

## His Kickass 71

### Chapter 71

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 at

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 own

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 choked

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

"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 a

"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, I

"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

“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

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 72

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 easy

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

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’m

“I don’t know. You

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

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

"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 73

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

“So, you and Karl, huh?” Chloe finally says, her tone

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, that’s

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

“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

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?”

“But... I hope you’re not thinking of getting back together with him. You know you deserve better,

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

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 broke

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 to

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 74

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 at

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 join

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 my

"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 with

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 you

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 was

“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

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 experienced

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

“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

Chapter 75

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, after

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

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 or

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

Just in case she decides to

"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

"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 suite

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

"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

“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 very

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 on

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

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

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

"Shut up."

Chapter 76

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 perhaps

"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 it

"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

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 young

"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 be

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

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

"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 77

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.

"Abby, we've got a problem. Amelia West from 'Gourmet Gazette' is here, and she doesn't look happy."

My heart sinks at the mention of the infamous food critic.

"Why?" I ask, bolting up from my chair. "What happened?"

Ethan shrugs, throwing his hands up in the air. "Hell if I know. All I know is that she got her food a few minutes ago, made a face, sent it back, and started writing in her notebook. God, I'm such an idiot. I didn't even recognize her at first..."

With a deep breath, I place a hand on Ethan's shoulder reassuringly. "It's alright, just keep calm. Let's make sure everything is perfect. Double-check the specials and inform the servers. I'll go talk to her and see why she sent the food back."

After taking a moment to compose myself, I head over to Amelia's table. "Good morning, Ms. West. It's an honor to have you here. Is everything to your satisfaction?"

She looks up from her notebook, snapping it shut with a sour look on her face. "Where do I even start?" she hisses. "My food was lukewarm, and I couldn't even taste the garlic underneath the mountain of sauce on the plate. I've been waiting for my coffee for fifteen minutes, and your waitress had an attitude when I sent the

The food critic's words send a shiver through my spine. Amelia West isn't exactly known for being the most lenient of food critics. If I had known that she was here, I would have served

"I'm very sorry, Ms. West," I reply, maintaining my composure. "Your feedback is invaluable to us. I'll be sure to brew you a fresh pot of coffee right away, and the waitress will be disciplined accordingly. Can I get you another dish on the

She sighs, pushing her chair back. "No, don't bother. I'm

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 we

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

I retreat to my office to collect myself. Thankfully, I’m able to lose myself in some paperwork for a couple of hours; but it feels as though it’s only been five minutes that I’ve been alone before there’s suddenly a knock on the

“Come in.”

The door opens, and it’s Sarah, one of the servers. Her face is red and her eyes are puffy, not from crying, but from what looks like a nasty cold. She’s got a tissue in her hand and her hair is disheveled.

“Abby, I’m really sorry. I thought I could manage today, but—”

“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 stand.

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

"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 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 dining

"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

Of course. The universe still has one more curveball up

"Certainly, Mr. Thompson," I manage, taking his outstretched hand. "We always aim to maintain the

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

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

“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

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 situation

Chapter 78

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, post-dinner rush.

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s... good,” I sigh, rubbing my eyes. “Did you

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

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

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

I shrug. “I’ll be fine. I’ll at least

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

I stare out the window for another few moments at the rain, listening as it patters against the glass. A quick glance at my coat hook reveals that my umbrella is nowhere to be found, and I yawn, realizing that my nap on my desk didn't really do much to cure my exhaustion.

"Alright, fine," I finally say, turning back to face Karl. He's got an almost triumphant look on his face, but hides it quickly. "Let's go."

...

The transition from the dim, cramped space of my office to Karl's sleek, black sedan is an unexpected comfort. The car smells like fresh leather and a hint of pine air freshener. The city lights, made blurry by the rain, bounce off of the windshield as we drive. I've always loved the city in the rain, especially the way the neon signs look on a stormy night; it's like something out of a movie.

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 was

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

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 go

"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 hang

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

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

"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

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

Chapter 79

Abby

The lunchtime rush is finally easing up. Much unlike yesterday, it's been a smooth day so far, and I feel relieved; but that's exactly when it happens.

I'm scanning the restaurant floor, making sure everything is running smoothly, when I hear the crash. It's a shocking mix of the sound of ceramic shattering, gasps, and the thud of a body hitting the floor, followed by a loud "Ow!"

