

## His Kickass 81

### Chapter 81

Abby

The scent of mahogany and bergamot fills the air as I step into the room that was once mine—our room, really.

I feel so drawn to the familiarity of it all; the embroidered curtains, the chestnut armoire that I remember picking out myself, and the plush rug that used to cushion my bare feet in the mornings. Every little detail is still the same, just as I remember it. It's uncanny, really.

My fingers trace the intricate patterns on the upholstery of the armchair near the window. It's a bit surreal, being back in this space. I mean, this was my sanctuary once. Our sanctuary. But now, it's filled with... bittersweet memories. Maybe more bitter than sweet.

I move to the dresser next. That's when I see it: a photo of us, still sitting exactly where it used to be on top of the dresser—Karl and I laughing at something, looking so young, so naive. My eyes widen slightly as I gently pick it up. Did he have this picture up all this time?

As I hold the picture, something stirs in me. Tears begin to prick the backs of my eyes, and I have to set the frame back down with a ragged breath, laying the photo flat so I don't need to look at it. Suddenly, it feels all too stuffy in here, and I need to get out for a bit.

I make my way down the winding staircase and out through the large foyer, bypassing the glances of a few household staff. When I reach the back patio, I take a deep breath, as if I can finally breathe again. Then, pushing open the door, I step into the garden, a sanctuary that I used to escape to when the weight of the world felt unbearable.

The colors and smells envelop me instantly, filling my senses with a mix of nostalgia and tranquility. Rows of roses, lavender, and daisies stretch out in front of me like an artist's vivid canvas. I walk past a bunch of lilies, their heads tilted towards the sun, and reach the jasmine vine that was always my favorite. Leaning in, I take a deep sniff. Its scent is as intoxicating as I remember.

For a moment, I feel free from the memories and the speculation that my return is no doubt generating.

But then, feeling as though someone is watching me, I look up instinctively toward the mansion. Overhead in a window, that's where I see Gerald, the butler, staring at me through one of the back windows.

His face is inscrutable, but his eyes, they hold a certain...bewilderment? Or is it something else?

Then, the moment our gazes meet, he abruptly steps away from the window and disappears from

A flush creeps over my skin, a mix of embarrassment and curiosity. It must be odd for him to see me wandering around the garden, the ex-Luna now an unexpected visitor in her former home. How many people here still believe that I cheated on Karl with the

I shake my head, trying to dispel the uneasy feeling that settles in my gut. Surely he was just surprised to see me. After all, I doubt Karl made a big announcement about my return. I just hope that he at least dispelled the theory about my

Deciding it's time to go back inside, I take one last look around the garden, breathing in deeply to steady myself. Then, I make my way back towards the house. Just as I reach the patio door, it swings open, and there stands Elsie, one of the maids I had always been close

"Abby!" Her eyes light up, and before I know it, I'm wrapped in a warm, affectionate

"Elsie, it's so good to see you," I murmur, returning the hug with just as

"You look amazing," she exclaims, pulling back to look at me. "Is life outside treating

I laugh. "As well as it can, I

A moment of silence hangs in the air before she finally asks the question that I've been dreading. "So... Are you and Karl..." Her words trail off, but her implication is

My cheeks flush a deep red. “No, no, nothing like that,” I assure her. “We’re just friends. He invited me to visit,

Her lips curl into a knowing smirk, and I instantly regret my choice of words. But instead of making a comment, she simply nods. “Well, it’s really nice to have you back, even if it’s just for a... visit.”

The subtext is as clear as daylight. In her eyes, Karl and I could never just be “friends”. And as much as I’d like to deny it, a part of me wonders if she’s right.

“Thanks, Elsie,” I say softly. “It’s good to be back.”

With that, I make my way back into the house, each step carrying a different weight, a different emotion. As I reach the top of the staircase, I hear Karl’s voice drifting from the living room, and my heart does a strange little leap. Maybe Elsie’s smirk held more truth than I’d like to admit.

Just then, I hear the familiar ping of my phone and my thoughts snap back to the present. Reluctantly, I pull it from my pocket and see a message from Ethan. He’s asking a question about inventory, and I know that I should let it wait until I get home. But before I know it, I’m typing out a reply, unable to resist the urge to be a boss for five minutes.

I’m halfway through responding when the sound of footsteps approaches behind me. “Ahem.”

Startled, I whip around to see Karl standing on the step below me. He has a knowing look on his face, and a sparkle in his eye.

He moves closer, and for a split second, I’m transported back to a time when this was an everyday occurrence.

“You’re not working, are you?” he asks, gesturing to the phone in my hand. “You’re supposed to be enjoying the weekend off.”

With an embarrassed shrug, I avert my gaze. “Maybe a little.”

Karl reaches for my phone, gently taking it from me. “Abby, Ethan and the restaurant will survive just fine without you for a couple of days. Just try to relax. Please.”

I look at him, partly exasperated but mostly grateful. He always had a knack for cutting through my excuses. “Okay, okay. No more work. I get

A smile brightens his face, and it’s a smile I’ve missed more than I care to admit. “Well, look,” he says, “I just finished up a couple of things here, and now I’m free until my meeting. How about some coffee at that cafe you used

...

The cafe hasn’t changed much since I was last here three

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air, mingled with the comforting scents of baked goods. Even the barista seems to remember us, shooting a discreet, knowing look

Karl orders our drinks—black coffee for him and a hazelnut latte for me, just like old times—and we decide to take them to go. Stepping out, we make our way to the nearby park where I used to lose myself in books and Karl occasionally joined me, pretending to read but really just watching the

That was before he started spending too much time as an Alpha, and leaving little time for me.

“It’s... Just as I remember it,” I say, taking a sip of my latte as we walk along the

He smiles. “Some things

But some things do. Like us. Like me. And yet, the more we walk, the more the lines blur. The trees are still tall and majestic, the air is fresh, and the world around us feels like it’s stuck in a time capsule—a snapshot of our

Chapter 82

Abby

The warm afternoon sunlight casts dappled patterns on the ground as we walk through the park, holding cardboard coffee cups in our hands. The warmth seeps through the cup, mingling with the crisp air. It's a nice moment, bordering on something that feels almost normal.

And then we stop in front of it—the old oak tree.

