

Kickass 271

Chapter 271

Before I know it, I'm inside, the bell above the door announcing my entrance.

"I'll take it," I'm telling the saleswoman, and it's as if my body is moving of its own accord. The price pops up on the screen, my card swipes, and my fingers tremble slightly as I walk out of the shop with the bag in my grasp.

Why? Why did I buy it?

"Just in case," I murmur to myself, heading back to the restaurant with a newfound pep in my step. "Just in case..."

...

"You've reached Karl. Leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

I don't know why I've called him again. Maybe it's because he's still on my mind. Maybe it's because the pearlescent white dress that's hanging on the back of my bedroom door is staring at me, reminding me of the date we had planned.

Or maybe I'm just being sentimental.

The beep sounds before I have the chance to hang up again. And I'm talking, the words spilling out of my mouth like an avalanche.

"Hey, Karl, it's Abby." My voice is steady even though I'm screaming on the inside. "I wanted to call you..."

A pause. My fingers grip the edge of the counter so tightly my knuckles are starting to turn white. I clear my throat.

“I’ve got news, and I guess I wish you were here to hear it in person.” Another pause, another cleared throat. “The security taped from the cook-off came in, and Daniel was exposed. But that’s not all... The judges, they’ve given me another chance.”

I can almost imagine his response. I’d like to think he’d be happy for me. Despite everything, in fact, I know he’d be happy for me.

“They want me to cater the Alpha party,” I continue, pressing the phone closer to my ear. “But there’s a catch.”

I find myself smiling, even in my solitude. “I have to cook them a private meal first. To test my skills, I guess.” The words feel almost absurd as I speak them aloud, like it’s too good to be true.

“I... I’d love it if you could be there, Karl. One last hurrah as my sous chef?” The invitation hangs in the air, met by silence, of course. “It’s not mandatory, of course. Just... I guess I’d just really like you to be there. If you want.”

There’s a tension in the air, one I can’t dispel with laughter or a shake of the head. The kitchen around me is eerily silent, waiting.

“And Karl,” I add, the words a little heavier, a little more difficult to push out, “I hope you’re doing well. I—”

There’s a hitch in my breath, and it’s now that my voice begins to crack. My resolve is melting, I can feel it.

“I miss you.”

Chapter 272

Karl

The silence in the mansion is a stark contrast to the hum of the restaurant. I’m sitting at my desk amidst paperwork, meetings, and preparations for tomorrow’s luncheon. The pack is buzzing with excitement;

their Alpha is looking for a date, potentially even a new Luna. It's the talk of the town, and I feel like a spectacle.

"Karl, we need to go over the security arrangements for tomorrow. Your potential mates must be protected," Marcus reminds me as he enters the room, a handful of notes in his hands.

I nod, setting aside my pen. "Let's make it quick. I've got a lot on my plate."

As we talk, I can't help but think of the irony. Here I am, arranging for a new date to the Alpha party, while Abby... What is she up to, actually? I declined her call the other day, and haven't heard anything else. Is she doing okay? Is she thriving?

"Karl, you haven't said a word about the seating arrangements. What are your thoughts?" Marcus asks, pulling me back to reality.

"Just follow the usual protocol, Marcus. I trust your judgment," I say, trying to focus on the conversation at hand.

He studies me for a moment, his concern evident. "You sure you're up for this, Karl? You don't have to go through with it if you're not ready."

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. "It's not about being ready. It's what's best for the pack," I say, a mantra I've repeated to myself too often lately.

Once Marcus leaves, I rise from my desk, the sense of disquiet growing. I step outside, taking in the expanse of the estate, the manicured lawns, the wild forests beyond. This was supposed to be our domain, Abby's and mine. What will happen if I introduce a new woman? Will she want to change it? Make it her own? I'm not sure if I want that.

With a sigh, I head back inside. I can hear my staff in the kitchen, gossiping as they prepare for tomorrow's big luncheon. They're oblivious to my presence.

“I heard there’s an heiress from another pack coming,” one of the maids says to another. “Imagine the strength that would bring to the pack. To be united with another...”

“Strength isn’t everything,” another replies. “Beauty matters, too. When our Alpha has children, he’ll want to make sure that they’re just as attractive.”

