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Leilanna's POV

"Did you hear? The Sigma boys are throwing their Masquerade Night next week. Biggest one this year," Sera said, her voice cutting through the chatter around the school field.

Monica nodded. "Yeah, everyone's talking about it. I heard even students from Eastbridge and Saint Lyra are invited. Total chaos incoming."

I didn't look up from my notebook. The wind brushed over the grass, carrying faint sounds from the soccer team practicing nearby. The sun was hot, my patience hotter. I was still burning from what Damon had pulled last week.

That stupid, humiliating stunt.

That fake kidnapping.

That bastard thought fear was funny.

The last week had been a loop of anger and insomnia, the memory of that night replaying in flashes I couldn't turn off. The ropes on my wrists. The sound of his voice through that ski mask. The smug, cold smirk when he revealed himself.

Every time I saw him on campus, my blood simmered.

He walked like he owned the air we breathed. And worse, everyone else seemed to agree.

Sera nudged me. "You should come, Leil. It's open to everyone, even non-members. They say the theme this year's Royal Decadence. Masks, champagne, all that."

"Yeah," Monica chimed in, grinning. "It's at the Sigma mansion. You have to see it. They're transforming the whole place. Chandeliers, silk drapes like some twisted fairytale."

I closed my notebook with a snap. "Why are you two telling me this?"

"Because," Sera said with exaggerated patience, "you never go anywhere. You live in hoodies and murder eyes. Come on, one night won't kill you."

Monica leaned closer, teasing. "And maybe we'll finally see you in something that isn't gray or denim."

I raised an eyebrow. “You make it sound like a fashion intervention.”

“Maybe it is,” Sera said. “Please, just say you’ll go. You could use some fun.”

Fun.

I wasn’t sure I remembered what that even felt like.

Sera and Monica were watching me expectantly.

Suddenly, an idea slid into my brain. I didn’t know if it would work, but I knew exactly what I wanted: payback.

“I don’t know, you guys,” I said, letting my voice wobble like some fragile thing. “Parties... make me anxious. Crowds, noise. I just...” I let the words trail, let the pity build.

They exchanged looks, the ones friends do when they mean it’s okay. Sera’s hand went to my shoulder, soft and rehearsed. “We get it, Leil. Honestly. We don’t want to push you if you’re not comfortable.”

Monica nodded, eyes all sympathy. “Yeah. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. We’ll still go.”

“Thanks,” I said, voice low. “Really.” I left it at that and watched the way their faces relaxed. They meant every word. And I meant none of it.

When I got home that day to that ridiculous house, too big for one and noisy in its own silence, I went straight for the closet like someone gearing up for war.

I hunted until I found what I wanted. It wasn’t the hoodie and jeans I lived in ninety percent of the time. This was something else entirely: black silk that kissed the body and left little to the imagination, a slit that flirted with danger, a back cut so low it begged for eyes to travel it. Daring. Dangerous. The kind of dress that read look at me in a language everyone knew.

I don’t know if this will work, but at least I tried. I’ve never worn clothes like this before, but I’ll do it once. Just for revenge.

The days crawled by just the same, Damon Darkov playing his usual part as the arrogant, spoiled prince of the campus. He was surrounded by girls, flashing that infuriating smirk, laughing too loud, touching too casually.

He was untouchable. Unbothered.

And it made my blood boil.

Every time his name came up in a conversation, every time someone sighed about how hot he was, it burned in me like poison.

Until the night came.

The Fraternity Masquerade Night.

Sera and Monica thought I wasn't coming and that's exactly how I wanted it. But there I was, standing in front of my mirror, makeup brush trembling in my hand. I hadn't done this in years, eyeliner, lipstick, shimmering powder that caught the light. My reflection almost startled me. It didn't look like me.

My long hair was curled and pinned loosely to one side. My skin looked too soft, too exposed under the warm light.

Then came the dress.

Black.

Tight.

Dangerous.

