

His Kickass 191

Chapter 191

Abby

The atmosphere shifts as our arms untangle. We're all a little teary-eyed, but none of us say it. Instead, Chloe reaches for a tissue from the box on her coffee table, and holds it out for me.

"Well, I didn't expect this tonight," Leah says, sniffing.

"Yeah, me neither," Chloe says, dabbing at her eyes too. She looks at me, her gaze still soft but punctuated by a new intensity. "But I just have one more thing to say: it can't always be this easy, Abby."

"What do you mean?" I ask, bracing myself.

Chloe seems to choose her words carefully as she speaks. "I need to know you're serious about what you said. Karl gets one more chance, Abby. One. If he messes up again, and you keep giving him the time of day, then—"

She doesn't finish, but she doesn't need to. "I get it," I say quietly, locking eyes with her. "And thank you. Thank you for giving me another chance, too."

Chloe nods, her lips twitching into a reluctant smile. "Well, someone's gotta keep you on your toes, right?"

"Speak for yourself," Leah chimes in, picking up her wine glass from the coffee table. "Keeping both of you in check is like my full-time job at this point."

A ripple of laughter goes through us, as if the pressure has been released. We settle into Chloe's plush sofas, the soft cushions embracing us like an old friend. Chloe refills our wine glasses, and we toast.

"To friendship," Leah says, lifting her glass higher.

“To all it’s messiness,” Chloe adds.

“And to understanding,” I finish.

...

As Chloe and I walk through the front door of the restaurant, I feel lighter. It’s a new day, both metaphorically and literally.

“Chloe! Welcome back!” Daisy exclaims, throwing her hands up in

Chloe grins, genuinely happy. “It’s good to be back,

“Everything’s been dull without you,” Daisy jokes with a wink, even though it’s been

But then, I feel a sudden tension coil in the air. I glance towards the kitchen’s swinging door just as Karl steps out. His eyes lock onto Chloe’s for a moment, and I can practically feel the static

Here it comes.

Then, in a move that leaves me speechless, Chloe walks up to him and extends her

Karl hesitates, then takes her hand, shaking it firmly. They exchange a few inaudible words; Chloe whispers something into his ear. He nods, almost imperceptibly, before breaking away and heading back to

“What the hell was that?” I ask Chloe as she returns to

She smirks. “Oh, nothing. Just a

I roll my eyes but can't contain my grin. "You're incredible, you know

"But you love me for it," she

The day flies by in a flurry of orders, invoices, and brief exchanges with staff. I almost forget about the morning's events. But then there's a knock on my office door, and I look up to find Karl leaning against

"Got a sec?"

"Sure. What's up?"

He walks in and hands me a piece of paper with a name and phone number scribbled on it. "This journalist, Alex, is super interested in covering the restaurant for you."

I take the paper from him, somewhat surprised. "Thanks, Karl. You didn't have to do that."

He nods, offering a half-smile. "Just doing my part. Gotta get you some good press, right?"

As he leaves the office, I dial the number. My pulse races a little; I can't believe I'm nervous about this.

"Hello, this is Alex," the female voice says from the other end.

"Hi, Alex, this is Abby from La Belle Vie Bistro. I heard you were interested in writing a piece on us."

"Abby? I'm so glad you called!"

The excitement in Alex's voice is contagious. "Great! Would you like to come in tonight, get a feel for the place?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Alex says.

...

That evening, as the restaurant buzzes with the dinner crowd's lively chatter, Chloe leans over the bar and grins at me. "You seem pleased. Did Karl actually come through for once?"

I chuckle. "You could say that. But let's not jinx it."

"Agreed," she says, flashing a mischievous grin before heading back to mixing drinks.

Right on cue, the door chimes, and a young woman with curly brown hair holding a notepad and wearing an inquisitive smile on her face walks in. Alex, presumably.

"Abby?" she says, extending

"That's me," I say,

"This is quite the place." Alex pauses, looking around. "How long have you been

"Just a couple of years," I respond. "Hopefully

Alex smiles. With that, she launches into her routine; trusting Karl's judgment, I give her free rein of the floor to interview the staff, and she makes a beeline

"You're Daisy, right?"

"Yep. That's me!"

