

His Kickass 111

Chapter 111

Abby

Chloe leaving sends me into a spiral.

Hot tears begin to prick at the backs of my eyes as I watch her fading form. Some of my other employees are starting to trickle in, with Daisy at the helm, who nearly ran face-first into the slamming door as Chloe brushed past her without so much as a greeting.

“Geez,” Daisy says, swinging the door open with a confused look on her face. Her ankle is all wrapped up in an Ace bandage, but she seems much better after she rolled it. Ethan comes in behind her. I’ve noticed recently that the two of them seem thick as thieves, but I pretend not to notice. It’s sweet, but it’s not my business.

Daisy jerks her head toward Chloe as she approaches the bar. “What’s her problem?”

I shake my head and try to steady myself over my coffee. “Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Daisy, picking up what I’m implying, scurries past to the back room without a word. Ethan, however, doesn’t take the hint. Typical men.

“You good, Abby?” he asks, limping behind the bar and pouring himself a cup of coffee from the machine. “You look like—”

“Just... Don’t,” I interrupt, unable to hide my annoyance any longer. Ethan shoots me a confused look, but I don’t care at this point.

Still reeling from my argument with my best friend, I storm into my office, my heels clicking angrily against the floor. The door slams behind me before anyone can so much as utter a word, leaving me alone

I'm overwhelmed, hurt, and furious all at once. Chloe was supposed to be my rock, my confidante, my ride-or-die. How could she just turn her back on me like that? All because I wasn't willing to just throw Karl out on the street when he's clearly trying to be

Maybe she's right about Karl. Maybe I should be staying away from him. Maybe this will end in disaster again. But if it does, I want it to be my decision. Not

I sink into my chair, my hands shaking as I grip the edge of my desk. I hear the distant chatter of my staff outside the door, no doubt gossiping about the spectacle that just unfolded. What's worse is that I've never been the kind to air my dirty laundry in public, and especially not in my

I press my palms against my eyes, trying to hold back the tears. But it's a losing battle; one rebellious tear escapes, then another, trickling down my cheeks as I let out a

It's not long before there's a hesitant knock at

"Go away!" I snap, my voice breaking. I'm in no mood to deal with anyone right now, even if it's Chloe coming back to

But the door creaks open anyway, and I look up, fully prepared to unload my frustration on whoever's intruding. It's Karl. The epicenter of all of this, in

"What do you want?" I hiss, narrowing my eyes. "I said to go away."

"Abby, we need to talk." His voice is soft as he lingers in the doorway. I don't know what to say; all I can do is stare unblinkingly up at him, praying that no more tears will spill.

"Talk about what?"

He steps inside and closes the door gently behind him. For a moment, he just stands there, locking eyes with me. There's a genuine warmth in his gaze, an unspoken understanding.

My walls start to crumble a little. It's just like when we were together, and he always knew when something was wrong. He never gave up whenever I refused to talk about what was bothering me. Even if it drove me insane, he always pushed me to tell him what was going on. Now is bound to be one of those times.

"Is it Chloe?" he murmurs.

I nod. A silent sob quakes my body, my lips pressing into a quivering line. And before I know it, he's crossed the room and enveloped me in a hug before I've had the chance to even react.

I should be setting boundaries, I should push him away, but I don't. I can't. I just let myself sink into his arms, relishing the warmth and comfort they offer. Karl doesn't speak, doesn't question. He just holds me, as if understanding that sometimes silence speaks volumes.

Finally, I pull away slightly, my eyes still damp. "Why did Chloe turn on me? She was supposed to be my friend, my best friend. It's just not fair, Karl."

"She'll come around," Karl says gently. "You two have

"I know, but..." I take a deep breath and turn away, wiping my damp eyes with the back of my hand. "Not like this. Not over something this serious. Not over..." My voice trails off, the implication too clear. Not over you, Karl, is what I almost say. But I don't need

He looks at me, his eyes full of genuine concern and understanding. "I'll make it right, Abby,

"What?" I blink up at him, caught off guard. "Why would you say that? This isn't your mess to clean

"But it is, Abby," he insists, his voice earnest. "I shouldn't have put myself between you two. I realize that

"You think you came between me and Chloe?" I ask incredulously. "Karl, she made her own choices. She chose to treat me like a petulant teenager who can't make her own decisions. It's not your

“But she’s right, in a way,” he counters. “She told me to stay away from you, to give you space and let you succeed without interfering. I couldn’t even do that for one night. And after everything I did to

Now, Karl’s voice is the one that trails off. He shoves his hands in his pockets and crosses the room, his head hanging slightly

Chapter 112

Karl

I step out of Abby’s office, my heart still pounding. It’s like a battlefield in there with emotional shrapnel all over the place.