Its massive trunk and sprawling branches are as iconic as they come. It's always been a sort of landmark in this small town, here long before the town was ever built. But to me, it's more than just a tree. It's a bitter reminder of another life, of another version of us.

We took our wedding photos under this tree.

"Do you remember?" Karl asks, his eyes meeting mine as if he's searching for something—recognition, perhaps.

"Of course I remember," I snap, maybe a little too quickly. "How could I forget?"

He looks taken aback, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion. Then, as though sensing he's wandered into a minefield, he falls silent.

We stand there for another minute, neither of us able to speak. Then I can't hold back any longer.

"Did you ever tell the staff the truth?" I ask, my voice edged with more tension than I'd intended. "That I never actually cheated on you with the gardener? That it was a terrible mistake?"

Karl goes silent, the creases on his forehead deepening. I wait for what feels like an eternity, my patience waning with each passing second.

"Karl?"

He sighs. "No, Abby, I didn't make an official announcement."

Anger and hurt surge within me, mingling with a heavy dose of disbelief. And yet, somehow, I expected this. It's just like Karl, isn't it? "That must be why Gerald was giving me dirty looks from the window

"Gerald did what?" Karl's eyes flash, a ripple of anger surfacing before he reins it

I blanch, regretting that I let that slip. "It's nothing, really. I just caught him giving me an odd look. And he seemed... perturbed when I

Karl's jaw clenches, and for a moment, it looks like he might explode. Then he exhales deeply, as though forcing himself to calm. "I'll speak with

"And what about setting the record straight?" I press, my voice filled with frustration.

He falls silent again, and my annoyance flares up

"Karl? Why didn't you clear my

"I... I thought it would make me look incompetent," he finally admits, avoiding my eyes. "That I couldn't even handle my personal matters

"Incompetent?" I retort, incredulous. "So my reputation gets tarnished because you're worried about your image? That's not fair, Karl. You need to man up and do something about

He looks at me, his eyes meeting mine without evasion this time. "You're right. I'll handle it. I'm sorry,

Admittedly, I'm a bit shocked. Karl is so willingly offering to make things right. I was so angry with him, and yet somehow, he's exceeding my

But before I can say anything else, he changes the subject. "Where do you want to go for

For a moment, I consider naming one of the countless restaurants we used to frequent, each carrying its own set of memories. But then a different idea pops into my head.

“I’m tired, actually,” I say. “I’d rather just stay in.”

He nods, the tension still lingering between us, but easing somewhat. “Alright, I can order from anywhere you want. Just say the word.”

I hesitate, but then the thought solidifies as a soft smile works its way across my lips. “You know what? I want to cook. In my old kitchen.”

...

I slice through an onion, its layers falling apart under my knife. The pot simmers on the stove, filling the air with the aroma of garlic and herbs.

It’s soothing, grounding, to be cooking in my old kitchen. The sleek stainless steel countertops are juxtaposed against the warm amber glow from the overhead light, reminding me of old days. I add a pinch of salt to the pot, watching the crystals dissolve into the bubbling sauce. Then, footsteps echo from the hallway.

“Smells amazing in here,” Karl says as he walks in, his eyes meeting mine for a moment before landing on the pot. “Whatcha cooking?”

“Spaghetti Bolognese,” I reply, stirring the pot once more. “I remember it was one of your favorites.”

“Still is,” he grins, moving closer. “Need any help?”

I look at him, momentarily caught off guard. It would be so easy to say yes, to let him slide back into that role he once played so perfectly. But I hesitate, unsure. I’m still upset about earlier, about finding out that he never cleared my name. But at the same time, I can’t bring myself to be too mad at him—not when he so willingly agreed to set the record straight. And not when we’re in our old home together, and the nostalgia is taking over me.

Finally, I nod. "Could you chop those mushrooms for me?"

He grabs a knife and starts slicing, his movements as fluid as they always were. For a brief moment, the kitchen feels like it used to—full of life, laughter, and the smell of delicious

As we work side by side, I can't help but marvel at how well we function together. The synergy is still there, as if time hasn't changed anything. I find myself imagining what it would be like to have him by my side at

He'd be the perfect sous chef—steady,

My lips part, prepared to ask him if he would join me for the competition. But at the last moment, I close them, shaking my head to

What am I thinking? This is just dinner,

"Abby?" Karl asks, snapping me back to reality. "You good? You looked like you were about to say

I shake my head, glancing away.

Finally, the meal is ready. We sit down at the dining table, a space that once hosted countless meals, countless memories. The spaghetti is tender, the sauce rich

"This is incredible, Abby," Karl says after the first bite, looking up at me with sincerity in

"Thank you," I reply, my heart swelling at the compliment. There's a lot unsaid between us, but for the moment, the food says it

We drink red wine, each sip easing away the day's worries. Conversation flows easily after the first few sips, filling the room with an ambiance that's

"I miss this," he says softly as he refills my glass. "I

Chapter 83

Karl

The mahogany door clicks shut behind me as I step into the conference room.

Members of the council, influential businessmen and entrepreneurs who hold significant power in the community, are already seated around the long table. I can feel the weight of their expectations hanging in the air, but right now, my thoughts are preoccupied with something—or rather, someone—else.

Before I can approach the table, my secretary, Gianna, is waiting by the door for me. "Good morning, Alpha Karl," she says, her voice low and even as usual. "Nice to see you after all this time."

I nod as I slip my jacket off and hang it on the hook. "I'm glad to be back."

"And you're staying, I presume?" she asks, her eyes glinting with something unreadable.

For a moment, I feel almost like I'm being put on the spot. The others are preoccupied with their preparations, but Gianna's gaze is unwavering. I always knew that she disapproved of my... adventure out to the city to win Abby back, but there's something else in her gaze. Something I can't quite put my finger on.

"We'll see," I say, trying to be vague.

Gianna blinks slowly before handing me the meeting's agenda in a leather bound folder. As she does, our fingers brush, and she leans in.

"Sir, I know this might not be my place, but I heard that your... ex-wife is staying with you. Is that correct?"

Her sudden choice of words gives me pause, especially in this setting. Slowly turning to face her, I can't help but notice a subtle furrow of her brows, a tightening around her eyes. "And if she is, would that be that a problem?" I ask, keeping my voice neutral.