"So, tell me, is it true you were a street walker before you began working

Daisy's face grows pale. My heart instantly sinks, and I step in. "Alex, Daisy has a lot of tables right now. How about we head back to the kitchen and you can talk to our newest

"But you gave me free

"I know," I say, casting Daisy an apologetic look while giving Alex a tense smile at the same time. "But I didn't realize how many tables she has, and our new chef is currently

Looking somewhat disappointed, Alex jots something down on her notepad before giving me a nod. I lead her to the kitchen, where Anton is waiting, leaning on the

"Ah, the journalist!" Anton says animatedly as we enter.

Alex shoots Anton a cold smile, her pen poised to write. "So, Anton, you've made quite the impression so

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Abby

"Excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt," I say, offering 'Alex' a tense smile as I walk up to her and Anton. "I just need to speak with Anton for a moment."

"Um, sure," Alex says, scribbling something else on her notepad. "Take your time."

Throwing her another grin, I snatch Anton by the arm and signal for Karl to follow. I lead them to a secluded corner of the kitchen, away from the prying ears of the mysterious 'journalist'. My heart pounds in my chest.

"Is everything okay, Abby?" Anton asks, looking a little pale. "I hope I did not say the wrong things—"

"No, Anton, you were great," I whisper, glancing over my shoulder at Alex, who is staring at the dishwasher and scribbling furiously on her notepad. "It's the 'journalist'. She's a fake."

“A fake?” Anton asks.

Karl takes out his phone and scrolls through it rapidly. “Hang on. Let me check something real quick.” He takes the slip of paper from my hand where he had scribbled Alex’s number earlier. His eyes dart between his phone screen and the paper for a few moments, his face slowly losing even more of its

“Oh, god. This

“What? What’s not good?” Anton’s eyes are practically saucers

Karl looks mortified. “The number I gave you, Abby, isn’t the real Alex’s number. It’s a

“What? How can that be?” I can feel the tension knotting up in my stomach, making me feel almost sick.

“I’m so stupid. I must have clicked the wrong link,” Karl confesses, showing us his phone screen where a website that looks eerily similar to a locally renowned journalism site is displayed. “I found the number here. It looks like the real site, doesn’t it?”

I squint at the screen. “Yeah, it does. But if there’s a real Alex out there, then who the hell is she?”

Karl sighs deeply, running his fingers through his hair. “From the looks of it, this site is for a tabloid that poses as a legitimate news source. They’ve duped us. They’re going to write something terrible, I just know it.”

“Merde!” Anton mutters under his breath, visibly anxious. “What do we do now?”

Karl looks at me, concern etching lines into his face. “I’m so sorry, Abby. I didn’t mean for this to

I take a deep breath, releasing it slowly as I look into Karl’s apologetic eyes. “It’s not your fault, Karl. It was an honest mistake. Anyone could’ve been tricked by that fake

He nods, still not relieved. "What's the plan, then? If we kick her out now, it'll be even worse for us. She'll just write that you kick out journalists who don't ask the kind of questions you

I lean against the wall, tapping my fingers on my arm as I think. "Yeah, I know. And in the court of public opinion, perception is

Anton chimes in, "So we are stuck between a rock and a hard place? Is that

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Daisy clenches her fists. "Ugh, I knew something was off about her."

Chloe rubs her temples. "So what's the plan, Abby? We can't just kick her out."

"Yeah," Ethan adds. "We don't need another PR nightmare right now."

"Oh, don't worry," I say, a sly smile crossing my face. "I've got an idea. We're going to answer her questions, but we'll do it in the most ridiculous way possible. Let's make her article an absolute circus. If she wants to write trash, then that's exactly what she'll get."

John grins. "I'm liking where this is going already."

Karl looks worried but intrigued. "You sure about this, Abby?" he murmurs.

"As sure as I am that the Earth is flat," I say with a wink, setting the tone for the evening's... theatrics.