But I’m not naive enough to think I’m a mere bystander, oh no. I’m pretty sure I’m the damn cannon that fired the first shot.

“Big moment, huh?” My wolf’s voice resonates through my mind. I’m so focused on the situation between Chloe and Abby that it almost took me by surprise.

“You could say that,” I respond. “Chloe’s not exactly my biggest fan.”

“Well, maybe this is your chance,” he suggests. “Just like you did with John. Bury the hatchet, put aside your differences for Abby’s sake. Start over.”

“I hope so,” I reply, running a hand through my hair. “But Chloe’s different. She’s never liked me, not even at the beginning.”

I recall a camping trip years ago, back when Abby and I were still married. Chloe was there, along with their other friend Leah. A mix-up with the tents meant we all had to share one. God, that was a disaster.

The memory plays out like an old film reel in my mind. Leah, as always, was as chill as ever about the situation while Abby was fairly indifferent. But for Chloe and I, it felt like the end of the world. To share a tent with each other? I knew for a fact that Chloe would have rather died, because she said so herself.

That night, the tent was cramped, the tension palpable. Of course, Chloe and I ended up arguing about something stupid—how to properly set up a sleeping bag or some

It eventually devolved into an all-out brawl. Chloe threw a folding chair. I chased her up the tree. You know, the usual, until Leah and Abby had to step in. They were both in stitches over the ridiculous situation, but it was real as hell for Chloe and I. We hated each other's

"But was that really all Chloe's fault?" my wolf chimes in, snapping me back to

"What do you mean?" I ask, genuinely

"You were annoyed that you and Abby couldn't have a private tent for you-know-what. You were looking for a fight, and Chloe was an

I chuckle, realizing he's hit the nail on the head as usual. "Damn, you're right. I was cranky because I wanted some alone time with Abby, and Chloe got in

"See? You're not blameless in all this, and you never have been. But I think that if you go into this conversation recognizing that, maybe it'll turn out better than you

I take a deep breath, letting his wisdom settle into my bones. I just hope he's right. "Okay," I say, steeling myself. "Let's

The restaurant is buzzing with activity—customers chatting, employees hustling. A quick scan and I spot her. Chloe's seated at one of the patio tables, her arms crossed, jaw clenched. Anyone with half a brain could tell she's furious. This is gonna be a hard sell.

"You know I can't just walk away now," I say as I approach her. She looks up, and if looks could kill, I'd be six feet under.

"Try," she spits out, narrowing her eyes at me.

Ignoring her daggers, I sit down opposite her, careful to keep a respectful distance. "We need to talk."

"And why would I want to talk to you, of all people?"

"Because it concerns Abby. And you and I both know that she's our favorite person, so we need to work this out."

She raises an eyebrow, still skeptical but maybe a notch less hostile than she was before. "Go on."

"Look, I know how you feel about me, Chloe. You think I'm toxic for Abby. Hell, maybe I was. But I've realized my mistakes, and I want to be a better man. I've got a lot to make up for, not just to Abby, but to everyone, including you."

She looks surprised, as if she didn't expect this level of self-awareness from me. "Well, look who's grown a conscience."

"Better late than never, right?" I say, locking eyes with her. She glances away, but there's a shift in her demeanor. Maybe I've cracked the first layer of her icy fortress. "You can hate me all you want, Chloe, but don't take it out on

Her eyes flash back to mine, and I see a glimmer of realization. "You think that's what

"I don't know. You tell

She sighs, folding her arms on the table, and the weight of her anger seems to lift just a little. "Maybe I have been a little harsh. But you need to understand, Karl. Abby just got out of a relationship. She doesn't need another one right now, especially not with

I flinch at her brutal honesty, but she's not wrong. If this were a few days ago, I'd have been plotting to swoop in the moment Abby was single. But I realize that would never work, not if I'm truly committed to being a better

"I get it, Chloe. I really do," I reply, finding the words strangely easy to say. "I promise, I'll give her all the space

Chloe studies me for a moment. Her gaze is intense, as if she's reading my soul, searching for any hint of a lie. Then she nods, slowly, reluctantly. "Fine. Benefit of the doubt, Karl. But if you screw

"I won't," I interrupt, holding up my hand. "I can't afford to. I'm done being that guy, the one who messes up everything

Chapter 113

Abby

My hand freezes on the spreadsheet I'm working on when I hear a knock on my door. A soft, hesitant one that's almost drowned out by the evening chatter of the restaurant. My heart instantly jumps to my throat. Is it Karl? Has he decided to make another appearance?

But when I open the door, it's Chloe standing there, her eyes hesitant but earnest.

