hargrave raised both hands again. “Enough. Enough.”

He stood from his desk, straightening his tie like he needed to physically remind himself he was still in charge.

“This is not a circus. Miss Velmor, you will apologize. Right now. You’re a new transfer. You’ve been in my office less than ten minutes and you’re already making a scene. You assaulted a fellow student—”

“He kicked my chair! I fell on the floor so hard I could’ve cracked my skull! He’s the one who started it!”

His jaw tightened. “Regardless, I am telling you to apologize. This university is not your personal fight club.”

Damon, still lounging like a king on the edge of his chair, smirked at me through split lips. Blood stained the corner of his mouth, but his eyes glittered with unholy amusement.

“No,” he drawled lazily, voice rough from the blow but dripping arrogance. “I don’t want her to just apologize. I want her to kiss my feet.”

The air in the office went still.

I gasped, then scoffed so hard it was almost a laugh. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Damon’s smirk deepened. “You think you can just walk into my school, punch me in the face, and walk away clean? No, sweetheart. You’re gonna show some respect.”

I turned to Hargrave, incredulous. “You’re hearing this, right? This isn’t just arrogance. This is... whatever the hell this is!”

The dean pressed his fingers to his temples, eyes closing like he could physically shut out our voices. “Mr. Darkov—”

“I’m serious,” Damon interrupted, tone shifting darker. “She embarrassed me in front of a full class. You want to make it even? Have her on her knees. Right now.”

“Absolutely not,” I snapped, my voice sharp enough to cut glass. “You’re insane.”

Damon leaned forward, elbows on his knees, gaze burning into mine. “You’re lucky I don’t drag you outside myself and—”

“That’s enough,” Hargrave barked, slamming a hand on his desk. The sound snapped the air in two.

We both went quiet, but our eyes stayed locked, his full of hate, mine full of fire.

Hargrave took a long, slow breath, massaging his forehead as if to soothe a migraine. “I’ve been doing this job for twenty-two years,” he muttered. “And I have never seen two students behave like this on the first day.”

He pointed at me, his voice hissing now, the frustration boiling over. “Miss Velmor. You will not escalate this further. You will apologize. You will de-escalate this situation or you will leave my school before you’ve even unpacked your bag. Do you understand?”

I stared back at him, my pulse a drum in my ears. “Why should I be the only one apologizing?”

“Because you are the transfer. Because you are on probation. Because I am giving you a chance to stay,” he snapped.

Damon chuckled low under his breath, leaning back in his chair like a predator watching prey squirm. “Hear that, Velmor? Even the dean knows your place.”

I shot him a glare. “Keep talking, Darkov. One day your daddy’s money won’t be here to save you.”

His eyes flared, but he didn’t lunge. He just smiled, a slow, dangerous baring of teeth. “One day, Velmor, you’ll learn what happens to people who defy me.”

I straightened in my chair, tilting my chin high, voice even. “If this school wants to expel me for not kissing some entitled asshole’s feet, go ahead. But I won’t apologize for defending myself.”

Damon’s jaw ticked. He glared at me so hard it was like heat coming off a fire.

“You’re so fucking hard-headed, huh?” he spat, voice low but violent. “You just don’t know when to shut up.”

I glared right back, every nerve in my body screaming not to give him the satisfaction. The air between us crackled like a live wire. I could hear the clock ticking on the dean’s wall, steady and loud.

Dean Hargrave pinched the bridge of his nose again, his shoulders slumping as if the weight of both of us had crushed him in his chair. When he spoke again, his voice wasn’t sharp anymore. It was quiet. Almost pleading.

“Miss Velmor…” he said, leaning forward, palms spread flat on the desk. “Please. Just apologize. We can resolve this right here and now. No hearings. No suspensions. Please.”

His eyes met mine and for a second I saw fear. Whoever Damon Darkov belonged to, whatever family he came from, they were powerful enough to make a dean of a prestigious university look like a man begging for his job.

I gritted my teeth. God, I’m so tired. It’s too early for this. Just get it over with.

I sighed through my nose, turning my head slightly, voice coming out a hiss.

“Fine. I’m sorry,” I said flatly, like spitting out a stone.

Damon’s smirk returned instantly, curling slow and wicked. “Oh no,” he drawled, leaning back in his chair. “That’s not what I asked for. I said I want you to kiss my feet.”

I stared at Damon, my jaw locked. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

He smiled wider, all teeth. “You want to stay? Show some respect. On your knees.”

For a moment I didn’t breathe. I could feel Hargrave’s eyes on me. I could feel how much he wanted me to just do it, to make it go away. The humiliation burned hotter than any bruise.

Just a kiss, right? I thought. Just to end it.

I knelt slowly, every muscle in my body trembling with rage. My hoodie fell forward, hair sliding over my face like a curtain. The smell of his cologne hit me even from down here. My fists clenched at my sides as I leaned forward and pressed my lips, quick and hard, to the toe of his rubber shoe.

Damon laughed, a low, ugly sound, and shifted his foot just enough to make me stumble back.

“Good girl,” he sneered. “Maybe you can be trained after all. Strip you of that attitude, pull that leash tight, yeah, I think you’d break real pretty.”

He leaned down just slightly, lowering his voice to a whisper meant only for me. “You think this is the bottom? You’ve got a lot more floor to kiss before I’m done with you. Crawl faster next time, Velmor.”

My face burned red. Shame. Rage. Fury. All of it coiled inside me, waiting for the right moment to strike back. But I swallowed it, stood, and met his eyes without a word.

He looked at me a second longer, like he was testing whether I’d break before he turned on his heel and headed for the door.