Daisy starts to giggle. "Oh, this is going to

We disperse back to our stations, armed with our roles in this little farce. The tension transforms into electrifying

Alex finally emerges from the kitchen with a baffled look on her face, her pen still poised to write. She beelines for Karl next, who is pretending to scrub the wall with a

“What are you doing?” she asks, eyeing him

He shrugs as nonchalantly as ever. “Food fight accident. Can I

Alex narrows her eyes, but says nothing more about it. “So Karl, how does it feel to be part of Abby’s restaurant?” she asks, jotting notes down before he even

Karl smiles. “Ah, you know, it’s like being a hamster on a disco ball. Spinning, but fabulous.”

I stifle a laugh into my napkin, pretending it’s a cough. Karl throws me a quick glance, his lips turning upwards into an almost imperceptible smirk.

Alex looks puzzled but presses on, turning to Chloe. “Chloe, can you describe Abby in three words?”

Chloe doesn’t miss a beat. “Humble space alien.”

Alex blinks, visibly confused but dutifully writes it down. She finally turns to me. “Abby, your friends and associates have quite unique perspectives about you and your work. Do you have any comments?”

“I’d say they’re spot on,” I reply, deadpan. “Although, the term ‘alien’ is a bit offensive. We on Mars prefer ‘extra-terrestrial.’”

Her pen pauses in the air.

“Oh, yes,” I nod. “The commute is a killer, but the low-gravity weekends are

Alex finishes her scribbling, clearly baffled, before turning back to Daisy. “Okay...

Instead of answering, Daisy begins wildly making hand gestures, a grin plastered on

“What is she—”

“Oh, she’s deaf,” John says, shrugging. “You didn’t

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Abby

I’m standing in the middle of the restaurant, my phone clutched in my hand as I stare at the screen. The headline glares back at me: “Inside Abby’s Bizarre World: A Journey into the Mind of a Lunatic.”

“Guys, you have to see this,” I say, grinning as I turn the screen towards Daisy, Chloe, Karl, John, Ethan, and Anton.

Karl starts to chuckle. “Oh my god, look, she included my quote—‘it’s like being a hamster on a disco ball: spinning but fabulous.’”

Daisy snickers. “That was pure gold, Karl. I’m surprised you came up with that one.”

Chloe leans over my shoulder. “And she actually wrote about your ‘commute from Mars’? How gullible was this lady?”

Ethan laughs so hard he almost spits out his coffee. “This is hilarious. Do you think she realized we were messing with her?”

“I hope not,” Anton says, shaking his head. “It adds to the mystery,

As we’re reveling in the absurdity of it all, my phone rings. The laughter dies down a bit as I glance at the caller ID. “It’s Mr. Thompson,” I announce before swiping to

“Abby, good morning. I presume you’ve seen the article.” His voice is stern, making my

“I was... just discussing it with my team,” I reply, shooting a look at everyone to signal that it’s serious.
“Quite the

Mr. Thompson pauses, and I can practically feel the tension emanating through the phone. “I don’t find it amusing, Abby. This is terrible press for someone who is competing in the cook-off. What were

I bite my lip, realizing the gravity of what’s happening. “Mr. Thompson, I can explain. The journalist was actually a fraud. We found out too late, and we thought responding this way would at least make the piece

“You should have been more cautious, Abby. Such naivety doesn’t bode well in the culinary industry.”

I can feel my stomach knotting, the weight of his words crushing my earlier triumph. “I understand that it was a risky move, but it was an unusual situation.”

“That may be, but you should know better than to retaliate like this. You’re now on thin ice, Abby. Not just with the competition, but with me.”

I look around at my friends; their faces are filled with concern. “I understand, Mr. Thompson. What should I do?”

He sighs. “Look, I like you, Abby. Since I believe you’re talented and I want to see you succeed, I’m going to give you another chance. I’ll send you the contact information of a journalist I trust. You’re going to give them an interview, and this time, it had better be straightforward. No antics.”

I feel a mix of relief and gratitude. “I appreciate that. Thank you.”

“Consider this your last chance, Abby. Don’t mess it

“I won’t, Mr. Thompson. I

...

I'm pacing the restaurant, feeling more nervous than I should. The journalist from Mr. Thompson's recommendation, Vanessa, is supposed to arrive at any minute. I've already prepped the team, even went as far as to write down potential answers for

No more disco-ball hamsters, we agreed. We need this one to be a

"Abby, relax! You're making me nervous just looking at you," Chloe exclaims, perched on a barstool as she wipes

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"Intentionally? Are you kidding me?" My voice is shaky as I process this.