Their words are a blow. I almost want to say something, but I don’t.

Abby and I would have made beautiful children. But our relationship is over, finished, in the past. There’s no use trying to save it anymore. It’s time to move on.

The rest of the day is a blur of paperwork, meetings, and endless discussions about the luncheon. By the time night falls, I’m exhausted, not from the work, but from the principle of it all.

I retire to my study, pouring myself a drink. The amber liquid swirls in the glass, and for a moment, I see her reflection in it—Abby’s smile, the way her eyes crinkles at the corners when she laughs.

I sit in the dark, the only light coming from the fireplace. The flames cast a warm glow, but they can’t warm the chill inside of me. I should be used to Abby’s absence by now, seeing as how it’s been three years since our divorce, but I’m not. I never have been.

Chapter 273

No matter what tomorrow brings, no matter who I meet, they won’t be Abby. They won’t be my Luna.

And as the night stretches on, I can’t shake the feeling that no one ever will be. No one except for her.

...

The meeting room is lined with stern faces, pack businesspeople and advisors all waiting for my direction. I’m present as one of the commerce moguls drones on about some new merger, but my mind is elsewhere.

My phone buzzes, and a glance reveals her name lighting up the screen.

Abby.

A pang hits my chest—a mixture of longing and regret—but I can't answer. I slide the phone aside, silencing the call without a second thought. This is Alpha business; personal matters can wait. Maybe forever.

"Karl, the trade routes need to be established before the winter. We can't delay any further," insists Marcus, his eyes boring into me, bringing me back to the present.

"Of course," I say, my voice steady despite how I really feel. "I'll review the proposed paths tonight. Let's ensure we prioritize safety and efficiency."

The meeting drags on, discussions surrounding logistics, alliances, and pack welfare—topics that should command my full attention. Yet, through it all, a sliver of my mind lingers on the missed call, on Abby.

When the room finally empties, the silence left behind feels oppressive. Only then do I allow myself to reach for the phone, noticing the voicemail notification. My thumb hovers, hesitates, and then presses play.

"Hey, Karl, it's Abby. I wanted to call you..." She pauses. I can feel my heart stop as I hear the sound of a ragged breath on the other end before she speaks again.

"I've got news, and I guess I wish you were here to hear it in person... The security tapes from the cook-off came in, and Daniel was exposed. But that's not all... The judges, they've given me another chance. They want me to cater the Alpha party."

Without meaning to, a smile spreads across my face. I knew she would do it. I knew she would come out on top.

"I have to cook them a private meal first. To test my skills, I guess."

And then, time seems to stop. “I... I’d love it if you could be there, Karl. One last hurrah as my sous chef? It’s not mandatory, of course. Just... I guess I’d just really like you to be there. If you want.”

“And Karl,” she adds a moment later, and I can feel my breath hitching in my throat. “I hope you’re doing well. I—I miss you.”

The message ends abruptly, and the silence is even more profound than before.

“Abby,” I murmur. “Oh, Abby.”

I stand, crossing over to the window to look outside. She did it. She’s going to cater the Alpha party after all; this will be huge for her career, and I’m happy for her.

But then, something crosses my mind. Abby... at the Alpha party... And I will be there with another woman.

How will she take that? How will I take that?

Chapter 274

Abby

The sun is barely up when I begin to stir, but I can’t sleep any longer. Today is the day. My second chance. My redemption.

I stretch, feeling a blend of excitement and nerves course through my body. My second chance with the judges, a redemption—or another fail, depending on how things go. I’m hoping for the former.

But despite everything, my heart dips as I roll over and check my phone. No new messages; I guess, in my own naive sort of way, I thought that Karl would have answered my voicemail with at least a “good luck” text, but he hasn’t. Maybe my fears weren’t unfounded. Maybe he really doesn’t want to hear from me.

Either way, there's no time to wallow over it, no matter how much it pains me. I've got a restaurant to run, meals to cook, and judges to impress.

Leah waits for me downstairs. We fall into step alongside each other on our way to our respective workplaces, coffees in hand.

"Someone looks like she's ready to conquer the world," she says, a smile playing on her lips.