When I slipped it on, the fabric clung to every curve I'd spent my whole life trying to hide. My cleavage spilled more than I'd ever dare show, the neckline dipping scandalously low. The back was cut deep, the slit climbing up my thigh with every small movement.

I froze, staring at myself.

The dress fit too well. Too perfectly.

And I hated it.

I hated how it made me look, how it reminded me of the body I never asked for. The body people stared at before they even looked at me. My chest. My hips. My ass. All of it. Too much. Too visible.

I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

My throat tightened, my reflection warping slightly as I whispered to myself,

"You can do this, Leil. No one's gonna recognize you. You're wearing a mask."

I picked up the mask, sleek black lace with silver edges, delicate and sharp. It covered just enough to make me unrecognizable but left my lips were visible.

I fastened it behind my head, the ribbons brushing my neck, and took one last look in the mirror.

A stranger stared back at me, confident, cold, untouchable.

But behind her eyes, I could still see the girl who hated everything about herself.

I grabbed my phone, slipped it into the tiny black clutch that barely fit it, and squared my shoulders.

“This is it,” I muttered. “You’re gonna make Damon Darkov remember your name.”

Then I turned off the lights and stepped out into the night, ready to turn his perfect world upside down.

I slid behind the wheel of the black car.

It wasn’t the one I usually drove to school. No one would recognize this one.

The streets were alive that night, headlights streaking by as I drove toward the venue. I’d seen the flyers, the social media posts, the endless countdowns. Everyone wanted to be there. Everyone wanted to be seen.

And tonight, I would make sure he saw me.

When I pulled up to the entrance, the place looked like something out of a movie. The frat’s rented mansion sat glowing at the edge of the city, golden lights spilling from tall windows, bass-heavy music vibrating through the ground. Cars lined the circular driveway, each one more expensive than the last.

A valet opened my door, and I nodded, stepping out into the cool night air.

The mask was already in place.

Half of my face hidden.

Half of me unknown.

And that was the point.

I walked up the marble steps, heels clicking against the stone, my black dress catching the light with every step. The moment I crossed the threshold, I felt it.

Heads turning.

Conversations pausing.

Eyes tracking me.

The ballroom was stunning, chandeliers dripping with crystal, gold and crimson drapes, people dancing under dim lights and flickering spotlights that cast shadows across masked faces. The air was thick with perfume, alcohol, and heat.

And suddenly, I realized just how many people were staring.

Some men whistled low under their breath.

Others nudged each other, whispering.

A few girls turned their heads, whispering behind their masks, pretending not to stare.

“Who’s that?”

“She’s so fucking hot.”

“Damn, look at that body.”

“Never seen her before. She must be from another campus.”

My throat tightened, but I lifted my chin higher, forcing a small smirk onto my lips. The mask made me brave. It was like armor. No one could see me, only what I let them.

The music was low and pulsing, something sensual and heavy that made the air hum. The room was dark except for the golden chandeliers and the flashes of colored lights that rippled across the dance floor.

I needed a spot. Somewhere perfect for what I had planned.

At the far end of the ballroom, past the dance floor and behind a set of heavy velvet curtains, I noticed a door slightly ajar. People passed by it without a glance, too drunk or too busy trying to impress someone. I slipped through it quietly.

It led to a dimly lit storage area, stacked cases of champagne, extra chairs, boxes of party supplies. It smelled faintly of wood and expensive liquor. Perfect.

“This is for you, Damon,” I whispered, a smirk curving my lips and turned back toward the ballroom.

I found an empty table near the back, where shadows covered most of the light. From there, I could see everything, the bar, the dance floor, the staircase, and the clusters of frat boys laughing too loud.

And then... there he was.

Damon Darkov.

Even with his mask on, I'd know him anywhere.

The way he stood, relaxed, confident, surrounded by people who practically orbited him. His black shirt was slightly open at the collar, sleeves rolled up, a black half-mask framing his sharp jaw and that infuriatingly perfect smirk.

