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Leilanna's POV

Darkov.

The name itself carried weight like iron chains disguised as gold. Out of curiosity, I'd done my homework. I'd pulled up every article, every blog, every business magazine I could find.

Real estate empires. Luxury cruise lines. Half the malls in the city. Hotels, logistics, even a media company. The Darkovs weren't rich. They were an institution. They didn't just own companies. They owned people. They built the playground and sold the swings.

And Damon? The golden heir, born into it all. No wonder he thought so high of himself. He wasn't just some cocky campus bad boy. He was a prince who'd been raised to believe the entire kingdom owed him a bow.

Two months at this school and I'd seen it firsthand. The way doors opened when he walked by. The way people shut up mid-sentence, even teachers, when his voice cut in. The frat parties, the whispers about his family's lawyers making inconvenient problems "go away." He was the king here and he ruled like one.

And every time I saw him, I wanted to strangle his neck.

I tugged my hood tighter as I walked toward the library, my bag heavy with books and frustration. Exams were coming up. I was supposed to be focusing on political theory and statistics.

But no matter how hard I tried, Damon Darkov was a splinter I couldn't pull out.

I heard a sound that didn't belong on a quiet Thursday morning. I slowed my steps, furrowing my brows. The library was still a hundred feet away. The sound was coming from behind the old math building, the one with the broken window on the side no one used anymore.

I hesitated. I could've kept walking. Instead, I turned and followed the sound.

It led me to a narrow passage behind the building, shadowed by overhanging trees. The smell of damp earth clung to the air. The closer I got, the clearer the sounds became, pleading, whimpering, words tumbling over each other.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Damon. I won't do it again, I swear, please!"

My stomach clenched.

I rounded the corner and stopped.

There were at least four men, three standing off to the side like silent guards, and one kneeling on the ground, his hands up like a supplicant at an altar. His face was streaked with tears and blood, his suit jacket torn at the shoulder.

And in front of him, the man he was begging to.

Damon Darkov.

He was in a black shirt with sleeves rolled to his elbows, tattoos faint under his skin. His fists were clenched, his hair slightly mussed like he'd already been at this a while. His eyes were cold, flat, utterly focused on the man kneeling before him.

"Please," the man sobbed again, clutching at Damon's pant leg. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. I'll pay back the money, just, please..."

Damon's lip curled.

"Too late for that," he said, voice low, almost bored. "You don't steal from me. Ever."

Before the man could respond, Damon's fist shot out. A clean punch to the side of the man's jaw. The crack echoed off the building like a gunshot. The man collapsed sideways, groaning.

Damon stepped forward and kicked him in the ribs. Once. Twice.

"I told you what would happen," he hissed, his voice finally showing a spark of anger. "You thought I was bluffing?"

The man rolled over, clutching his side, coughing blood. "I'm sorry, please!"

"What the fuck are you doing?" I shouted, storming into the alley before my brain caught up with my mouth.

Damon froze mid-step. Slowly, he turned toward me.

His eyes locked on mine.

"Velmor," he said, voice flat. "Not your business."

"Not my business?" I snapped, fists clenched at my sides. "You're out here beating someone half to death in broad daylight like it's a hobby, and I'm supposed to just walk away?"

The three men at the edges exchanged glances but didn't move. They were waiting, watching to see what Damon would do.

He stepped toward me, slow and deliberate, wiping his knuckles on a handkerchief like I'd interrupted a lunch break, not a beating.

"You shouldn't be here," he said quietly.

"Go to hell," I spat. "You think being rich gives you the right to beat people bloody behind buildings?"

His eyes hardened. "You don't know what this is."

"I don't care!" I took another step closer, anger buzzing under my skin. "I've watched you strut around this campus for two months like you're some goddamn king. And this..." I gestured to the man sobbing on the ground. "This is what you are. A thug in designer shoes!"

A muscle in his jaw ticked. He took another step toward me, closing the distance until I could smell his cologne over the blood and sweat.

"You've got a death wish, Velmor. Can't keep your nose out of what isn't yours? Haven't figured out what happens to people who cross me—"

I didn't let him finish. I spat. Right in his face.

The world seemed to go quiet for a second. Even the man on the ground stopped sobbing. Damon froze, saliva sliding down his cheek.

Then, very slowly, he wiped it off with the back of his hand.

When his eyes lifted to mine again, they weren't cold anymore. They were red. Alive. Dangerous.

"You're dead," he hissed.

His hand shot out faster than I could react. The slap cracked across my face, snapping my head to the side. My cheek burned hot, the taste of copper touched my tongue.

For a heartbeat I saw red. My vision narrowed. My fist shot up, aiming for his jaw.

But he caught my wrist mid-swing, fingers locking around it like iron. Before I could yank free, he twisted, using my momentum to spin me around. My back slammed against his chest, his arm snaking around my middle, pinning me.

I struggled, but his grip was like steel. His breath was hot against my ear.

“You don’t get it,” he hissed, voice low, rough, inches from my skin. “You don’t ever spit in my face.”

I bucked against him, twisting, but he only tightened his hold. My heart hammered against my ribs, anger and adrenaline tangled so tight I could barely breathe.