"I think I might be," I admit, trying to let the excitement of the day overshadow the pang in my chest. "But it also stings a little bit. Karl never answered my voicemail."

She heaves a sigh, a lock of hair falling across her face as she shakes her head. "If Karl doesn't want to talk, that's on him, Abby. Don't let him crawl under your skin. He's just being a sore loser because he couldn't win you back."

I mull over her words, watching as a little bird hops along the pavement. "You're right," I say, taking a sip of my coffee. "I won't let it rattle me."

Leah nods. "That's the spirit. Remember, today is about you: your talent, your hard work. Nothing else."

Her words make me smile. We walk in companionable silence for a little while longer before another confession bubbles up, this time more excited than the last.

"I bought a dress."

"A dress?" Leah's eyebrow quirks.

"Yeah, for the Alpha party," I continue, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks. "Just in case I get a chance to leave the kitchen and... you know, mill around a bit. It's a really sexy one, too."

Her response is an instant brightness. "Abby! That's fantastic! You're going to kill it."

A laugh escapes my lips. “Yeah, I hope so.”

But then Leah’s smile softens, a knowing look in her eyes. “Are you doing this for yourself, or to show Karl what he’s missing?”

I freeze mid-step, the question striking a chord. Did I? The thought has crossed my mind, more than once, the image of his reaction. I look away, fixing my gaze on a blooming flower display in a shop window.

“I just... wanted to buy myself a pretty dress,” I say finally, although the words sound hollow even to me.

Leah reaches out, her hand gently squeezing my arm. “Good,” she says simply. “Because you deserve it, Abby. For you.”

As we approach the restaurant, Leah veers off toward her own job. “Knock ‘em dead, Chef,” she says with a wink.

We wave goodbye and I head inside. The kitchen doesn’t feel so much like a battleground anymore as I grab my chef’s jacket and get to work.

But Leah’s question lingers in my mind as the morning stretches on. The dress, hanging in my closet, is stunning—it makes me feel like a princess.

But did I really buy the dress just for me?

...

“We’re ahead of schedule, Abby. The lamb’s marinating, the herbs are chopped, and everything’s prepped for the day.”

John’s words make me grin. It’s already two PM, and today couldn’t be going any better. I nod, stepping away from the line.

“Good. I’m just gonna be practicing my dishes for tonight one last time before the judges come. Let me know if you need anything.”

John nods, and we go our separate ways. But it’s not long that I’m working at my station when I hear it—the sound that no business owner ever wants to hear.

A bang, a pop, and then... rushing water.

I whirl around and the sight makes my heart sink. Water is spewing from a burst pipe beneath the sink with so much force that the floor is already beginning to flood. No, it’s not just coming from beneath the sink; it’s coming through the wall, too, all around the sink. It must be at least two burst pipes.

But how?

“What the—?!” My words dissolve into the chaos as the kitchen staff springs into action.

“Shut off the water!” I yell over the din.

Anton dashes for the main valve as I wade through the water, which is already soaking into my shoes. The cold seeps in, but it’s the panic that’s really chilling. Today of all days, this can’t be happening.

But maybe, just maybe, I can salvage this. It’s just a couple of burst pipes, right? I’ve dealt with worse. Way worse.

Time seems to slow. Anton finally makes contact with the main water valve, but it does nothing, no matter how many times he turns the spigot. John races back and forth, barking orders at the servers. Towels are thrown down onto the floor, but it doesn’t matter. The kitchen is still flooding, and there’s no stopping it.

And then, it gets even worse. The power goes out.

The restaurant falls into a hush, punctuated by the sound of rushing water and the valve squeaking as Anton continues to turn it. I'm left frozen to my spot, my eyes still adjusting to the dark.

"Abby?" John's voice calls out through the darkness. "What on earth...?"

Chapter 275

Abby

My hand trembles slightly as I dial Mr. Thompson's number, each ring sounding like a warning siren against my ear. The kitchen is still flooded, and the chaos is like a perfect mirror image of my inner turmoil right now.

"Mr. Thomson," I breath, my voice shaking, as the line clicks to life.

"Abby?" his voice crackles through, instantly picking up on my tone. "Is everything okay?"

The words spill out in a rush. "The restaurant—a pipe burst, the kitchen is flooded, and the power went out. I need to inform the judges that I can't do this today."

