

## Chapter 7

\*\*The bell above the bakery door jingled as Kaelani slipped inside, heart pounding like she'd run the whole way. She spotted Tessa behind the counter, dusted in flour, sliding a tray of pastries into the display.\*\*

\*\*"Tess, I'm so sorry," Kaelani blurted, rushing forward. "I should've called, I should've—"\*\*

\*\*Tessa cut her off with a wave, barely looking up. "Relax. I've been holding it down." She dusted her hands on her apron, finally meeting Kaelani's gaze. "Sales dipped, sure. People can tell when it's not your magic touch, but I did my best."\*\*

\*\*Kaelani opened her mouth, but Tessa's lips curved into a sly grin. "Told them you were sick," she added, making air quotes with her flour-smudged fingers and throwing in a deliberate wink.\*\*

\*\*Kaelani frowned. "...What's with the winking?"\*\*

\*\*"Oh, come on." Tessa leaned on the counter, eyes glittering with mischief. "I went by your place the other day when you didn't answer your phone. And guess who opened the door?"\*\*

\*\*Kaelani's stomach flipped. "Tessa—"\*\*

\*\*"Six-foot-something, built like a god, dripping sweat, and—" she spread her hands, grin feral—"packing a monster cock like I've never seen outside of porn."\*\*

**\*\*Kaelani's face went up in flames.\*\***

**\*\*"And the best part?" Tessa pressed, eyes dancing. "He basically told me to fuck off. Growled it, actually. Looked like he was about two seconds away from bending you over the nearest surface."\*\***

**\*\*"Oh God," Kaelani muttered, wishing the floorboards would swallow her whole.\*\***

**\*\*"And," Tessa went on mercilessly, "Mrs. Donnelly from across the street told me you two had been at it all day and night. Didn't even bother lowering her voice, either."\*\***

**\*\*Kaelani dragged a hand down her face. "For fuck's sake... did the whole neighborhood hear us?"\*\***

**\*\*It would explain the looks she got this morning when she finally stepped out of her house. A few neighbors had smiled too knowingly. One old man had even tipped his hat. At the time, she thought nothing of it. Now, the heat rushing to her cheeks told her everything.\*\***

**\*\*Tessa leaned on the counter, chin propped on her hand, grin positively wicked. "So... do I get to officially meet this guy?"\*\***

**\*\*Kaelani shot her a flat look. "It's not what you think."\*\***

**\*\*"Ohhh." Tessa's brows shot up. "So a one-night stand? Never took you for the hook-up type. Guess you finally listened to me and got laid." She smirked, eyes glittering. "Now come on—spill. What's a cock like that**

even feel like? Because, girl, I don't know how you're walking straight."\*\*

\*\*Kaelani nearly choked on air. "Enough, Tess." Her voice came out sharper than intended. She cleared her throat, softening it just a fraction. "It's not—" She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about it."\*\*

\*\*Something flickered across Tessa's face—surprise, maybe even guilt—but she didn't push. She just gave a little shrug and turned back to the register.\*\*

\*\*Kaelani slipped into the kitchen, the hum of the ovens and the familiar scent of spices and sugar wrapping around her like a shield. Here, at least, she could breathe.\*\*

\*\*Baking had always been her refuge. Back in the pack, when she was just a lowly omega, it was the only place she was trusted to be of use. Scrubbing pans, kneading dough, fetching trays until her arms ached. They treated her as nothing—less than nothing—but in the quiet rhythm of measuring, stirring, and shaping, she found something they couldn't touch.

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\*\*She wasn't anyone's daughter. She wasn't a wolf. She wasn't worth a second glance. But when she baked, she disappeared into the work, losing herself in the steady motions, the way raw ingredients transformed into something golden, warm, and whole.\*\*

\*\*It had been her peace then. And it was her peace now.\*\*

\*\*Tessa wiped her hands on her apron, eyes drifting to the front window. Across the street, the hotel doors swung open. Jace stepped out first, posture sharp and efficient, scanning the street as though even now he was working.\*\*

\*\*Then Julian followed. He was impossible to miss—broad shoulders, commanding presence, the kind of man who drew the eye without trying. He adjusted his cufflinks with cool precision, face unreadable.\*\*

\*\*The valet jogged to bring their car around, sleek and black. Julian stood waiting, gaze fixed forward, not once turning his head toward the bakery. Not a glance. Not even the flicker of consideration that something—or someone—might be watching.\*\*

\*\*The car rolled to a stop. Jace opened the back door for him, and Julian slid inside, every line of him composed, distant, untouchable. A moment later, Jace joined him, and the sedan eased away from the curb.\*\*

\*\*Tessa's brow furrowed as she turned back to the kitchen. Kaelani was bent over her work, kneading dough with focused intensity, as though nothing else in the world existed.\*\*

\*\*Something didn't add up. Kaelani had always brushed off men in this town—charming ones, persistent ones—who would have showered her with flowers the very next day if she'd given them half a chance. A one-night stand wasn't her style. And that man across the street? He didn't look like the type to leave without leaving some kind of mark.\*\*