We've kept our distance today, partially because of the insane lunch and dinner rush, but I think also partially to cool off. I'm not sure if Karl's conversation with her was successful, but the knot in my chest loosens when I see her.

"Hey," I manage to say.

"Hey," she replies softly.

Neither of us says anything for a moment. The silence is thick, full of the words we'd both hurled at each other this morning. Finally, she breaks it. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." I step aside, letting her enter.

The door clicks shut behind her, sealing us into this tiny bubble of a moment. I feel her arms wrap around me, almost tentatively, as if she's afraid I might pull away. But I don't. I hug her back, tightly, grateful for the chance to mend this fragile piece of our relationship.

"I'm sorry, Abby," Chloe says into my shoulder. "I was out of line."

"I'm sorry too," I reply, feeling a twinge of guilt for the things I'd said earlier. "We both got carried

We pull away and Chloe takes a seat, her eyes scanning my face as if searching for something—perhaps a sign of residual anger or a lingering grudge. But she won't find any. At the end of the day, Chloe is like a sister to me, and that's one thing you never turn your back

"So, you and Karl, huh?" Chloe finally says, her

I shake my head quickly, dispelling the thought before it even has a chance to settle. "No, Chloe, there's no 'me and Karl.' We're just figuring things out,

"But you think he's changed? Really changed?" She looks at me, her eyes almost pleading for an answer that would make everything simple

"I don't know," I admit. "Maybe. He says he wants to be better. Shouldn't everyone get a chance

Chloe sighs, looking down at her hands. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I've been too hard on

Chloe's words warm me, but I know that there's something lingering at the end of her sentence. Something that she's trying to leave unsaid. "...But?" I

"But... I hope you're not thinking of getting back together with him. You know you deserve

The irony of her statement doesn't escape me. "I promise, I'm not planning on it," I reassure her. "Honestly, I think I need to be single for a while. Figure myself out, you

Chloe looks relieved. “Good. You have so much to offer, Abby. Don’t waste it on someone who doesn’t deserve you. Especially not when you have so much going for you right now.”

I nod, my thoughts suddenly drifting to the kitchen scene with Karl—his proximity, his scent, the undeniable chemistry that seemed to draw us together no matter how hard we tried to stay apart. My wolf stirs inside me just at the thought, a low growl of yearning in the distance that’s quickly snuffed out as soon as I brush the thoughts of Karl away.

“Thanks, Chloe,” I say, pulling myself back to the present. “Your friendship means the world to me.”

“Yours too, Abby,” she says, standing up. “Yours too.”

We hug one more time, the warmth of our friendship seeping through the cracks of our previous animosity, sealing it, making it whole. Chloe leaves, and I’m left standing there, a strange blend of relief and confusion swirling within me.

I close the door and lean against it, exhaling deeply. The night is still young; the restaurant is filled with the hum of voices and the clatter of dishes. Life goes on, swirling around me in its constant, dizzying dance. And yet, my mind keeps wandering back to Karl.

My phone buzzes on the table, snapping me out of my thoughts. It’s a text from Leah.

“Hey. Chloe mentioned that you two got in a fight earlier. Everything good now?”

I almost laugh. Leah’s knack for impeccable timing has always astounded me. But I’m glad to hear from her whenever I can.

“Yeah,” I type back, a soft smile flickering across my lips. “Everything’s

“Good. You two aren’t allowed to be mad at each other. You know I don’t like it when mom and dad

This time, a laugh actually escapes my lips. Slipping my phone into my pocket, I decide to head out and make my rounds to check on my

Just then, my eyes catch movement from across the room—Karl, stepping out from the bar, talking to one of the servers. He glances up, and for a split second, our eyes meet. It's brief, but it's enough to send a jolt through me, a spark that lights up the dark recesses of my heart, where feelings I thought I'd buried long ago suddenly flare

My wolf whines softly again, pushing against the barriers she's set up since Karl and I

I can feel her, restless and yearning, drawn to the man who was once a part of our soul. And in that instant, I realize just how hard this is going to be. Staying away from Karl, keeping this newfound friendship platonic, it's going to be a battle, one that I'm not entirely sure I'm equipped

As I watch Karl laugh at something the server says, his eyes crinkling in that familiar way that once used to make my heart skip a beat, I wonder what

Am I making the biggest mistake of my life by pushing him away? Or am I saving myself from a world of hurt that could potentially

I don't have the answers, and for the first time, that scares me. Because the path ahead is murky, filled with the landmines of past mistakes and the shadows of future

Before I can slip away, Karl turns and heads toward me. His eyes

Chapter 114

Abby

The clock on the wall reads 11:30 PM, its ticking slicing through the quietness of my office like a knife.