"Abby, you can't cancel now," he cuts in sharply. "Today was chosen by the judges very deliberately. If you cancel, then they might go for another contestant instead."

A knot forms in my stomach as my mind scrambles to come up with a solution. "Okay, I won't cancel, but I can't do it here. I need to... I need to move the venue—to my house."

There's a pause before he answers. "Your house? Abby, this is highly unorthodox. Rescheduling could look bad, but changing the venue so drastically, and an unprofessional setting no less... Are you sure?"

"I don't have another choice, do I?" I insist, my voice a mix of determination and desperation. "It will be professional. Trust me, it will be an experience they won't forget. I'll make sure of it."

He sighs, and I can hear the sound of something like papers shuffling on the other end. "I can convey this to them, but I can't guarantee—"

“Just tell them,” I interrupt, my voice pleading. “Please.”

The call ends with a promise that he'll try. That's all any of us can do, isn't it?

...

I pace the floor of my kitchen as I wait, the chaos of the burst pipe reflecting the turmoil in my mind. I'm playing a dangerous game, changing the venue last minute, and I haven't even heard back from Mr. Thompson yet.

“Abby, plumber's here,” John calls out, snapping me back to the present crisis.

“Good,” I mutter, forcing a calm over myself that I don't feel in the slightest.

The plumber is already knee-deep in the mess, his face serious as he examines the disaster. “Huh,” he says, shining his flashlight up into the burst pipe. “That's strange.”

“What's strange?” I ask, feeling my breath hitch.

“You've got a huge blockage,” he says as his hands work with a long plastic snake to dislodge it. “Looks like... paper towels. And cardboard?”

My heart drops into my stomach. “Cardboard?” I echo, dumbfounded.

“Yup,” he grunts, pulling out a sodden, grotesque mass. It's a monstrous wad of paper towels, mixed together with pieces of what looks unmistakably like cardboard.

My staff clusters around, their expressions a mixture of confusion and concern. I catch their eyes, one by one, searching for a flicker of guilt, a shadow of deceit.

“Has anyone been shoving stuff down the sink?” I ask, although I know my team and would trust them not to do something like this. They wouldn’t be so reckless, so foolish.

“No way, Abby,” Anton says, and there’s a chorus of denials and shaking of heads.

“I’m sorry,” I say, passing my hand over my weary face. “I know you guys wouldn’t do this. It’s just...” My voice trails off. I don’t even know what to say.

The plumber clears his throat and draws my attention back. “Oh, and there’s another thing,” he starts, and I can tell from his tone that I’m not going to like it in the slightest. “The water shouldn’t have killed the power the way it did. You might wanna call an electrician.”

I rub a hand over my face, feeling the exhaustion already beginning to settle in. “Tomorrow, then,” I say, more to myself than anyone else. “We’ll handle it tomorrow. Let’s keep the restaurant closed for now.”

John’s hand lands on my shoulder, his figure looming in the dim light of the lantern’s we’ve set up. “We’ll get through this, Abby,” he assures me.

I nod, thankful for the strength in his voice. But there’s a thought worming its way through my mind, insidious and dark. Sabotage.

Someone knows about my second chance. Someone’s trying to snuff it out before it has a chance to breathe.

And maybe that someone just so happens to be the same someone that started a fire in my apartment.

As the plumber finishes up his work, we return to our own work: scrubbing, drying, and throwing away precious ingredients that got soaked in the mess. My wallet hurts just thinking about the expense this will all be, but that’s not the most important thing on my mind.

Then, finally, my phone rings. I pick it up on the first ring, my breath hitched.

“Mr. Thompson?”

“Abby,” Mr. Thompson’s voice crackles through. “They’ve agreed to come to your house.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Oh, thank god. Really?”

“Yes, but...” He hesitates. “Make it count, Abby. This is a significant deviation from what was expected of you. They’ll be even more vigilant when it comes to professionalism and cleanliness.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “Don’t worry. Thank you, Mr. Thompson.”

The line goes dead, and a surge of adrenaline kicks in. “They agreed,” I announce to the room. “I need to get ready.”

