

Chapter 12

Heat burned her cheeks, but she kept walking, shoulders squared. A man walking his dog gave her a polite nod, but she caught the smirk tugging at his mouth before he looked away.

She was used to it—stares, whispers, words meant to cut. She'd grown up under their weight, carried them like stones. But tonight, it felt heavier. For five years she'd lived free of scorn, built a life without judgment. Now it was back—sharp, merciless—and all the harder to bear.

Kaelani quickened her pace, fixing her eyes on the glowing sign of the pub ahead.

The pub was already alive when Kaelani pushed through the door, a low hum of conversation layered over clinking glasses and the thrum of music from the jukebox in the corner. Warm light spilled across worn wood floors, the air thick with hops and fried food.

Tessa spotted her instantly from a booth near the back, waving her over with both arms like Kaelani might somehow miss her. Ryan and a couple of his friends were already there, pints in hand, laughing at something Kaelani couldn't catch.

"Finally!" Tessa beamed as Kaelani slid into the seat beside her. "I was about to send a search party."

Kaelani gave a faint smile, tugging her jacket tighter around her shoulders. The noise, the press of people, the curious glances—it all scraped at her nerves. She wasn't built for this. Not anymore.

Ryan leaned forward from across the table, his grin easy. "Glad you made it. Tessa always says you're too busy working."

"She exaggerates," Kaelani replied smoothly, though her hands twisted in her lap beneath the table.

Tessa nudged her with a wicked little smile. "Don't let her fool you. She needs a night of fun."

Kaelani forced a small laugh, though it didn't reach her eyes. All she needed was for the night to pass quickly—without more whispers, without more stares.

Still, one drink turned into two, and by the time Ryan ordered a round of shots, she let the burn slide down without protest. The hum in her chest eased the knot of tension she always carried.

When Tessa challenged her to a game of pool, Kaelani surprised herself by saying yes. Even more surprising—she was good. Really good. Her cue cracked sharp against the ball, sinking shots one after another with calm precision.

"Damn," Ryan whistled. "Hustler energy."

Tessa laughed, proud. "Told you."

The game stretched on, Kaelani cool and collected with every shot. She felt the weight of eyes on her, though—Ryan's friend lingering a beat too long, his gaze shameless as she bent over the table. She ignored it, chalking her cue, sinking another ball.



A few more drinks later, the music swelled, and Tessa dragged Ryan onto the dance floor. Kaelani hesitated, but the liquor made her bold enough to follow. Bodies moved, the bass thrumming through the floorboards, her head light. For the first time in too long, she almost felt... normal.

She swayed with the rhythm, letting herself forget, if only for a moment. That's when he slid in beside her—Ryan's friend. At first, just close. Then closer. His chest brushed her back, his hips pressing into hers in time with the beat.

She went along with it for a breath, the liquor making her careless. Until his hands crept higher. From her hips, up her waist, brushing the curve of her breast.

Kaelani froze. The burn of alcohol in her veins soured. She shoved him back, spinning to face him.

His grin twisted. "What's your problem? Don't you like it?" He leaned in, voice sharp and ugly. "Or do you only spread your legs for men in expensive suits? I'll pay, if that's what it takes."

A ripple of laughter broke out around them—sharp, brutal, cutting straight through the music. A few heads turned from nearby tables, eyes gleaming with judgment.

Kaelani's breath caught, her chest tightening. Everywhere she looked, someone was smirking, whispering, or outright laughing. The composure she wore like armor faltered, slipping just enough for the sting to show.



“You’re a fucking asshole!” Tessa snapped, shoving herself between them. Her voice cut through the noise like a blade.

“Hey, be cool,” Ryan added quickly, stepping forward, though his tone carried more appeasement than anger.

Ryan’s friend only sneered. “What? I’m just saying what everyone’s already thinking. Looks like we’ve got ourselves a new town whore.”

The laughter doubled, meaner this time, echoing off the walls.

Kaelani’s throat burned, shame rising like bile. Without another word, she turned and pushed through the crowd, the sound of their laughter chasing her like hounds.

“Kaelani, wait!” Tessa called after her, voice sharp with worry.

But Kaelani didn’t stop. She couldn’t.