I'm engrossed in the sea of paperwork in front of me when there's a knock on the door—soft but persistent. My eyes dart up, half-expecting to see Chloe or maybe Leah, but it's Karl leaning against the doorframe.

“Hey,” he says, his eyes not quite meeting mine as he studies the pile of papers on my desk. “Am I interrupting?”

His sudden appearance sets off a chorus of conflicting emotions inside me. Part of me wants to put up the barriers again, but another part is surprised and, dare I admit, pleased to see him. It’s late, and I thought that I was the only one left in the restaurant. As it turns out, I was wrong.

“No, not really,” I reply, setting aside my pen. “Just wrapping up some payroll stuff. What are you still doing here? It’s late.”

“I wanted to stay late to prep the kitchen for tomorrow.” He pauses, his eyes now finding mine. “Saw the light on under your door on my way out. Figured I’d check on you.”

The sincerity in his voice is disarming, but there’s a moment of hesitance between us, thick and almost tangible. Finally, I break the silence. “Oh. Well, I’m fine,” I say, managing a stiff smile. “Thanks.”

Karl stands there for a few moments longer. It’s clear that he’s not planning on leaving, and I sigh, setting my pen down again. Last night, he helped me with the souffle recipe again. But tonight, I have other work to do. I can’t focus 100% of my time on preparing for the cook-off.

“What is it?” I ask, glancing up

He shrugs. There’s an almost mischievous look in his eyes, like there’s something that he wants to say but isn’t saying it. “Bar’s still open,” he says, glancing at his watch. “I was thinking of grabbing a drink. Wanna

Karl’s proposition takes me by surprise. All this time, I’ve tried to contain our interactions to the restaurant and the restaurant only. It’s easier that way. But then, at the same time, it is late. I’ve been staring at this spreadsheet for so long that the numbers are starting to dance on the screen in front of me. Finally, with a resolved sigh, I shut

“Sure. We can grab a drink. But just one, you

He smiles, a subtle lifting of the corners of his mouth that used to drive me crazy in love. "One drink," he says. "I can live

After locking up the restaurant, we head to the bar down the street. The transition from the solitude of my office to the casual ambiance of the late-night setting feels almost surreal. This bar is known for its cozy atmosphere, creaky wooden floors and

As I slide onto a stool, Karl takes the seat beside me. The bartender comes up to us and leans on the bar. I recognize him well; I've frequented this bar on Friday nights over the years since I bought

"Hey, Abby," the bartender says, nodding politely to Karl in turn. "What can I get

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can, Karl speaks up. "Two whiskeys. Neat."

As the bartender shuffles off, I raise my eyebrow at Karl. "Always the Alpha, huh?" I tease lightly, smirking. "Couldn't let me order my own drink?"

Karl grins. "Like you wouldn't have ordered the same thing anyway. I know you, Abby."

He's right; he does know me. Too well, in fact. The bartender pours us a couple of whiskeys, and as the liquid warmth spreads through me, the lines between past and present blur a bit. I find myself wanting to lean closer to Karl, a primal instinct of our bond, but I fight against it. I made a promise to myself, and a little whiskey and some light chit-chat won't change anything.

"Look, Abby," Karl starts, his fingers nervously circling the rim of his glass. "I need to apologize."

I'm caught off guard. I thought that Karl's reconciliation with Chloe yesterday was enough of an apology on his part, at least for the time being. "Apologize?" I mutter. "Why? For what?"

"For not being supportive of the competition. I know it's important to you and to the restaurant. I shouldn't have been such a jerk about it. I was..." He pauses, his brown eyes studying the glass of whiskey in front of him. "Selfish."

His words hang in the air between us, charged and filled with an honesty that disorients me. I could choose to be skeptical, cautious. But something tells me this is different.

“You know that means a lot to me, Karl,” I murmur. “Thank you. But you already apologized the other night.”

A soft sigh escapes Karl’s lips. “I know. But I don’t feel as though it

“Enough? I—”

“Let me finish,” he says gently, his brown eyes filled with sincerity. “I’m so proud of you, Abby. And... I want to support you throughout all of this. So whatever you need, I’m here. We’re gonna make sure you win this

I can feel my heart swell a little at his offer. The man I used to love—the man I still have complex feelings for—standing by me? It’s a dream and a potential nightmare wrapped into one, but right now, the dream is

For a moment, I almost consider offering him what’s been on my mind lately: that I want to make him my sous chef for the competition. But just as I’m about to open my mouth, I decide against it. I already made up my mind; Karl is helpful and we have pretty good chemistry when push comes to shove, but he’s just not

Honestly, I’ll probably choose John in the long run. I trust him a lot more now that he’s gotten his attitude in check, and I’m less worried about him losing his cool on television.