"No, not a problem," she says, but her hesitation tells me otherwise. "Just... be careful around her, Karl. You know how things

I look at her squarely. "Abby never cheated on me. The gardener manipulated the situation. Let's not

Gianna's expression shifts, a hint of guilt flashing across her eyes, but before I can question it further, the room settles into a hushed silence, signaling the meeting's commencement. Gianna takes her seat, and I push my concerns aside, focusing on the task at

"Let's get started," I say, scanning the room. "First on

The meeting progresses smoothly enough. Various issues are discussed: business acquisitions, investment opportunities, community initiatives. But it's the last item on the agenda that makes my

My brother's condition.

"As you all may know," the local renowned physician and member of the council, Dr. Thompson, begins, "your brother may be waking up from his coma soon. How does that affect your position

All eyes are on me, probing, scrutinizing. I maintain my composure. "I welcome it. If he wakes up, maybe a little friendly competition for the role of Alpha wouldn't be a bad thing." Of course, my words are couched in a hint of humor. But at the same time, I can't entirely deny the fact that there's a bit of truth behind my

I've been the Alpha here for years. No matter how much I love my brother, I won't give up my position so easily. And besides, who's to say that he'll even be physically able to lead

A low murmur courses through the room at my words. Then Mark, a council member who's always been vocal about his opinions, speaks

“But you’ve been working at a restaurant in the city, haven’t you, Karl?” he asks.

I shrug. “That is correct,” I say. “And what of it?”

Mark pauses, then shoots me an apprehensive look. “Perhaps being Alpha isn’t your top priority.”

The words hang heavy in the air, and I can feel the atmosphere shift, the tension climbing up a notch. I look him straight in the eyes.

“My reasons for working there are not up for discussion,” I say, letting my words cut through the room like a knife. “Meeting adjourned.”

There’s a collective rustling as the council members gather their papers and stand, exchanging curt nods and stiff handshakes as they leave the room. I stay seated for a moment longer, letting the weight of the meeting sink in.

“Karl,” Gianna says once they’re gone, snapping me out of my reverie. “I think you should come to dinner tonight. We need to discuss a few more things.”

I look up at her. There’s something off about her tone, something I can’t quite place. Maybe because of that, I wind up making a snap decision. “You know what?” I say, standing. “That’s an excellent idea. We’ll hold a dinner at my house tonight.”

For a moment, a peculiar expression crosses her face. It’s fleeting, but it’s there—a mix of surprise and something else I can’t identify. She quickly masks it with a professional smile.

“Very well, sir. I’ll see you tonight.”

...

As I settle into the leather seat of my car, the engine purrs to life, but I don't immediately pull out of the parking lot. My fingers drum on the steering wheel, my mind racing through the events of

Abby's return home for the weekend, the council's thinly veiled criticism, Gianna's strange behavior—each thought competes for attention, but it's Abby who ultimately wins

My wolf stirs, breaking his prolonged silence. “You know, this dinner tonight could be a good opportunity. A date with Abby, gaining her

I chuckle softly, already ahead of him. “That was the goal, my friend. I'm even thinking of taking her out shopping for a new dress before dinner. Let her choose whatever she wants, no price tag too

Memories flood back: me buying Abby the latest designer handbags, high-end jewelry, whisking her off on surprise getaways. I loved spoiling her, loved the shine it would bring to her eyes, or so I

“But did Abby ever really enjoy being spoiled?” My wolf's question catches me

I sigh, taking a moment to shift through years of memories and moments. Then it hits me. A flashback steals over

We were younger then, still grappling with the early years of our relationship and my role as Alpha. I had missed our anniversary dinner due to an urgent Alpha matter. When I returned home late that night, I found her in our bedroom, crying softly into her

In an effort to make it up to her, I went out the next day and bought an expensive diamond necklace. I was certain it would cheer her up, that the sheer extravagance would wipe away her tears

Chapter 84

Abby

I'm seated on a lounge chair in the back lawn, soaking in the sun and the chirping of birds as a soothing backdrop. The air smells of freshly cut grass, and I'm surrounded by the vibrant colors of the garden—reds, yellows, and blues.. It's peaceful, almost idyllic, but my mind is elsewhere.

I keep thinking about Karl's words yesterday, how he never made an official announcement about my fidelity. All morning, I've been getting strange looks from members of the staff—aside from Elsie, who has never been anything but pleasant.

Part of me wants to announce it myself to set the record straight, but something tells me that most of the staff who are unabashedly loyal to Karl wouldn't believe me. And besides, he should do it himself. He should be the one who admits to his shortcomings, not me.

Suddenly, my phone rings, breaking me out of my reverie. I glance down and let out a soft sigh. Ethan's name is flashing on the screen.

"Hey Ethan, what's up?" I answer, my voice casual, but inside I'm wondering if something went wrong after all. Perhaps the restaurant went up in flames, or that food critic came back for another bad experience, or the place got robbed. Maybe all three.

"Abby, sorry to bother you on your time off. Quick question—how would you like us to handle the supplier transition for next week? The new seafood vendor is offering different terms."

I open my mouth to dive into a detailed explanation, logistics dancing at the forefront of my mind, when I remember Karl's words about taking time off. A moment of conflict grips me, but I decide to heed his advice.

"Um, go ahead and negotiate the best terms possible but keep it in line with our usual arrangements. And if you could, save any future questions for when I'm back. I'm supposed to be taking a break."

"Ah, right. I apologize for interrupting your vacation. Where'd you wind up going anyway, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm... visiting family," I lie smoothly, guilt settling somewhere in my stomach. I can't tell Ethan—or anyone, for that matter—that I'm visiting my old home with my ex-husband.

Just then, the phone rustles, and a new voice bursts through. "Abby! It's Chloe. Are you with Karl?"

But just as I'm opening my mouth to talk to him,

"Sorry for the short notice, Abby, but I'm hosting an Alpha dinner tonight at our place," he announces, hanging his jacket on the hook beside

An Alpha dinner. I feel a sudden jolt of excitement that momentarily overpowers my need to confront Karl; it's been so long since I had the chance to prepare a feast for the Alphas. My fingers already itch to chop, saute,

"Oh, that sounds fantastic. What's the

"Mainly council matters, and a few other things," he replies, but there's a pause that tells me he's not giving me the full story. "I'd like you to attend as my

His words take me by surprise.