John wipes his hands on a towel, his concern palpable even in the dim light of the lanterns. “Are you sure we can’t do anything to help, Abby?”

I shake my head, firm in my resolution. “Just keep the ship afloat here. Make sure nothing else crazy happens, alright?”

Anton leans on the mop he’s been using, his gaze settling on me with a sternness that surprises me, given how jovial he really is. “So, the judges will be visiting Miss Abby’s home kitchen,” he says. “Are you sure that will be okay?”

Chapter 276

Abby

“Shit!” I call out, tossing the soggy spinach into the trash. “Wet. All of it.”

My ingredients got wet from the mini-flood—almost all of them, at least. I’ll have to buy new ingredients, and in this city, driving is slower than walking. Before Anton or John can utter a word, I’m already bolting out of the restaurant and down the street.

The grocery store is a short sprint away, and I'm moving faster than I ever thought possible. Before I know it, the automatic doors are sliding open. I grab a basket and make a beeline for the vegetables first.

"Excuse me," I murmur as I sidestep a little old lady contemplating the avocados with a furrowed brow. I'm weaving through the aisles, my list mental, each item being checked off with a physical counterpart landing in the basket. Olive oil, check. Fresh basil, check. Sea salt, check.

The meat counter is next, and I slide in just as another customer drifts away.

"Two pounds of your best salmon, skin on, and make it quick, please," I say, the words rushing out of me like a tsunami. The butcher nods, his movements efficient as he wraps the fish. I want to tap my foot, to rush him, but I don't. He's quick enough, thankfully.

I make a last-minute detour for dessert ingredients, my mind already racing through the steps of the chocolate souffle I've decided will be the final course for tonight.

Chocolate, eggs, heavy cream. The basics. And I'm done.

But the cashier is another story. It's like she's moving in slow motion, taking her sweet time despite the obvious frantic movements I'm exhibiting right in front of her. It takes all of my willpower not to lash out, although I can't quite hold in the frantic tapping of my foot.

"Sorry," she says, as she rescans a can of coconut milk that didn't beep the first time. Or the second. Or the third. "It's not registering."

"It's fine," I assure her, my tone betraying none of my inner scream. "Just... could you please try to hurry? It's rather urgent."

"Oh, of course!" She smiles, but her hands are still moving at a snails' pace.

Finally, she bags the last item, and I'm swiping my card before she can tell me the total. Approved. I don't wait for the receipt, and just grab my bags and dash out the door in a flash, ignoring her calls.

I'm running again, the bags swinging in my hands, a cacophony of clinks and rustles with each step. I weave through commuters on their way home from work, dodge a kid on a skateboard, and leap over a puddle that's practically a miniature pond.

A honk snaps me back to reality as a taxi driver comes to a screeching halt in the crosswalk.

"Hey! Watch it!" the driver yells out his window. All I can do is offer a wave that's half-apology, half-dismissal.

By the time I make it home, I'm coated in sweat. Shit. I'll need a shower before the judges come, that's for sure.

I burst through my apartment door, and that's when I freeze.

"I've been neglecting you, haven't I?" I mutter to no one in particular as I look around at the mess in front of me.

The place is a disaster. Blankets are unfolded, shoes are scattered near the door, the carpet hasn't been vacuumed in weeks and mail is piled up on the coffee table. The kitchen is even worse: takeout food containers, unwashed dishes, more mail somehow, and dirty counters.

Who the hell do I think I am, to think I could pass this disaster off as "clean and professional"?

But now is not the time to stand here and wonder. I need to move. Once the ingredients are in the fridge, I get to work.

"Alright, Abby," I say out loud, pushing up my stained sleeves. "Let's get this over with."

I begin by running around with a bag to pick up the trash that's scattered around. A quick dash out to the trash can, and that's one thing done. Then, I get to work picking up dirty laundry, muddy shoes, and various knick-knacks, which I toss into my bedroom, figuring that the judges will never see that—so long as I keep the door shut tightly.

Now, it's time for the dishes. I scrub frantically, the hot water scalding my hands until they're all pink and wrinkled; there's no time for the dishwasher.

Dishes, check.

Wipe down counters, check.

But then, my reflection meets me just as I'm moving past the hallway mirror.