"Just get here, Abby."

"I'm on my way," I say, hanging up. The room spins around me as I turn to face my team. "Guys, I have to go. There's been a fire at my building. They think it was set on purpose."

Karl stands up, visibly concerned. "Do you want us to come with you?"

"No, you guys stay. Handle the interview with Vanessa if she shows up. Explain the situation, please. I just... I need to see what's happened." I'm already grabbing my coat and bag.

"We've got this, Abby. Go," Anton says, nodding firmly.

"I'm so sorry," I say, almost out the door now.

"Don't be ridiculous. Just go!" Chloe shouts after

As soon as I arrive at my building, I see the mess. Fire trucks, police cars, neighbors standing outside wrapped in blankets, the stench of burnt wood and plastic in the air. David spots me as I push through the

“Abby, over here.”

“What happened?” I ask, my eyes darting around, trying to assess the

“It started on the first floor, in the storage room. The firefighters contained it before it could spread too much, but there’s still a lot of damage,” Mr. Davis explains, wringing

“A storage room? That’s...odd,” I say, confused

A police officer approaches us, her face stern. “You’re the tenant from

“Yes, I am. Abby. What’s going on?”

“We’re investigating. It seems like the fire was started intentionally. Do you have any enemies, anyone who might want to harm you?”

I almost laugh at the absurdity. “Enemies? No, I run a restaurant, not a mafia.”

The officer doesn’t smile. “We’re taking this very seriously. We have yet to identify the person responsible.”

“How bad is the damage?” I ask, still trying to wrap my head around the situation.

“We’ll need to make some repairs, but your apartment is mostly okay,” Mr. Davis interjects. “Some water and smoke damage. You might want to stay somewhere else for a few days, though.”

I swallow. The weight of it all suddenly feels like too much. A fire, possibly caused by an arsonist, on the very day that I'm supposed to publish a news article?

"Sorry, but do you know where in the building the fire may have originated from?" I ask the officer just before she

The officer nods, then gestures for me to follow. David and I trail behind her into apartment, number eight along the row of townhouses. I can feel my heart leap into my throat as we make our way up the front steps and in through the

"Oh my god..."

My apartment walls are scorched. The sprinklers must have gone off, because there's a thin layer of water on everything. The further we get into my apartment, the more I see it: my belongings, my books, papers, and photographs... Many of them have been damaged. Even my favorite armchair is

The officer leads me over to the kitchen, where it appears as though the window was

"We believe the perpetrator forced this window open and threw a match in here," she says, pointing to a spot on the floor where the scorch marks are extra dark and the smell of gasoline

My eyes widen and tears begin to brim up, obscuring my vision. "I..."

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Abby

I'm sitting in the sterile confines of the police station, the room buzzing with the noise of ringing phones and chatter. I can't help but fidget in my seat as the detective shifts across from me, jotting notes down on a clipboard.

"So, you're absolutely sure you can't think of anyone who might want to harm you?" the detective, an older man with a receding hairline asks, eyeing me over a stack of papers.

“Detective, if I had enemies, I’d be the first to tell you. I swear, I really can’t think of anyone.”

He nods, scribbling something down. “Alright. But keep your eyes open. This may just be a random targeting, but it’s certainly not an accident. Call us if you think of something, or someone, who might shed some light on this situation.”

“I will, thank you,” I say, standing up to leave. The tension in my shoulders eases just a bit as I make my way out of the room. This whole experience is surreal, like some bizarre soap opera that I’ve unwittingly become the star of.

David, my landlord, is waiting for me in the hallway, his usually cheerful face tight with concern. “Abby, how did it

“Fine,” I answer with a sigh. “They’re keeping an open investigation but don’t have any suspects

David rubs his temple. “I’ve arranged for maintenance to get started on repairs first thing in the morning, but if you want to get a hotel room for a few days, I can cover the lodging expenses.”

I shake my head. “No, David, that’s kind of you, but I want to go home. I want to take care of my belongings myself.”