He was talking to someone, a blonde in a shimmering silver dress, leaning too close, laughing at every stupid thing he said. His hand brushed her hip and she giggled.

Someone brushed past me, bumping my shoulder slightly.

"Sorry," a voice said, and I turned to see a guy with a mask shaped like a raven's beak grinning at me. "Didn't mean to, gorgeous."

I gave him a small, polite smile, the kind that said don't talk to me again, and he seemed to get the message, walking away.

I took another sip from the drink the waiter had placed in front of me earlier, champagne, cold and sharp and glanced back toward Damon.

His laugh cut through the music. Deep, confident, careless.

It made my skin crawl.

I stood slowly, adjusting my mask, smoothing down the dress that still made me feel too exposed. My heels clicked softly against the marble as I walked toward the bar. I could feel people watching again, eyes following the movement of my hips, my hair, my mask, but I didn't meet their gazes.

And as if the universe wanted to play along, Damon's gaze finally landed on me.

He froze mid-laugh, his hand still on the blonde's waist.

I saw that split second of surprise.

Then curiosity.

Then something darker.

His smirk returned. He said something to his friend, who laughed, and then he excused himself, eyes never leaving me as he crossed the room.

My pulse quickened.

He stopped in front of me, tall and smug and far too sure of himself. He was standing right in front of me, eyes tracing my every move like I was prey he'd already marked.

I lifted my chin, forcing a small, easy smirk, even though my pulse thudded like a drum in my ears.

"Well," he said, voice low and smooth, "this is interesting. I don't think I've seen you before."

He leaned closer, studying me through the dim light and the gold patterns of my mask. "What school are you from, gorgeous?"

I made sure to drop my tone an octave lower, soft but firm. "St. Martin's."

"St. Martin's, huh?" His smirk deepened, his gaze flicking over me in a way that burned. "Figures. I would've remembered if I'd seen you before."

I smiled faintly, the perfect blend of shy and teasing. "Maybe I don't usually go to parties like this. I just thought I'd try... something new."

He grinned, clearly charmed and fully hooked. "Then lucky me." His hand extended toward me, open and confident. "Dance with me."

I hesitated just long enough to make him think he had to earn it, then slipped my hand into his. His palm was warm, rough, steady.

The music pulsed around us, slower now, heavier. He led me toward the center of the room, bodies shifting aside to make space. The air thickened, heat, perfume, laughter, curiosity. I could feel eyes on us as we moved to the rhythm.

He placed a hand on my waist, just above the curve of my hip, and I nearly flinched. But I kept the act, smiled, moved closer, played my role.

"So," he murmured, leaning in, breath brushing my ear, "do all St. Martin's girls dance like this, or just the mysterious ones who sneak into frat parties?"

I laughed lightly, tilting my head toward him. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

His fingers flexed against my waist. "I would. Very much."

I met his eyes through the mask, heart pounding. "Then maybe you'll find out later."

He smirked, slow, dangerous, hungry. "I like the sound of that."

Oh, Damon.

Perfect. Arrogant. Predictable.

I let him lead the dance, let him think he was in control. Every step, every touch, every glance was a move in the game I had already planned.

When the song ended, he leaned close again. “You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” I said, smirking. “But surprises are only fun if you earn them.”

He chuckled low, eyes gleaming. “Challenge accepted.”

He was so near I could smell him. That intoxicating, addictive scent I hated admitting I liked. His palm settled against my waist, heavy and confident. I slid my hand up to the back of his neck, fingers brushing the warmth there, and let the touch be my invitation.

“Want to have some real fun tonight?” I asked, voice soft and deliberately sultry.

His grin widened, eager. “Now?”

I nodded, pressing the advantage. “There’s a storage room over there. Take me there now.”

He swore under his breath, then took my hand and guided me through the crowd toward the little door I’d scoped out exactly where my plan was waiting.