My heart lurches into my throat as I rush over to see one of my waitresses, Sarah, sprawled on the ground amid a mess of broken dishes and spilled food.

“What happened?” I ask, my eyes darting around the room, locking onto a group of snickering teenagers at a nearby table.

“I saw it,” Karl says, striding past me. “Those little shits tripped her. Deliberately.”

In seconds, he’s at their table, his face dark with anger. “You think that was funny? Get up.”

“It was an accident!” one of the kids says, feigning innocence. But it’s clear that he’s full of shit. They all are.

I kneel beside Sarah, who’s clutching her wrist, her face pale. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“I think so,” she mumbles, grimacing as she attempts to move. I call over two other employees to clean the mess and guide Sarah to a chair.

Karl reappears, dragging the shame-faced teenagers behind him. “Apologize,” he commands, his voice icy. They mumble scattered apologies, looking anywhere but at Sarah or me.

Karl grins, extending a hand to each parent. “I appreciate your understanding. Trust me, there’s a lot to be learned in a kitchen. I would know.” He glances at me, winking subtly. My face flushes red, and I avert my gaze to

“Then it’s settled,” the man says, shaking Karl’s

As the parents walk toward the kitchen, presumably to have a serious chat with their demented offspring, I lean against the bar, suddenly drained but also

Karl leans next to me, his shoulder barely touching mine. “Not what you

“Not at all,” I say softly, a slight laugh escaping my lips. “But these past couple of days have been chock full of

He glances at me, his eyes warm and comforting. “Some surprises are good, don’t you

“Yeah,” I murmur, realizing the truth in his words. Maybe it’s the parents owning up to their kids’ behavior, or maybe it’s the simple fact that for once, something has gone right amidst all of this chaos. Whatever it is, I’m grateful. It could have been a lot

The rest of the day is a blur. I feel as though I’m on autopilot, mechanically checking off tasks, my mind drifting. Even when the dinner rush starts and the restaurant fills with the sound of chatter and clattering dishes, I feel detached, like I’m observing it all from a

Finally, the clock nears closing time, and I let out a breath I didn’t know I

The lights are dimmer now, casting a warm glow over the worn wooden tables and chairs. The last few patrons file out, murmuring their goodbyes, leaving behind the scent of lingering coffee and

I spot Karl at the far end of the restaurant, flipping chairs onto tables, readying the place for the night. Our eyes meet, and he starts

Chapter 80

Karl

The sun is barely hovering above the horizon as I pull up in front of Abby’s apartment building on Friday morning.

I can’t help but smile as I think about the day ahead of us. My black car idles, the hum of its engine drowned out by the pop song playing on the radio—a song I can easily imagine Abby singing along to, although I don’t personally care for that kind of music myself.

With a deep breath, I turn off the engine and grab the to-go cup of her favorite coffee from the cup holder.

She opens the door almost as soon as I knock, as though she was standing there, waiting. There's a look in her eyes that makes it seem as though she's still on the fence about going. But the second her eyes meet mine, the tension in her shoulders eases. Just a bit.

"Good morning," I greet, handing her the coffee. "Figured you could use this."

She grins, taking a sip immediately. "You read my mind."

There's a slight silence for a few moments. My eyes scan the inside of her apartment, where a bag sits on the floor behind her; it's packed haphazardly, no doubt. She's never been the neatest traveler.

"Oh, one more thing," she says before I can say anything. She slips her phone out of her pocket and begins tapping furiously on the screen while her coffee cup balances precariously in the crook of her elbow. "I have to tell Ethan—"

"Ethan will be fine without you," I say, snatching both the phone and the coffee cup away. "And so will the restaurant. Just enjoy your time off, Abby."

She glares at me for a moment, that signature stare of hers, but finally relaxes and lets out a deep sigh. "You're right."

We hit the road within a few minutes. The morning sun streams through the windows, casting her face in a warm amber glow. I plug in my phone and shuffle through a playlist I know she'll love.

"So, long drive ahead. Music?"