He nods, his eyes searching my face. "Yes, you don't need to worry about the food. Just be there with

There's a gravity to his words, as though he's trying to bridge a chasm between us with this single dinner. But I'm not ready to play the perfect Alpha's wife. Those days have come and gone. That's not me anymore, and we're

"So, all of your old dresses are still in the wardrobe, or I can take you out shopping if

"Sorry," I interrupt, shaking my head. "That won't be necessary. I won't be your

His face falls for a split second. He looks disappointed, thoroughly sol. But I won't back down on this. I expect him to throw a tantrum, or at the very least to make a complaint. And yet, somehow, he regains his composure without a hint of

Chapter 85

Abby

I'm in the kitchen organizing my thoughts, sketching out a mental roadmap for tonight's three-course extravaganza as I mumble under my breath.

"Sauvignon Blanc with the salmon... Hmm... Maybe I should prepare cappuccinos with the torte for dessert..."

Just then, the door swings open, and in walks Karl, bags of groceries in hand. Gianna, his ever-present secretary, trails closely behind him.

My heart does a little dance at the sight of Karl, a knee-jerk reaction I've never been able to fully quell. Even with my wolf being asleep, the presence he creates when he walks into a room always makes her lurch in my mind, as though she can always sense him in her sleep.

In a way, it's frustrating. I want to yell at my wolf for leaving me alone and then momentarily reappearing every time the man who broke my heart walks into the room, but I know it won't do any good.

However, something else is on my mind right now. I can't help but notice how well they seem to get along, Gianna laughing at something Karl has just said. A pang of jealousy surges through me.

"Hey, Abby. Got everything you asked for," Karl announces, setting the bags on the countertop.

I shake off the jealousy, reminding myself that Karl and I are just friends now. "Thank you, both of you. This means a lot to me."

"It's nothing," Karl replies, a softness in his eyes that makes my stomach churn with a mix of nostalgia and longing. "Need anything else?"

I shake my head. "No. I'm good, thanks." Then, I turn to Gianna, determined to be cordial. "How are you

"I'm fine," she responds tersely, a frosty undertone to her voice. Then, shifting her attention to Karl, she says, "Could I speak to you privately? We need to sort some things out before

“Of course,” Karl says, casting a glance in my direction as if to say ‘I’ll be back soon.’ They both leave the room, Gianna leading the way with a sense

I watch them go, feeling a strange knot tighten in my stomach. It’s not jealousy, not exactly, but it’s something—something that

Behind me, Elsie snorts with what sounds like outright disgust. “Gods, I can’t stand that

Chuckling at Elsie’s blunt honesty, I turn back to the counter. “Let’s not focus on her, Elsie. We’ve got a dinner to prepare, and it has to

“You’re right, Abby,” she says. “Though, for the record, you’ve got no reason to be jealous. No one can take your place, especially

“I’m not jealous,” I insist, although her words make me feel unexpectedly warm. “Karl and I are just friends. I have no interest in

Elsie gives me a look that says she knows better, but she doesn’t push it. Instead, she helps me unpack the groceries, laying out the fresh salmon, vibrant vegetables, and a variety of spices and

My hands reach for the ingredients, eager to transform them into something

...

The kitchen is a lively mixture of scents and spices as I work with meticulous attention.

“Else, can you hand me the Herbes de Provence?”

“Sure thing, Abby.”

A few years ago, when I was still the Luna, I prepared this very meal for the Alphas from neighboring packs. A triumphant smile tugs at my lips. Tonight is a reminder that I haven't lost my touch.

My concentration is interrupted when another servant walks in. "The Alphas are arriving."

"Just a few more minutes," I say, not taking my eyes off the salmon filet sizzling in the pan.

Just as I'm about to declare it perfect, I realize that the crust isn't quite what I wanted. It's nearly there, but not quite. It would be easier to just let it slide, to declare it good enough, but that's not me. That's not Abby, the renowned chef, the one who always gets it right.

"Dammit," I mutter under my breath, reaching for a fresh piece of salmon. I'm about to season it when I overhear voices filtering from the dining room.

"Well, you should have seen the look on her face, trying so hard to impress everyone with her little cooking skills. As if we've forgotten that our ex-Luna has turned into nothing more than a pathetic housemaid."

I recognize that voice: Gianna. I can see the back of her head, her perfectly curled hair and tight dress, as she saunters past the kitchen door. Heat surges up my neck and into my cheeks. A pathetic

That's it.

With sudden clarity, I remember that the wardrobe upstairs still houses my former life—gowns and dresses, a collection of silk and sequins. A cunning plan starts to take

"Elsie, could you please watch the stove? Take the salmon off in five minutes and let Karl know that dinner is

"Erm, Abby...?" she starts, but I'm already ripping off my apron and dashing out of the kitchen and up the back steps two at a

A line of designer gowns greets me as I slide open the wardrobe doors. My fingers hover over the clothes for a moment before settling on a dress that I had once loved dearly—a stunning deep-red gown that fits like a dream, even now, years

I take a glance in the mirror before deciding to change my hairstyle. A few minutes later, the neat bun I was wearing before is now elegantly curled, cascading down my back. I don't need much makeup; just some mascara, a hint of eyeshadow, and a bold red lip to match

As I get ready, I can't help but wonder why I'm doing this. Is it really just to prove something to Gianna and her judgmental friends, or is it...

Am I, perhaps, trying to reclaim my spot

Minutes later, I look into the mirror and see a transformation. Makeup done to perfection, hair cascading down like a silken waterfall, and a dress that reminds me of a time when I was the epitome of poise and

Chapter 86

Abby

Stepping off the last stair, the whispers and murmurs reach a crescendo before falling into hushed silence. My gaze lands on Karl, and I revel in the astonishment flickering in his eyes.

There's a moment of silence as we gaze at each other. For a moment, things are like they used to be: I'm the Luna, Karl's wife, revered by the people around me.

In my shimmering red dress, I feel like a glimmer of my old self, plus or minus a few things. I feel more mature now, but that's how I prefer it. And as Karl gazes at me, taking me in, I think he prefers it this way, too.

But why am I doing all of this, really? Am I really doing this as a knee jerk reaction toward Gianna's comments, to prove her wrong? Or is it something else?

“Ladies and gentlemen,” hKarl begins, seemingly regaining his composure, “I’d like to reintroduce Abby. As you may know, she’s prepared tonight’s meal for us. Please, join us for dinner.”