“Let me go,” I snarled. “Or I swear—”

“Swear what?” he cut in, voice like gravel. “You’ll hit me again? You’ll kick me? You’ll make me bleed in front of my own men?”

His arm shifted higher, pinning my wrists together just under my chest, the hard plane of his body like a wall at my back.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with, Velmor,” he whispered at my ear. “You don’t know what this is, what I am, what happens to people who cross me.”

“I don’t care,” I spat back, breath shaky but words sharp. “You’re just a bully with a bank account.”

He laughed in my ear.

A low, dark sound that crawled under my skin like oil. It vibrated through his chest into my back, making the hairs on my arms stand up.

“You know what I think, Velmor?” he whispered. “I think you like this.”

My stomach turned cold. “Get off me.”

“I think you like me looking at you. Talking to you. Pinning you.” His breath was hot against my neck, words soft and vile. “You don’t come charging at me because you’re righteous. You do it because you’re desperate for my attention.”

I gasped, and pushed back hard against him. “You’re delusional!”

“Don’t think I don’t see through you,” he hissed, voice low and jagged. “The way you run your mouth like a brat who just wants to get punished. You’re starving for me to drag you somewhere dark, rip that attitude right out of you, and fuck you so hard you finally shut that pretty mouth. That’s what you want, isn’t it? You want my attention so bad you’ll bleed for it, humiliate yourself for it. You’re just a needy little slut hiding behind a loud mouth.”

My breath tore out of me like fire.

Begging for him?

Wanting his attention?

Wanting him to fuck me?

“You…” My voice cracked. “You filthy, delusional piece of shit. I would rather die! I would rather throw myself off the highest building on this campus than let you touch me!”

His lips brushed close to my ear again, almost a ghost of a touch. “Tell me you don’t imagine it at night,” he whispered. “Tell me you don’t picture me pressing you against a wall and—”

“Shut. Up!” I yelled, twisting so hard my elbow jammed into his ribs.

He hissed and his grip loosened just enough for me to spin out of his arms. I stumbled back, heart hammering, fists balled at my sides.

“You’re so fucking delusional!” I shouted. My voice cracked with fury. “You think every woman who won’t bow to you just wants to sleep with you? You think your money makes you a mind reader? Newsflash, Darkov, not everyone wants to be one of your broken toys! I don’t want your attention! I want you to stop acting like a goddamn tyrant in a hoodie! You don’t scare me! You disgust me!”

Damon smirked, then without breaking eye contact with me, he kicked the man’s face again. A sickening thud cracked the air. The guy cried out, collapsing fully onto the concrete, blood smearing down his chin as he whimpered.

“Damon!” I shouted, stepping between them. “What the hell is wrong with you?!”

Damon just tilted his head slightly, still watching me like I was something beneath his shoe.

“Don’t get all heroic now, Velmor,” he drawled, voice full of mockery. “He’s just another worm who thought he could mess with my name. You’d be surprised how many lessons people need around here.”

I dropped to my knees beside the bleeding guy. He was shaking, eyes dazed but open, trying to speak through split lips.

“Hey,” I said gently, brushing a hand over his shoulder. “Can you walk?”

He tried nodding but grimaced instead, groaning as he lifted his arm with difficulty.

“You need to get out of here,” I muttered. “Come on. I’ll help you.”

Behind me, Damon gave a short, condescending laugh. “Aww,” he mocked. “Look at you, Leilanna the savior. What’s next? Gonna start a campus charity for all the sad little shits I ruin?”

I ignored him. The guy on the ground clutched at my sleeve, trying to rise. He was tall, but Damon’s blows had knocked the strength out of him. His legs wobbled as I helped him sit upright.

“I said come on,” I urged him.

Damon’s boots scraped the pavement as he stepped closer behind me. “I don’t know what’s more pathetic,” he sneered. “Him, crying in the dirt. Or you, acting like anyone here gives a shit what you think.”

I turned slowly.

His soldiers, those jacked-up bastards who followed him everywhere like loyal guard dogs, were standing off to the side. Watching. Smirking. Not one of them looked surprised.

I looked back at Damon. “You know what’s really pathetic?” I said quietly. “You. Thinking power is fear. That if people tremble, it means you’ve won.”

He leaned in slightly, eyes gleaming with a challenge. “Fear is control. And control means they don’t fuck with what’s mine.”

“And who exactly is ‘yours’?” I spat. “People? This school? What? Everything the light touches, Simba?”

One of the soldiers coughed to stifle a laugh. Damon shot him a glare that shut it down instantly.

“You’re walking a razor’s edge, Velmor,” Damon hissed. “You think this school’s gonna save you? That you can mouth off and walk away clean? You don’t know how deep this runs.”

“I don’t care how deep your daddy’s wallet is,” I snapped. “You lay one more finger on anyone like this, and I swear I’ll find a way to bring you down.”

He stared at me for a moment. And for a terrifying second, I thought he might hit me again.

Instead, he smiled. Then he turned to his soldiers and nodded. “Let’s go. This bitch just made things more interesting.”

As he walked away, he threw a final remark over his shoulder. “See you in class, Velmor. Try not to drool.”