"Surprise me," she says, her fingers nervously tapping on the coffee

I hit play, and the first chords of a nostalgic song—one that played at our wedding—fill the car. She laughs, shaking her

"Come on, it's a classic," I defend, bobbing my head to the

Abby's lips twitch upwards into a smile, but it quickly fades. I watch from my peripherals as she averts her gaze to the window, occasionally sipping out of her coffee cup. She thinks I don't notice, but she's swaying back and forth to the song, ever so slightly. And that's enough

We've been riding in comfortable silence for about half an hour when Abby suddenly points to a barely visible building off the

"Remember that place?" she

I glance in the direction she's pointing, spotting the outline of an old, worn-down motel that has seen better days. "Ah, the Woodpecker Inn," I say, a smile forming on my own face. "We stayed there more

"Yeah." She pauses, her voice taking on a more nostalgic tone. "You proposed to me there,

I smirk, shaking my head. "Your memory is betraying you. I actually proposed at that fancy restaurant in the city. What was it called—La

Abby gives me a sideways look. "Karl, you've got it all wrong. You proposed at the Woodpecker Inn, right near the fireplace where we

Her voice trails off momentarily, leaving space where our memories belong. The fireplace at the Woodpecker Inn... I try not to think about it, because if I do, I'll get too distracted and possibly run the car off the

"I know what we used to do near that fireplace, but no, Abby, I proposed at La Bella Vita. I remember because the hostess almost kicked us out for disturbing the peace after you said

We go back and forth like this, both of us stubbornly clinging to our own versions of the story. The tension is playful, almost electric, a reminder of simpler times. I'm about to pull out my phone and call one of our mutual friends to settle the argument when Abby's eyes widen, and she bursts into laughter.

"We're both idiots," she exclaims.

“What?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“We’re both wrong,” she says, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. “It was the lighthouse.”

“The lighthouse?”

“Yes!” she says, shooting me a sideways glance. “The one near your pack’s territory. With the restaurant attached?”

The realization hits me like a bolt of lightning, and I burst into laughter too. “You’re right. The lighthouse! How could I forget?”

“We had dinner at the restaurant there, and you proposed at the top,” she says, her voice taking on an almost melancholic tone. “And then we went to the Woodpecker Inn.”

For a moment, there’s a softness in her voice, a glimmer of something that I’ve missed desperately. We lock eyes for the briefest of moments, and it’s as if the years peel away.

I miss those days, miss what we were. The regret hits me like a ton of bricks, settling heavy in my chest. It’s a regret that’s been there for too long, lurking in the shadows even when I was too stubborn to acknowledge it.

Finally, after another hour and a half of driving, the towering trees give way to the familiar entrance of my estate. I haven’t been here in a few months now, but it feels just as familiar as ever; especially with Abby beside me.

I throw her a quick glance, hoping that I don’t see any glimmer of doubt in her eyes. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” she says, though I catch a note of uncertainty in

I pull into the driveway, the old mansion coming into view. Before I can even cut the engine, the front door swings open. Gerald, our family butler for as long as I can remember, steps onto the porch. His face lights up when he sees me. "Mr. Karl!" he exclaims, shuffling out. "How nice to—" But then, his face falls the moment his gaze lands

"Miss... Abby? What are you doing here?" he asks, a thinly veiled note of disapproval coloring his

"Hello, Gerald," Abby replies, her tone neutral. "I'm

"Hmm," he mutters, and though he says nothing more, his eyes say it all. Maybe I should have mentioned it beforehand. But hell, if he has a problem with Abby being here, that's his issue to deal with,

I reach for her bag, but she's already grabbed it. "I got it," she says, our fingers brushing for a moment. Electricity shoots up my arm, and I have to resist the urge to pull her

"Shall we?" I gesture toward

She nods, stepping onto the cobblestone path that leads to the door. I catch up to her and we walk side by side, the tension palpable but not entirely uncomfortable. She glances around, taking in the towering oaks, the sprawling garden she once adored, the manor itself. There's a wistfulness in her eyes that tugs at my

Once inside, she continues to look around, this time at the grand staircase, the antique chandeliers, the aged paintings of our ancestors adorning the walls. All the things that make this place more than just a house. It's a home. It was her home, too, once upon a time. Maybe it will be her

"You okay?" I ask as we ascend the stairs. Her room—the master bedroom, and I've decided to take the guest room—is right at the top of the

"Yeah," she murmurs, but her voice quivers, betraying her

I unlock the door and swing it open, revealing the room she spent so many years in. It's been a few years since she's been gone, but I kept the furnishings the same. In fact, I couldn't sleep in here for the first two years; not since I thought she cheated on