He looks puzzled. “Are you sure? The maintenance crew can—”

“I know, I know. But some of those things... they’re not just things, you know? They’re pieces of me. I want to handle

He nods, understanding washing over his features. “Alright, Abby. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will,” I say, giving him a small but appreciative smile.

I make my way back to my apartment, my heart heavy with a strange blend of relief and dread. As I walk through the door, I survey the damage. It's like someone took my cozy, sunlit space and dunked it into a darkened, charred reality.

My eyes immediately go to the walls—they'll definitely need a new coat of paint. And the smell of wet wood and burnt paper fills the air.

But all in all, it's not all that bad. It could be worse; far worse.

I decide to start with the living room, carefully lifting a pile of soaked books from the coffee table. I arrange some of the more precious ones hanging on the backs of chairs in the kitchen, hoping that with time, the air will dry them on.

Next, I move on to the photographs over the fireplace, or rather what's left of them. It's a bit heartbreaking, having to throw away some of the photographs of happier times, but I try to cheer myself up by telling myself that I can take more

"I can do this," I mutter to myself as I clutch a damp cloth and a bottle of cleaner. I'm about to tackle the armchair—my favorite reading spot—and see if I can get the blackness out of it when the doorbell suddenly

I open the door, and my heart leaps straight into my throat. "Oh my god," I gasp,

Standing on my front step is the entire gang from the restaurant: Chloe and Leah, John, Ethan, Anton, Daisy, and—even Karl.

"Surprise!" they cheer in unison.

"What on Earth...?" I sputter,

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I can feel the knot in my chest loosening, the heavy weight of the day's events lifting ever so slightly. "You guys are amazing."

Then, my eyes meet Karl's. He's carrying a loaf of what smells like very fresh bread and a wheel of cheese stolen from the pantry at the restaurant, and there's a soft, apologetic look in his eyes. We stare at each other for a few moments, and my heart does a flip. I can feel the heat rising into my cheeks and I have to quickly look away before he notices.

Suddenly, Chloe's voice breaks through my reverie.

"Let's get this party started!" she says, turning up the music.

Soon, we're all a little tipsy, swaying to the beat of a Spotify playlist that Daisy insisted was the "Ultimate Cleaning Mix." I find myself moving my hips while scrubbing the walls, and I look over to see John and Ethan attempting the moonwalk with mops.

"We're setting a new standard for house parties!" Ethan shouts over the music, and we all burst into laughter.

Despite everything that happened, my chest feels a little lighter. I couldn't have asked for better

I slip into the pantry to grab more trash bags, momentarily stepping out of the haze of laughter and chatter. It's quiet in here, the stillness giving space for the reality of the situation to creep back in. Who could've done this to me? I shudder at the thought.

Just then, Karl steps in. "Hey, you okay?" he asks, his eyes searching

"I'm fine," I reply, although my voice is a bit wobbly. "Just a little shaken, you know? Wondering who could've set fire to my apartment."

Karl suddenly takes my hand. My heart pounds in my chest and I slowly lift my gaze to meet his. His cheeks are flushed, probably from the booze, but his voice is low and a little husky. "Abby, we'll find whoever did this to you. I

I chuckle. "Thanks, Karl. But the police have it under control."

“Still,” he says quietly, drawing just a little closer. “Whatever you need, I’m here. I...”

“Karl...”

Before I know it, Karl’s lips are on mine, and for a second, the world stops. My heart does a somersault, caught off guard. In the back of my mind, I can feel it: my wolf, slowly coming out of her slumber. She’s drawing me closer to him, and for just a moment, I allow her to.

Without entirely meaning to, I find my hand lifting, my fingers tangling into Karl’s hair. The music and the chatter in the other room fades into the background, and suddenly it’s just us, just me and Karl.

When we pull apart, there’s a heavy pause, both of us staring at each other with wide eyes, unsure of what just happened.

“Abby,” he murmurs, “I—”

“Um, thanks for helping tonight,” I finally say, gently disengaging from the awkward

“Abby—”

“I... I can’t, Karl,” I murmur. “Let’s not do this right now.”

Karl is silent. I slide past him, my heart pounding like crazy, and rejoin the group, hoping beyond hope that I can just forget that electric, heart-stopping kiss that I just shared with

When I step back into the room, it’s like nothing has changed, and yet everything feels different somehow. I shake off the encounter and get back into the cleaning groove, tossing charred remnants of my life into trash bags.