“That’s... Wow,” I finally say, swallowing. “Thank you, Karl. That’s really sweet

Karl smiles, his eyes meeting mine in a moment of vulnerability that sends a shiver down my spine. “Well, it’s the least I can

Chapter 115

Karl

Abby's face looks apprehensive, which was exactly what I feared.

When my secretary called me last week to come home for a pack meeting, my original plan was to slip back home on the day of the meeting and come back to the city without uttering a word. I wanted to just get my duties over with and return to my task of trying to win Abby back, but plans have changed.

After everything that's happened recently, I want her by my side. And although I won't admit it, in a selfish way, I want her to see our old home and remember what we had together. Maybe then we can move things forward.

"Well?" she asks, narrowing her eyes. "Tell me. What's the catch?"

I pause, choosing my words carefully. "I have to go back to my pack this weekend for a meeting. It's family stuff, council discussions, you know. The usual." I hesitate, reading her face, which now shows a mix of curiosity and guardedness.

"And...?"

"And... I'd like you to come with me."

The sudden stillness in her eyes, the subtle twitch of her lips, tells me this isn't what she expected. "Karl, you know I have responsibilities here, right? There's the restaurant first and foremost, and beyond that, I have to practice for the cook-off."

"Yeah, I know. But look, it's a weekend. We'd be back first thing Sunday morning. The restaurant can manage without you for two days, and as for the cook-off..." I grin, trying to channel some semblance of charm into my plea, "you can practice in my kitchen. I've got it all set up—really, anything you'd need."

Her eyes narrow, but not dismissively. She's considering it, I can tell. I can still remember how much she loved our old kitchen; she was the one who designed it,

It's a home chef's paradise, complete with two ovens, an industrial grade dishwasher, a huge counter island, and an entire pantry full of cooking

She used to spend hours in there every day, cooking up some new concoction or baking something extravagant. Half of my staff put on weight while she was living there because she was always giving out some goodie

When she left, though, it started collecting dust. I've hardly used it since I divorced her, but it's still the same, more or less. And recently, I've had the place prepared for

Just in case she decides to home

"No," she says, shaking her head decisively. "It's not a good idea. Karl, we talked about this. The two of us being there

Her voice trails off, but I know what she was about to say: that the two of us being there again could make things even more complicated than they already are. Duh. That was kind of the whole point. But I won't reveal that to

"Listen," I say, trying to sound casual. "I had the guest room all set up for you. Remember how much you used to love that room? Your own private balcony and an en

Abby pauses for a few moments as recognition flashes through her eyes. The guest bedroom was another room that she adored. She always loved showing it off whenever we had overnight guests. And sometimes, when we had a fight or when she wasn't feeling well, she even slept in

"You're trying to butter me up." Abby's words are terse, and she ends the sentence by finishing off her drink.

Caught off guard by her intuition, I chuckle, still trying to sound casual. "Okay. Maybe a little."

"But why?" she murmurs. "What do you really want from me, Karl?"

Her words leave me feeling oddly empty and sad. Just like always, she's onto me. Her intuition has almost always been top notch. And before I can say anything, she shakes her head and licks her lips.

“Karl, we can’t...”

“Just think about it,” I interrupt, taking a sip of my whiskey to steady myself. It burns going down, tethering me back to the present. “I’m not trying to get anything out of you. I just wanted you invite you home. Thought it would be nice.”

“It’s not my home anymore.”

Ouch. Her words sting.

For a moment, we both fall silent, our eyes locked in a sort of silent negotiation. The air around us thickens with possibilities, good and bad. What is it that I’m really asking of her? A journey back to my world, a chance to share a part of my life that’s been so far from her for so long?

Or perhaps it’s more selfish than that—a desire to show her off to my pack, to say, “Look, she’s with me

“Karl, I won’t lie. It’s tempting,” she finally murmurs. “But right now, it’s a big ask. Let me sleep on it at the

I nod, trying to hide the flicker of disappointment that washes over me. “Of course. Take all the time you need. I’ll be leaving

With a last sip of her whiskey, Abby slides off her stool and puts on her jacket, offering me a smile that’s equal parts warmth and uncertainty. “Good night,

“Good night, Abby,” I say, but as she turns to go, I find myself captivated by her silhouette against the dim lights of the bar, her hair cascading like a blonde halo

She’s radiant—she’s always been beautiful, but there’s something about the maturity she’s gained over the years. Somehow, she’s been sculpted into an even more stunning woman now that she’s

But then, she's gone before I can think too much about it, leaving me alone with my thoughts and an empty

"Well, muddled that one up pretty good, huh?" My wolf's voice suddenly breaks through my thoughts. I felt him there throughout the conversation, listening,

"Shut up."

