

Chapter 11

The sharp scent of burning sugar hit Kaelani's nose a second too late. She whipped the oven door open, coughing as smoke curled out in a bitter wave. The tray of croissants, once golden and perfect, was now blackened beyond saving.

***"Damn it," she muttered, sliding them out and clattering the tray onto the stovetop.**

Tessa looked up from the table where she was filling the napkin dispenser. Her brows arched high. "That's the second one this week." She tipped her head, studying Kaelani. "You good?"

***"I'm fine," Kaelani said quickly—maybe too quickly—grabbing a towel to wave the smoke away.**

Tessa's look was skeptical, but before she could press further, the front bell jingled. A delivery guy stepped in, tall and broad-shouldered, a crate balanced easily in his arms. Tessa's expression flipped in an instant—eyes bright, smile coy.

***"Hey, Ryan," she chirped, leaning a little too far over the counter as he set the crate down.**

***"Afternoon, Tess," he returned with an easy grin.**

Her lips pursed, teasing. "You didn't call."

**He winced faintly, scratching the back of his neck. "Yeah, sorry about that. Work's been a mess." His grin returned, smoother this time. "But

hey—we're all heading to the pub tonight. Just a few of us, nothing big. You should come."**

Tessa's smile bloomed again. "Maybe I will."

He gave her a wink before heading out, the door jingling shut behind him.

The second he was gone, Tessa turned back to Kaelani, practically glowing. "Please come with me. Please. I cannot show up alone and look like some desperate loser when I really like him."

Kaelani smirked faintly, sliding the ruined tray into the sink. "You like him? He's got fuckboy written all over him."

"Oh, so it's only acceptable to fuck the rich fuckboys?" The words landed sharper than Tessa meant them to.

A flicker of something crossed Kaelani's eyes. She turned back to the sink, busying her hands, but the heaviness lingered in her chest.

Tessa's face softened instantly. "Shit. I didn't mean it like that." She nudged Kaelani's shoulder gently. "Look, just come with me. It'll be good for you. Music, drinks, actual people. You might even enjoy yourself."

Kaelani forced a tight smile, shaking her head. "I don't really—"

"Don't even try me," Tessa warned, wagging a finger playfully. "You've been wound tighter than a drum lately. You're coming."

**Kaelani sighed, wiping her hands on her apron. Her chest still felt tight, unsettled, though she hid behind the mask she'd learned to wear so well. "

"We'll see," she muttered. But Tessa was already beaming like she'd won.*

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By the time the bakery lights were switched off and the door locked behind them, Kaelani knew she'd lost the argument. Tessa's pleading had worked its way under her guard, and now here she was, back home, standing in her bathroom with the shower hissing behind her.

Steam clung to the mirror as Kaelani swiped her hand across the glass, the reflection that stared back at her sharp in the hazy frame. Drops of water trailed down her shoulders as she dragged the comb through her long hair, each pull steady, mechanical.

Then her gaze snagged on the mark.

A dark crescent etched against the pale curve of her neck, faintly bruised, still stubbornly visible. Her body tensed. A week had passed—long enough for it to have faded into nothing—but no. The damn thing clung like a brand, refusing to let her forget.

Her fingers grazed it before she could stop herself, the skin still slightly tender beneath her touch. A bitter laugh escaped her. "Of course," she muttered under her breath. "You couldn't just ruin me quietly. You had to leave something behind."

The comb hit the counter with a clatter. She didn't want his mark. She didn't want the reminder. Not of the way his body had consumed hers, or the way he'd dismissed her like she was nothing afterward. She wanted it gone. Every trace of him gone.

Kaelani drew a long breath, forcing her shoulders back. She slipped into a simple black dress—nothing fancy, but it hugged her curves enough that Tessa wouldn't accuse her of being a nun at the pub. Sliding a bracelet onto her wrist, she squared her reflection with a look that said she could face the night ahead.

Even if that mark burned like a lie against her skin.

She stepped outside, locking the door behind her. Evening air cooled her damp hair, carrying the hum of voices down the street. Lights from porches and storefronts flickered warm against the darkening sky.

The glances started almost immediately. Neighbors pausing mid-step, conversations faltering. Two women perched on a bench leaned close, voices dropping as Kaelani passed.

***"Would've never taken her for a screamer," one whispered, stifling a laugh.**

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