Karl slips out of the pantry a few minutes after me, and avoids my gaze. I catch him out of the corner of my eye making his way to the bathroom, and allow myself to relax just a tiny bit when he’s out of

Karl

I need to breathe.

Before anyone notices, I decide to sneak out of Abby's apartment and away from the clean-up party, feeling like I've got a storm cloud hanging over my head.

Kissing Abby was a bold move, a stupid one maybe, and now the walls in there are practically vibrating with tension. My wolf isn't happy either; he's restless, prowling around inside me as if he wants to burst out.

I step outside, welcoming the chill in the air. It feels good against my skin, like it might cool off the heat of the moment, give my alcohol-addled brain some clarity. The sounds of the city's nightlife hum in the distance, a muffled backdrop to my jumbled thoughts.

"Dammit, Karl," I mumble to myself, shoving my hands into my pockets as I walk around the building. The gravel crunches under my boots with each step, as if scolding me. "What were you thinking?"

But then, suddenly, my senses flare just as I'm turning the corner. There's a scent—something close to the window where Abby's apartment was torched. I stop, sniffing the air. It's not smoke or any cleaning chemicals. It's something else. Something

I can't place it.

Just when I'm practically about to get on all fours and give the ground a good sniff—screw anyone who sees me—Chloe's voice

"Karl? What are you doing out here? You look like

I jerk upright, meeting her gaze. "Just needed some fresh air. It's kind of heavy in there, you know?
Smells

Chloe crosses her arms, always too astute for her own good. "So you're sniffing the air out here to clear your sinuses or

"Actually," I say, "can you come here for a second?"

She arches an eyebrow but steps over, clearly intrigued. "Okay, what's up?"

"Do you smell anything unusual here?" I gesture to the spot near the window.

Chloe sniffs the air, then shakes her head. "Nope. Just smells like burnt wood and cleaning stuff to me."

I nod, taking her words to heart. If Chloe, with her sharp senses, can't smell it, then what the hell is going on?

She looks at me, her gaze probing. "Ugh, I can't believe I'm actually asking this..." she mutters, running her hand through her hair. "But are you sure you're alright, Karl? You look a bit... off."

"I'm fine," I lie, my mind racing. The scent, why do I recognize it? And why am I the only one

Chloe holds my gaze for a moment longer before nodding. "Alright, if you say so. But if you keep acting all broody and mysterious, people are going to start thinking you're up to

I manage a forced smile. "I'll try to act

She starts to head back toward the door, then stops, freezing for a moment. I feel as though I can see the gears turning in her head. Then, slowly, she turns around. "Hey, um... If you figure out what's bothering you, you know where to

I'm a bit taken aback by her sudden kindness. "Oh, um..."

She heads back inside, and I'm left alone again, staring at the window where this whole fire originated from. There's still orange police tape surrounding it, indicating that a larger investigation is

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"Hey Marcus, what's up?"

"Karl, glad I caught you. You have a minute? We need to discuss some pack matters."

"I've got a moment," I say, feeling a knot of tension that I hadn't noticed before start to unwind.
"What's going on?"

"First off, the lumberyard deal went through. They're asking if we're okay with them expanding a bit more into our territory."

I think for a moment. The owners of the lumberyard have been allies for years, and the lumberyard provides jobs for pack members. "Fine by me, as long as they stick to the agreed environmental safeguards."

"Great. I'll confirm it with them."

"What else?"

"We've had some land disputes on the west boundary. The Everwinter pack is claiming

I grit my teeth. The Everwinters are notorious for pulling stuff like this. "Alright," I say with a sigh. "Let's not start a war over it. Offer a meeting to discuss it, and go heavy on the diplomacy. Remember, their Luna loves our pack's specialty: Turkish delights. Get her a fresh box of them. It'll sweeten the

"Understood. Oh, and you'll have a couple of contracts to e-sign tonight. Expect

"Sure, send them over," I

Marcus pauses for a moment before he speaks again, choosing his words carefully. "And, Karl, there's something else. Some of the pack..."

I feel a prickling sensation at the back of my neck, a warning from my wolf. "Talking? About what?"