Chapter 116

Abby

My apartment door shuts behind me with a satisfying click after a long day of being away from home. With a sigh, I throw my bag on the couch, and flop down beside it.

But it's not long before I'm on my feet again, pacing my apartment floor as I chew on my lower lip. Karl's proposition still lingers in my mind: going with him to the pack? To our old home?

My first instinct screams at me to not go, of course. To return to our old home together? How is that not a recipe for disaster?

As I finally decide to pour myself a glass of wine to calm my frayed nerves, I think to myself that right now, I really do have it all. A successful career, friends who love me, and the cook-off coming up. Why throw a wrench into it by letting Karl back into my life in that way? We're doing just fine as friends, keeping everything at arm's length between us. There's no need for it to become more than that.

But then, there's still a tiny sliver of myself that almost considers going with him. My life was once entwined with his, after all. The long talks in our garden at sunset, the joy of cooking in a kitchen I had designed myself.

But that was a lifetime ago.

I take a sip of wine, letting the bitter flavor linger on my tongue before swallowing. "Tomorrow," I resolve, "I'll tell him I can't go. It's for the best."

...

The scent of freshly brewed coffee greets me the moment I walk into the restaurant. It's comforting and slightly bittersweet, but also unexpected. I should be the only one here right now, and I didn't see Ethan's car on the way in; but I've hardly made it halfway through the door when Karl suddenly steps into my line of sight, a coffee cup in

"Morning," he greets, his eyes searching mine for something—confirmation, maybe, or

"Morning," I reply cautiously. "You're

He offers a lopsided grin, holding the cup out to me. "Wanted to get some prep work done.

I smirk and take the cup. It's sweet and light, just the way I like it. But I can sense Karl's true ulterior motives. "You're trying to butter me up again,

He chuckles, a low and surprisingly endearing sound. "Is

"No," I say, letting a slightly serious tone take over my voice. "And actually, I've thought about it. I'm sorry, Karl, but I can't come with you. It's not a good idea... for multiple

The disappointment that flickers across his eyes is subtle but unmistakable. But much to my surprise, he simply nods.

No argument, no second attempt to change my mind. Just those two words: "I understand." I could count the amount of times I've heard Karl utter those words on

In fact, I'm surprised. "That's it?" I find myself saying. "You're not gonna try to convince me to go anyway?"

"No, Abby," he says, taking a step back. "It's your decision whether you go or not. I just wanted to invite you, give you a chance to take a little time off. But if you don't want to go, I won't push it."

He turns to leave, and I'm left standing here, coffee cup in hand, my eyes wide with shock. My first instinct last night was to assume that he had ulterior motives behind inviting me back to our old home, but now, I'm starting to wonder if that was ever the case at all.

...

My eyes dart to the clock again—2:37 p.m., the post-lunch lull when the restaurant can finally take a breath for a brief moment before the chaos of dinner service begins.

With no immediate fires to put out or crises to deal with, I decide to leave the sanctuary of my office for a quick walk around the floor. But as I do, I notice Karl talking with Daisy. And it sounds... pleasant?

They're by the kitchen, chatting amicably. My first instinct is to approach them, maybe crack a joke or two to lighten the mood as I suspect that the conversation will go south, but something holds me back.

Instead, I stand here, just out of their line of sight but close enough to overhear.

"So, Daisy, what kind of food do you like?" Karl asks. His voice is genuine, not the flirty tone some guys adopt when talking to a pretty

"Hmm... I know it's a little basic, but I honestly just love Italian food," Daisy says. "I feel like I could eat a pound of pasta a day for the rest of my life and

Karl chuckles. "Ah, a woman after my own heart. Have you tried the fettuccine alfredo here

"I did!" Daisy exclaims. "It's the best dish on the menu, in my opinion! I kind of wish we had more dishes

"It's one of Abby's specialties," Karl says in response. I can hear the note of pride in his voice, and something about it makes my heart wander a bit in my

I bite my lip, a smile tugging at its corners. Is this the same Karl who used to shrug off small talk, who always said that he would rather be anywhere but engaging in 'unnecessary' conversation? I feel a sudden warmth flush through me, a pride I

He's... actually making an effort to be pleasant and connect with

But what catches my attention next nearly

"You know, you should tell her if you really think it's the best dish on the menu," Karl says, his voice taking on a more sincere tone. "Abby values honest feedback. And who knows, maybe she'd even consider incorporating more Italian dishes into

Chapter 117

Abby

The day starts just as any normal day should: with the aroma of simmering tomato sauce and sizzling bacon filling the restaurant, and the sound of happy breakfast customers wafting through the air.