A ripple of confusion sweeps across the room, but nobody dares to question Karl’s decision, not in front of their Alpha.

I gracefully move towards the dining table, feeling the weight of dozens of eyes on me. Some are bewildered, others are intrigued, but most are just stunned.

But as I approach, I can already sense an invisible barricade forming. Gianna is seated in my old chair, situated right next to where Karl would sit. The spot I used to occupy as his Luna, the seat that I thought would be mine forever in a strange way.

Our eyes meet, and Gianna sends a sneer my way, a message loud and clear. “This is my territory now,” her expression seems to say.

I could argue, could cause a scene, but I decide against it. Tonight isn’t about claiming old territory; it’s about breaking ground and proving people wrong. I begin to veer towards another chair, one a respectful distance away from Karl and his secretary.

But just as I’m about to take a seat, Karl’s voice slices through the air, tinged with authority. “Gianna, would you please move? Abby should sit there. It’s the Luna’s

A collective intake of breath sucks the air out of the room. All eyes swivel between Gianna, Karl, and me.

“But... Abby isn’t the Luna anymore. She’s the ex-Luna,” Gianna retorts, barely masking her indignance.

Karl locks eyes with her, unyielding. “It doesn’t matter. Abby is my special guest for this evening. She’s gone to a lot of trouble to prepare the entire meal for us, so she deserves her old

Gianna’s face tightens, but she stands, moving her plate and glass to another seat with an air of begrudging compliance. As I take my place beside Karl, I lean in to whisper, “You didn’t have to do

He turns to me, his eyes earnest. "I wanted

Then, suddenly, Karl rises from his chair, his gaze sweeping over the room filled with pack members and allies, some of whom were my friends once. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention, there's something I'd like to say before we begin our meal."

The room falls silent. Even Gianna, still sulking at her relocated seat, can't seem to hide her

"I know I've misled many of you," Karl starts, his voice filled with something that sounds like regret. "I made it public that Abby was cheating on me during our time together. And during that time, I believed it to be the truth."

"But recent tests and investigations have revealed that it was all a grave misunderstanding," he continues, his eyes meeting mine. "Abby never had any acts of infidelity."

Murmurs break out around the room, but I'm too stunned to register them.

"I would like to formally apologize to Abby for tarnishing her reputation and for making her out to be someone she's not," Karl says, each word heavy with sincerity. "I would also like to apologize to my friends, colleagues, and staff for not coming clean sooner. I was too childish to admit my faults."

Then he turns his gaze to me, and his next words strike me like a bolt of lightning.

"I am striving to be a better man, one who doesn't make rash decisions based on falsehoods or let his pride dictate his actions," he confesses, his eyes searching mine for something—forgiveness, maybe, or perhaps just understanding.

For a few seconds, it's as if we're the only two people in the room. Words fail me. My mind is a thicket of emotions, feelings too intricate and tangled to put into coherent thought.

When Karl finally sits back down, a part of me wants to run away, to escape this newfound reality where the lines between past and present blur. But I stay put, because running would mean letting go, and letting go means losing a piece of myself that I've just rediscovered.

“Now,” Karl says, raising his glass. “Let’s enjoy this delicious dinner prepared by a renowned chef.”

The room comes alive as plates are set and glasses are filled. The aroma of the three-course meal I’ve painstakingly prepared fills the air, and the murmurs return with time.

“The food smells incredible,” remarks one of the Betas, breaking the ice. Others nod, murmuring their agreement.

“Yes, it’s delicious, too,” Karl adds, casting me a meaningful look from across the table.

Except for Gianna. Oh, I catch her alright, barely taking a bite, making faces like she’s ingesting poison. She doesn’t speak throughout the entire dinner, and when plates are taken away, hers is still full. She refuses the dessert and the cappuccinos, resorting instead to swirling her wine around in her glass with a deathly stare on her

My insides coil with irritation, but I let it pass. I don’t need her approval, not when I see the look of pure satisfaction on the faces of everyone else in the room.

“Would anyone like to dance?” Karl announces once the plates are

A buzz fills the air as couples pair off, leaving Karl and me in a widening circle of emptiness. Then he extends his hand towards me, a silent request that sends an unexpected thrill up my

“Would you do me the honor?” he

“I... I shouldn’t,” I murmur.

But Karl’s eyes are stern. “Dance with me.

My heart races as I take his hand, letting him lead me to the makeshift dance floor. For a moment, it feels like old times. His body is pressed close to mine, his hand is resting on the small of my back, and the scent of his cologne overwhelms me. It's all I can do to keep my gaze averted and keep myself from

But when I glance up finally, I notice that the expression on Karl's face has shifted. His eyes lock onto mine, holding a depth of emotion that I can't quite decipher.

"I thought you didn't want to attend the dinner," he says quietly. "What

Chapter 87

Karl

As I pull Gianna into the dimly lit study, the atmosphere is filled with a tension that's been brewing for weeks now, maybe even longer. The door clicks shut behind us, sealing us off from the guests, the judgment, and the murmurs.

For a moment, we are suspended in a bubble of silence, and I finally address what's been gnawing at me.

"A pathetic housemaid?" I ask.

Gianna shoots me a quizzical look, but I can see the gears turning in her head. She's trying not to display emotion, which is just a dead giveaway. "A... what?" she asks, taking a step back.

I take another step toward her, closing the gap once again. "Don't play dumb," I growl. "Is that really what you called her?"

"Called who?" Gianna's voice begins to rise ever so slightly.

"Abby, of course," I say, folding my arms across my chest.

For a few moments, Gianna is silent. Then, mustering a tense smile, she cocks her head to the side. "I'm sorry, Karl, but I have no clue what you're talking about."

I feel exasperated. Here I am, caught between my so-called 'loyal' secretary and the woman who I want to win back. In the back of my mind, I can feel my wolf, urging me to go with my gut and take Abby's side.