"About you not being around much. They say you're shirking your duties as Alpha."

I close my eyes for a moment, inhaling deeply. The irony isn't lost on me: I step out to escape one problem, only to be confronted by another.

"Marcus, what's my approval rating?" I finally ask, needing to know how deep the wound goes.

"It's... not the best lately, Karl. You should be aware of that. You've always been one to prioritize the pack, so your absence hasn't gone unnoticed. It's fixable, though. You just need to come home."

I feel a pang of guilt, and it stings. "Maybe I have been shirking my duties," I admit, looking up at the sky as if it holds answers. The stars twinkle back, indifferent to my problems. "I've been distracted lately."

"Distracted?"

I hesitate, reluctant to bring up Abby and the complicated web of issues surrounding her right now; how my efforts to gain her favor only worked to a certain extent. How she's still rejecting me, even tonight. "I can't talk about it right now, Marcus. But I understand what you're

Marcus sighs on the other end of the line, a heavy sound that says he's carrying his share of burdens, too. "When can you be back, Karl? We need our Alpha. In

"Very soon," I say, feeling the weight of that promise as I make it. "I'll come back full-time to the pack, I

"Alright," Marcus replies, still sounding skeptical but willing to trust me. "Take care, Karl. We'll hold down the fort until you get

“Thanks, Marcus. Bye.”

Chapter 200

Abby

The sun pours through the curtains, bathing my bedroom in a soft, golden light. As I slowly blink awake, I’m almost immediately filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

My friends, my little family, they all came together to help me last night. My apartment is almost back to normal, just waiting for a fresh coat of paint and some minor repairs that the landlord promised to handle at no cost.

But then it hits me—the kiss.

My cheeks flush at the memory.

Karl and I, alone in the pantry, his lips meeting mine in a stolen moment that felt like it lasted forever. I can’t shake off the feeling of his lips against mine, the sensation of his hair curling through my fingers, or the way my wolf seemed to wake up, even if just for a moment.

And then there was the awkwardness that followed, the way he walked away, his face unreadable. He was quiet the rest of the evening, and I noticed that he slipped away early.

“Ugh,” I groan softly, getting out of bed.

As I walk into the living room, Chloe and Leah, who crashed on my sofa, stir

“Morning, sleepyheads,” I greet them, still trying to shake off my own

“Good morning,” Leah mumbles, her voice rough from sleep. “I

“Me too,” Chloe agrees, stretching

I purse my lips, glancing at the kitchen. Unfortunately, my coffee maker was one of the things that got wrecked. I scratch my head and look back at my

They grin, almost sitting up in

“Cafe it is.”

We decide on a nearby cafe, known for its strong coffee and its fluffy, cloudlike croissants. The atmosphere is warm and inviting, a gentle hum of chatter filling the air.

We settle into a table in the window after grabbing our coffee and pastries, and I’m grateful for the easy conversation, for the warmth of the sun, and for the laughter that temporarily makes me forget about last night’s awkward kiss with Karl.

“So, anything interesting happen with Karl last night?” Chloe finally asks, her eyes meeting mine. “You two were in the pantry for a while and then, boom! Both of you looked like you saw a ghost.”

My face instantly heats up, and I look down at my coffee cup, swirling the foam with my spoon. “No, nothing happened.”

“Mhm, sure,” Chloe says with a frown, not buying it for a second.

“Chloe, stop pushing,” Leah interjects, giving her a warning look.

Chloe rolls her eyes but complies. “Fine, sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Let’s talk about you instead,” I say, eager to divert the attention away from me. “Any interesting guys in your life

Chloe chuckles, her eyes lighting up. “Ah, well, last week I hooked up with this guy. He was cute, but man is he desperate. He’s been chasing me ever since, even though I

I can't help but laugh as I give her a playful punch in the arm. "You're so

Chloe grins, unapologetic. "It's in my nature, you know

Leah takes a sip of her iced coffee before putting down her glass. "Do you think you'll ever meet the right guy and settle down,

Chloe's laughter fills the air, carefree and unrestrained. "Settle down?

And we all join in the laughter, each of us hiding our own complexities, our fears and hopes tucked away behind the safety of our