But as I settle into the rhythm of another busy workday, something feels off. I can't quite explain it, but it almost feels as though something is electric in the air.

That's when it happens.

I haven't even taken my first sip of coffee of the day when Ethan is suddenly rushing into my office faster than I thought he could even move with his leg, and there's a look of dread on his face. Before I can even open my mouth to speak, his words are tumbling out in a torrent of emotion.

Before I can answer, Amelia gets up and storms out. All I can do is walk away, my fists clenched. This is bad. This is really bad. I make a beeline for the kitchen, where Ethan is wringing his hands as John scrambles to make another plate of eggs Benedict for the

"Don't bother," I hiss as the door swings shut behind me. "She

Ethan's eyes widen. "You've gotta be kidding!" he says. "What do

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. "There's nothing we can do now," I mutter. "Let's just make sure nothing else goes wrong today. And Ethan, talk to whichever waitress had Amelia's table. Apparently she had an 'attitude'. But there's no need to get too upset; Amelia West is just a

Ethan nods, preparing himself to speak with the waitress. The kitchen, which has fallen into a hush since my entrance, returns to its normal pace; but Karl is standing off to the side, his knowing eyes searching mine. All I can do is throw him a shrug and walk away, hoping that this is the worst that will happen

Chapter 118

"Go home," I interrupt, trying to hide the mild annoyance in my voice—not directed at her, but rather at yet another hitch in the day. "Feel better, Sarah."

"Thanks, Abby."

But then, to make matters worse, I've barely been in my office for another half hour when Ben, another server, appears in the doorway. He looks just as bad as Sarah.

"Abby, I think I caught..."

"Just go," I groan, passing my hand over my face. "Try not to get anyone else sick."

After Ben leaves, I let out a weary sigh and sink further into my chair. Two servers down, a disappointed food critic, and the breakfast rush isn't even over.

Resigned, I leave the sanctuary of my office, heading back to the floor to help out. That's when I see Mark and Lisa, two of our employees, locked in a heated argument by the hostess

"He's stealing my tables!" Lisa exclaims, her eyes shooting daggers

"Your tables? You don't own the floor, Lisa!" Mark

“Enough!” I interject, my patience wearing thin. “Mark, give Lisa her tables back. Lisa, focus on the guests and not internal

Both nod, mumbling apologies, but the tension lingers in the air after they leave. I watch them go, biting the inside of my cheek, before turning back to the hostess station to see a a man standing there with a clipboard and an official-looking badge on his

“Good morning,” I say as pleasantly as I can. “How many are

“Oh, I’m not dining,” he says with a terse smile, holding his hand out. “I’m Jack Thompson, the health inspector. Mind if I take a look around?”

Of course. The universe still has one more curveball up its sleeve.

“Certainly, Mr. Thompson,” I manage, taking his outstretched hand. “We always aim to maintain the highest standards.”

I lead him through the kitchen first, where Ethan and the crew are wrapping up the breakfast rush. He makes notes on his clipboard, asking to see the temperature logs, the storage areas, and even the labeling on the spices.

All of this is standard procedure; except for today, of course, when we’ve already been through the wringer more than once.

“I noticed your cutting boards look rather worn, which could cause food contamination,” he says, a hint of sternness intertwined with his words. “And these towels are not stored properly. They need to be in a sanitizing solution when not in use.”

I take a deep breath, fighting the urge to show my frustration. “Absolutely, Mr. Thompson. We’ll replace the cutting boards and correct the towel

He nods, jotting down more notes on his clipboard. “Very well. Let’s

The tour continues for what feels like an eternity, with him pointing out minor infractions, and with me nodding and assuring him they'll be fixed. It's like having someone walk around with a white glove, checking for every little infringement. And I feel like a haggard scullery maid, just wanting to sit down for five minutes without being

Finally, he closes his clipboard. "You'll need to address these issues immediately. Failure to comply will result in a follow-up visit and potential

"Understood," I say, trying to keep the exhaustion from seeping into my voice. "We'll take care of

After he leaves, I gather the staff for an impromptu meeting. "Alright, listen up. We had a visit from the health inspector. There are a few things we need to fix. Ethan, please order new cutting boards. John, Karl, make sure your dish towels are stored

Chapter 119

Abby

My eyes snap open to discover that someone, in the span of what feels like five minutes, my office has grown dark. There's a hand on my shoulder, and an all-too-familiar face—with a smirk on it, of course—staring down at me.

"Sleepy?" Karl asks, his lips twitching into a grin.

I shake my head and sit up, trying to regain a sense of reality. The glare of the desk lamp scatters across stacks of invoices and order forms, casting a dim amber glow over everything.