"Gianna, what exactly is your issue with Abby?" The question spills out of my mouth before I can stop it, like a tidal wave of annoyance

She avoids eye contact, feigning a look of innocence that I know is far from the truth. "Issue? Karl, I have no idea what you're talking about. You must

I lock my gaze onto hers, narrowing my eyes. "Don't lie, Gianna. It doesn't suit you. Do you honestly think I didn't notice your little performance tonight? Trying to take her seat? Making faces? Refusing to touch

She meets my gaze for a moment, her eyes twinkling with a hint of defiance before looking away. "I don't have a 'problem' with Abby. I'm simply cautious, that's all. Isn't that what you pay me for? To be vigilant for

My arms fold across my chest. "Vigilant? Is that what you call it? It seems more like you're just indignant and

She tilts her head, allowing a slight smirk to cross her face. "Indignant is a

"Perhaps, but it's accurate," I growl. "You've been throwing shade at Abby all evening, and I can't help but wonder why. Abby has been nothing but polite and courteous, yet you treat her like she's beneath you. Why is

Gianna hesitates for a moment, her eyes darting away from mine as though she's searching for a way out of this conversation. "Well, can you blame me?" she finally blurts out. "She must be hiding something. No one is

I step closer, my Alpha aura amplifying, letting her know that her half-baked excuses won't work with me. "That's a dangerous assumption to make, Gianna. Now, be honest with me: What's really

Gianna shifts her weight uncomfortably, and I can almost hear the cogs in her mind whirring as she decides how much to reveal. Finally, she relents, sighing in a defeated manner. "Alright, fine. I don't want you getting back together with her, okay? Is that what you want to hear?"

The admission throws me off guard, and for a moment, I'm speechless. "Why? What could you possibly have against that?"

She crosses her arms, matching my stance. "Karl, let's be real. Abby was a part of your past. A past filled with complications and drama. I just think you can do better. Much better."

An incredulous laugh escapes my lips. "Better? And since when did my personal life become your concern?"

Her voice lowers, almost to a whisper. "Look, I've worked closely with you for years, Karl. I care about the wellbeing of this pack, and by extension, you. She is just a wrench being thrown into your livelihood."

Her words throw me off. How long has this been going on? How long had Gianna secretly been wishing that Abby wasn't in the picture? And how many lengths has she attempted to go to in order to ensure that Abby can't be in the picture?

I lean in, my voice tinged with both annoyance and incredulity. "My choices, especially about who I choose as my Luna, are not up for debate or discussion. Not by you, not by anyone. I intend to bring Abby back into my life. She deserves that spot, and nothing you say or do will change that. Do you understand?"

But then, just as I think I have a handle on the situation, Gianna's next words hit me like a tidal wave. "Fine," she says, huffing. "You're a man, you can make your own decisions. But Karl, there's something else."

I sigh. "What is it?"

Gianna pauses for a few moments. The silence feels almost too heavy, but as she utters her next words, I wish that she hadn't. "It's not just that I think you can do better. I...I have feelings for

My eyes widen, my mouth agape as I process her revelation. "What? Is

She looks away momentarily, her face flushed. "Yes. It's been true for a long time, actually.

"Years?" I find myself incredulous and bewildered. "Why am I hearing about this now? How come I never

She laughs bitterly. "Why would you? You had everything you wanted. You had Abby, you had your pack. Where did I fit into that grand scheme of things? I was just your secretary, someone who took care of your schedules, meetings, and paperwork. So, I kept it hidden. My feelings, my

I fall silent, my mind racing to make sense of this sudden and complex twist. My hand involuntarily goes up to rub my temples as I try to process her words, to sift through the layers of emotional and ethical dilemmas

Seizing the momentary pause, Gianna suddenly rushes toward me, arms outstretched, as if attempting a hug. "Karl, all I want is to be with you. And I've seen the way you look at me. I know you have those feelings for me,

But she's dead wrong. As her arms wrap around me, I react without thinking. Startled, my reflexes kick in, and I find myself shoving her away. "Have you gone mad?" I

However, she stumbles, her ridiculously high heels teetering dangerously as she almost crashes to the ground. Instinctively, I reach out and grab her arm, steadying her before she falls. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean

Chapter 88

Abby

I stand by the long table, the air thick with the scent of gourmet hors d'oeuvres and sparkling wine. Idly, I pick up a tiny pastry, turning it this way and that before setting it back on the plate.

As if to steel my nerves and try not to think about what Karl is saying to Gianna in the other room, I'm arranging the treats into some semblance of symmetry when a familiar voice that I haven't heard in years suddenly pulls me away from my thoughts.

"Abby, darling! It's so good to see you again!"

I turn to find Rebecca, the wife of one of the Betas, her face glowing with genuine delight. I flash a smile, the corners of my lips straining just a bit.

"Sarah, it's been too long! How have you been?"

She glides over, her high heels clicking against the polished floor. "Oh, you know, busy with pack life, community events, all that jazz. But never mind me; look at you! You're stunning as ever!"

I chuckle, trying to deflect the attention. "Thank you. You look absolutely fabulous tonight."

We share a few pleasantries, talking about fashion and the unusually mild weather we've been experiencing. But the conversation takes a turn when Sarah skillfully steers it into more personal waters.

"So, Abby," she says, her eyes twinkling, "I couldn't help but notice how cozy you and Karl have been tonight. Is there a chance for reconciliation? The pack could really use a union like that, you know."

My cheeks flush. "Sarah, I'm flattered, but no. We're friends, and I prefer it that way. So yes, I suppose we've reconciled in that regard, but not in a

Sarah looks a bit disappointed, but understanding at the same time. "Ah, I see. Well, either way, I'm glad he made that announcement tonight. I'll admit, I was a bit worried when I saw you—thinking that our Alpha was getting back with a cheater and all that—but to find out that it was all just a

Caught off guard, I hesitate before answering. "Yes, it was a mistake. I hope that the word

Sarah's eyes light up. "Oh, of course," she says, smirking. "You know me; I'll make sure all of my girlfriends hear about it. I'm sure a lot of people will be relieved. You two were always the golden couple, after all. Lots of hearts were broken when the marriage

I shift uncomfortably, unsure of how to respond. Yes, I'm sure a lot of hearts were broken. Especially

"Well," she beams before I have to come up with an answer, "I should mingle. But really, it was nice seeing you. And the food was

"Thank you," I say, relieved. "You should come visit my restaurant

"I might have to do just

With that, she gives me a quick hug, her perfume wafting around me like a cloud, and then moves on to mingle with other guests, leaving me to my plate of

Despite the surface-level cheeriness of our conversation, I feel drained now. I didn't expect to field questions about Karl and me so openly, so soon.