"No," I lie, looking away as Karl crosses the room back to the doorway. "I was just putting my head down for a few minutes."

A quick glance at the clock reveals that it's almost eight o'clock, and considering the fact that it's a Wednesday, the restaurant is already mostly quiet. Through my half-open office door, I can just barely make out the faint sound of scattered voices and silverware on plates from the few customers who are still hanging around,

Karl laughs and leans against the doorframe. "Sure. And what looks like drool on your cheek must just be condensation or something,

Drool? I swipe my cheek with the back of my hand and sure enough, it comes away

"Okay, you go me," I mutter, smoothing down my messy hair. "This morning was hectic, and I didn't sleep too well last

Karl shrugs. "Don't sweat it," he assures me. "In fact, you'll be happy to know that after the health inspector left, everything else went smoothly. No more food critics, no sick servers, no arguing employees."

I force a half-smile. So word really does travel fast; or rather, Karl is more attuned to the drama than I thought. I never mentioned the sick servers and arguing employees to anyone, but someone must have noticed.

"That's... good," I sigh, rubbing my eyes. "Did you need something?"

Karl pushes off the doorframe and saunters in again, perching on the edge of my cluttered desk. "Well, I had a question for you about tomorrow's delivery schedule, but it's really not that important," he says. "You look like you could use some rest instead."

I shake my head, pushing myself up to my feet in an attempt to make myself look more competent as a restaurant owner than I really feel right now. "I'm perfectly fine," I lie, hoping that he won't notice the fact that I'm wavering slightly where I'm standing. "What's your question?"

For a few moments, Karl gazes at me without answering. There's something gentle in his eyes, something that I haven't seen in a very long time. And something about it makes my knees just the tiniest bit weak. I cross the room in a feeble attempt to hide the blush that's creeping into my cheeks, and stop by the window, peering out into the dimly lit city street. It's pouring

"Look, it's getting late and the kitchen will close soon anyway," Karl says after a moment, snapping me back to reality. "You should go home,

I shrug. "I'll be fine. I'll at least wait

"Until it stops raining?" he asks. I nod, and Karl sighs. "It's supposed to rain all night. Just let me drive you home,

Chapter 120

We weave through the streets, the bright signs of late-night diners and convenience stores flashing by in a blur. For a moment, the weight of my job—the critics, the health inspectors, the constantly ringing phone—lifts, and I find myself lost in the rhythmic hum of the car's engine.

Karl finally breaks the silence. "You looked like you were having one hell of a dream back there. Was it about a beach, a tropical drink, and a server shortage all at once?"

I chuckle. "More like a health inspection nightmare. I can't seem to escape the restaurant, even in my sleep."

He glances over at me with a smirk. "Well, dreams are just unpaid labor then, aren't they? Surely you could get compensation somehow."

"Exactly. My subconscious is working overtime," I reply, my words tinged with a fatigue I can't hide.

We reach the front of my apartment complex—a red brick building with ivy crawling up the sides and a tall set of steps leading to the front door. It's surrounded by other buildings that look just like it. I remember when I first moved here, I almost walked into someone else's apartment. That

Karl pulls up to the curb and turns off the engine, then looks at me, his eyes searching my face. "Abby, are you sure you don't need a vacation? My offer still stands. Remember the pool and the hot

I look away. Of course I remember the pool and the hot tub, and all of the luxuries of our old home. But it doesn't mean that I think I should

"And," he leans in a little, lowering his voice in a conspiratorial tone, "I could take you to some of those places you used to love. Remember the little cafe with the perfect cappuccinos? Or that park where we used to

I feel a nostalgic tug at my heart. Karl's words paint a vivid picture, transporting me momentarily back to those carefree days when life felt easier, lighter. But then the logical side of my brain kicks back in, reminding me of the bad times: of fights, slammed doors, secrets.

"Thanks for the offer," I say, still looking out the window. "But I can't. You know that."

"Why not?" He asks.

"Because..." I shrug, not wanting to delve into it all right now, and decide to tell a half-truth. "The restaurant needs me."

Karl sighs. "The restaurant won't burn to the ground if you take two days to yourself, you know."

I sigh, feeling the corners of my mouth twitch into a smile. "That's easy for you to say, Karl. You're not the one dealing with the chaos day in and day

Karl studies me for a moment, then leans back, nodding. "I get it. The restaurant is your baby, and it's hard to let go. But even parents need a break sometimes,

"I know," I concede, "but not now." I open my mouth to say more, to explain to him that I can't bring myself to walk those halls again where our marriage fell apart, but I choose not to. Not tonight, at

Karl's eyes hold a hint of disappointment, but he covers it quickly with a warm smile, taking me by surprise yet again. "Alright, Abby. No harm in asking,