My fingers lightly touch the edge of the table, steadying myself. Each word from our conversation echoes in my head, their implications adding weight to the heavy thoughts already occupying my mind.

Sarah meant well—I know she did. She's always been one of the more empathetic wives in the pack. But even well-intended conversations can pull you underwater when you're already struggling to stay afloat.

I glance around the room, the elegant crowd still buzzing with energy, but I find myself disconnected from it all.

That's when I realize I need a break, a moment to breathe away from prying eyes and loaded questions. With one last glance at my strategically arranged hors d'oeuvres, I make my decision.

Steeling myself, I slip away from the table and make my way toward the exit, my heels clicking a hasty retreat. I navigate through the maze-like hallways, feeling the atmosphere change as I distance myself from the crowd, as I distance myself from the version of me they all want to see.

That's when I spot it—the door to Karl's private office, slightly ajar, a sliver of light spilling out into the dim corridor. I push it open, and the sight that greets me is comfortably familiar.

Bookshelves lining the walls, a leather armchair, and Karl's sleek, darkwood desk hosting his laptop.

Except, the laptop screen is glowing, wide open. Karl must've forgotten to shut it down.

A voice at the back of my head tells me to leave it alone, to walk away. But another, louder voice—perhaps fueled by my concealed desire to know more about what Karl has been up to all these years—prompts me to step closer. I rationalize it by telling myself that I'm just turning it off for him.

As I move the mouse to wake the screen from its screensaver, an open email catches my eye. I know I shouldn't read it, but I can't tear my eyes away. It mentions rare ingredients and specialized supplies. Normally, I'd ignore something like this, figuring it's just some work that Karl is doing in his spare time, something for the

But it's the name that makes my eyes glue to

"Hey, Karl," the email reads, "I hate to say this, but I've already run out of those rare ingredients. I don't suppose you'd be willing to share the name of your supplier so I can order more? I'd really appreciate it. Thanks.

Adam, as in my ex-fiancee. Adam, who came out as gay and broke up with

Why would he be in contact with Karl about rare ingredients? When did Karl supply him with any in the first place, and why? More than anything, why didn't I know about this before? The questions rush through my mind like a torrent, each more confusing than

And then, the atmosphere changes. I sense it before I see it—the room suddenly feels smaller, more confined. I whip around, and there he is—Gerald, Karl’s loyal butler, his eyes narrowed into

“What do we have here?” he sneers, a look of disdain curling

Caught red-handed, I stammer, my voice shaky. “I was just—I thought Karl left this on. I was going to shut

His eyes scan me, sizing me up, then land on the laptop screen. “Oh, of course. How altruistic of you, Abby. Or should I say, how

Chapter 89

Abby

“Gerald, Abby, would one of you care to explain what's going on?”

Karl’s voice is somehow exceedingly calm, juxtaposed against the chaotic energy filling the room. I feel like I’ve just stepped into a scene that I never should have witnessed with my own eyes, like a complete stranger in a home that I once used to rule.

Gerald wastes no time with his explanation. “I found her in your private office upstairs, sir,” he announces, as if he’s just solved a great mystery. “She was reading your emails, going through your personal computer.”

Karl turns toward me, his face covered in a puzzled expression. “Abby? Is this true?”

I nod, feeling embarrassed. “Yes, to an extent. But—”

Suddenly, Gerald butts in before I can finish. “Sir, I’ve always suspected she’s a spy for another pack, and this just further proves my point.”

My jaw drops open, incredulous. I whirl around to face Gerald, wincing against his iron grip on my arm. “Really, Gerald? A spy? Are you losing your marbles? What pack would I even be spying for, and why?”

He sneers, his eyes turning into two narrow slits of suspicion. "I'm not entirely sure, but it's no secret I've had my eye on you for years. Your behavior has always been...off. Perhaps you even plotted with that gardener—what was his name? The one who has conveniently run away—to create this 'cheating' fiasco as a distraction."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. It feels like I've just stepped into some sort of parallel universe, one where wild accusations are flung around like confetti.

"Gerald, you're completely delusional," I fire back, my voice shaking with a mixture of anger and disbelief. "I've never done any such thing. You're so busy playing detective that you're seeing conspiracies where there are

Gerald scoffs. "Ha! As if I don't—"

"Be quiet!" Karl's voice booms, echoing off the walls of the study, drowning out my indignation and Gerald's baseless accusations. The room falls silent, like a courtroom awaiting a verdict. Meanwhile, Gianna leans casually on the desk behind Karl, a knowing smirk on her face.

All I can do is think back to the moment I witnessed between her and Gerald earlier; was this a plan of theirs, somehow? To make me look bad in front of Karl? I always knew that Gianna hated me, but this feels like a new low, even for her.

Karl's gaze locks onto mine, and for a brief moment, I see a flicker of something—doubt? Concern? It's hard to tell. Then he turns his attention to Gerald.

"Do not interrupt her," Karl commands, his voice as icy as his stare. He turns back to me, and his stare is just as icy. It's clear that he's not entirely sure who to believe right now. "Abby, explain yourself."

I stand there, frozen, my eyes locked onto Karl's. The atmosphere is so thick with tension, you could cut it with a knife. Gerald's grip is like iron on my arm, branding me as if I'm already guilty.

"Listen, Karl," I stammer, my voice laced with desperation, "I just thought you left your laptop on. I was going to turn it

Karl's eyes narrow, but not in suspicion—more in contemplation, as if he's piecing together a complicated puzzle. "And the emails?" he asks, his voice neutral.

"I'll admit that it caught my eye," I mutter, swallowing hard. "I was curious, yes, but I wasn't trying to steal

Karl seems to absorb this, his expression unreadable. After a moment, he turns to Gerald. "You can let her go, Gerald. I believe her."

"Sir?" Gerald asks, sounding incredulous. "Are you—"

"I said, let her go." Karl's voice is low, stern, and oddly terrifying. It's moments like this that I'm reminded of the fact that he's an Alpha, through and through.

The butler loosens his grip, a look of disbelief contorting his face. But before he can leave, Gianna, who's been watching the whole scene unfold like some sort of soap opera, steps in.

"Wow, Karl," she sneers, her lips curling into a contemptuous smile. "So now we're letting not just cheaters but liars and thieves back into our home?"

The room goes silent. A rush of blood fills my ears. I can't believe she just said that.

Karl's face reddens, his eyes flashing with something that looks a lot like betrayal. "Both of you, out. Now."

Gianna tosses her hair over her shoulder, glaring at me one last time before stalking out of the room, her heels clicking angrily against the hardwood floor. Gerald follows, throwing me a disdainful glance as he leaves.

The door slams shut, and I'm left standing there, my heart pounding in my chest, my eyes blurring with tears I refuse to let fall.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, wiping away a stray tear. “I never should have

I turn and make my way to the door, but Karl’s voice stops me. “Abby,

I don’t turn around. I can’t turn around. I’m too scared to see the expression on his face. What if it mirrors Gianna’s or Gerald’s? What if he thinks I’m guilty too? What if there’s still a hint of her lipstick on his

Instead, I rush out of the room, bolting up the stairs and to my room, ignoring the confused stares of the dinner guests.

...

A soft knock on my door interrupts my thoughts a little while later. I’m sitting on my bed, my mind still swirling, when Karl walks in. He looks drained, as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders.

“May I?” he asks, gesturing to the empty space beside me on the

I nod, scooting over to make room. He sits down, and for a long moment, we’re both silent, lost in our thoughts.

“I know you didn’t steal anything,” Karl finally says, breaking the silence. “And I feel like I should explain myself too. About...”

My throat clenches. I’m about to tell him that I don’t want to know, but it’s too

Chapter 90

Abby

At the mention of the email and the rare ingredients, Karl’s face turns pale. Seeing him like this instantly fills me with an odd sense of dread as my mind begins to whirl with unending questions: why did Adam send him that email? Why did Karl give him rare ingredients? When did Karl give him rare ingredients?

“Karl, please tell me what’s wrong,” I say again, more urgently this time.

He takes a deep breath, then finally speaks. “I bought a ton of ingredients for Adam,” he admits, his voice barely above a whisper. “Rare ones. For his restaurant.”

My heart is in my throat. “For Adam’s restaurant? But why?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“He asked, and I just figured I would help him out,” he murmured. But as he speaks, his eyes dart away from me, indicating that he’s lying. I’ve always been able to tell when he’s pulling my leg.

“You’d better not be trying to lie to me right now,” I warn, my voice brittle. “I know you too well for that.”

His shoulders slump, and he looks down at his hands, gripping the edge of the bed with white knuckles. “Alright, fine,” he finally says, his voice low. “It wasn’t that.”

“Then what was it?” I press, but deep down, judging from Karl’s appearance I’m not sure whether I want to know the answer or not.

Karl hesitates, then takes another ragged breath as though trying to steady himself. “I gave the ingredients to Adam to bribe him into... into breaking up with

The room spins. My head is swimming with thoughts, feelings, questions. I can't fathom why Karl would do such a thing, and I jump up to my feet, my voice rising an octave. “You what? You bribed him to break up with me? But

“Because, Abby,” Karl’s voice is shaky, “I knew he was gay, and that he wasn’t being honest with you. The ingredients were a way to convince him to be just that: honest. To come clean about his orientation, so you wouldn’t waste your time on something that wasn’t real.”

His words hit me like a sledgehammer, demolishing everything I thought I knew. I look at him, stunned. "And since when is that any of your concern?" I find myself asking. "I don't recall ever asking you to be my knight in shining

Karl pauses, his face still as pale as before. He can't meet my gaze, and instead keeps his eyes averted to the floor in front of him. "I care about you, Abby," he says. "I love you. It pained me to see you being tangled up in a relationship with someone who didn't feel the same way about

His words give me pause. I can understand his reasoning a little bit, but it doesn't make it right. "You never should have gotten involved. It wasn't your place."

There's a heavy silence. Karl still can't meet my gaze, and it infuriates me even more. I find myself pacing the room, clutching at my hair. To think that all this time I thought that Karl was changing, becoming a better person, only for this to happen, makes me sick.

"Listen, Abby," he says, standing in my way. "I could see how he looked at you, how he looked at other men. I just wanted to

"You could have talked to me instead."

"Yeah, I know I could have," he says, his eyes darting around in that telltale manner once more. "But I—"

It's then that it hits me. I hold my hand up to make Karl stop, and pinch the bridge of my nose, letting out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "You never knew," I murmur. "Not before you bought those ingredients, at least."

"What?" he murmurs. "Abby, I—"

"Be honest," I hiss. "I know you, Karl. I can tell when you're lying. You didn't know about his orientation before you fabricated this whole plan, did you? It just so happened to work out in your favor, didn't it?"

There's a long, heavy silence. After what feels like an eternity, Karl finally meets my eyes, and there's a raw, aching vulnerability there that makes my heart drop into my stomach. "You're right," he says quietly, his voice filled with regret. "I didn't know at first. I just knew that he wasn't that invested in you, and figured that he'd take the bait."

My heart shatters. All at once, I want to scream, cry, and pass out. I can't decide which; maybe all three. "I can't believe this, Karl. How could you do something like that? Something so... cunning?"

He looks as if he wants to say something, to justify himself, but he doesn't. Instead, he stands there, staring at me with a sort of defeated look in his eyes, as if realizing that there are some things that even words can't fix.

"Abby, I—"

"Don't," I cut him off, my voice breaking. "Just don't even bother, Karl. I've heard enough. And to think that all this time, I really thought you were changing, becoming a better man like you said you would."

"But Abby, I am," he pleads, trying to take a step toward me. "Trust me, Abby. I've been trying so hard to be better for you. To be the man that you

I can't help but let out a wry chuckle. "Bullshit," I snarl.

I pull away from him, putting as much distance between us as the room will allow. "I'm booking a train home first thing in the morning. You can stay here, and you don't have to worry about coming back to the restaurant with me. We're done, Karl."

His face crumples, but he doesn't argue. He knows he's lost this battle, this war, and so do I. Maybe both of us have lost in our own ways. For a moment, we lock eyes, and I see a flicker of hope in his face—but I can't bring myself to look at him for any longer. Just looking at him makes me

Without another word, Karl crosses to the door to leave. But he pauses there, his hand on the doorknob, and speaks without looking over his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Abby," he finally murmurs, his voice choked with emotion. "I never wanted to hurt

“It’s too late for that, Karl. You already have.”