"God, I look like hell," I mutter, taking in my haggard appearance. Sweat is caking my hair to my forehead, my mascara is smudged, and my clothes are wrinkled and covered in stains. I haven't even begun prepping my ingredients yet, and I still need to shower, change, dry my hair, and put on makeup.

I glance at the clock and let out a sigh of relief. I've still got an hour and a half. That's time enough for a quick shower, right?

Right—so long as I get my cleaning done first, which is only halfway done. I still need to sweep, vacuum, mop, and clean the stove. I need to fluff pillows, light candles, pick out music, and set the dining room table—which, I'm just realizing, is still covered in clutter.

A curse escapes my lips, and for a moment, I can feel my resolve beginning to slip away. It feels as though I'm back at the cook-off, on a stage under the hot lights with the crowd's eyes on me, the cameras following me throughout all of my horrible moments.

And I'm frozen just like I was when the announcer shoved the microphone in my face.

But that's when I see it.

Her.

The little girl, her chef hat too big for her head, a haphazard sign in her tiny hands. "Abby, U R my hero!"

Chapter 277

Karl

The clink of silverware and the murmur of polite conversation surround me, but I feel like I'm underwater, like everything is distant and muffled.

I'm here, but I'm also not here at the same time—my mind is a thousand miles away, tangled in thoughts of Abby. As I lazily stir my drink with my straw, I can't help but wonder...

What's she doing right now? Wowing the judges, hopefully.

Across from me sits a woman named Marissa, her laughter ringing out a bit too loudly as she tosses her perfectly coiffed hair.

"And then I told the salesperson, 'Do you know who I am?' I mean, really, they should've known," she giggles, sipping her champagne with an air of self-satisfaction.

"Must have been quite the oversight," I reply blandly, the words tasting like cardboard in my mouth.

"I'm sure you do," I muster with a tense smile. "Excuse me for a moment."

Finally, I manage to slip away. I make a pit stop in the restroom to splash some water on my face, to remind myself why I'm here. But it seems as though I can't seem to come up with any good reasons.

"They're not her," my wolf says, agitated.

I almost scoff. "I know. Trust me, I know."

"So leave," he says. "They're not good enough. Go to her. She misses you."

But I can't. I have to see this luncheon through, have to find a date to the Alpha party. And time is ticking.

Chapter 278

It's the question I've been dreading because the answer isn't going to be something that they want to hear. But everyone is staring at me, and I can't bring myself to lie.

"Stories," I say finally. "Real stories about real people. That's what matters to me."

There's a moment of silence, and a flicker of something that looks like disappointment flashes across Elise's gaze. "How... quaint," she manages, before turning her attention to Meg's phone, who is scrolling through her most recent bikini pictures and talking about her breast augmentation.

All I can do is sit, my spine stiff in my chair. My gaze meets Marcus' from across the room, who just shoots me a subtle nod and a thumbs-up. It makes me want to roll my eyes.

Just then, my distracted gaze lifts past his shoulder, and for a fleeting moment, my heart leaps into my throat.

There, in the doorway, a figure appears, a silhouette backlit by the golden chandeliers, and for that split second, it's Abby.

It's her shape, her grace, the way she holds herself. Her golden hair cascading over her shoulders, her eyes lit up as she looks at me. My breath catches, and I'm rising from my seat.

But then reality crashes over me. It's not her. It could never be her. It's a different woman entirely, a trick of the light, a mirage in what feels like the driest desert on the planet.

I sit back down, the disappointment crashing over me like a wave.

"So," Marissa says, leaning in and smelling too strongly of floral perfume, "Karl... What do you think? Diamonds or pearls?" She's holding her phone out to me, but I'm not looking. My gaze is transfixed on the window, through which I can see my car sitting in the driveway.

Waiting. Beckoning to me.

“Karl?” she asks, wiggling her phone a bit with a giggle. “He’s so cute when he’s distracted, isn’t he?”

Then, with a clarity that feels like I’m just awoken from a very long dream, I know I can’t do this anymore. Not another minute of feigned interest, not another second of nodding along to stories that mean nothing to me.

“Excuse me,” I interrupt. My chair scrapes on the floor as I stand abruptly, and the conversations around me fall silent.

Marissa looks up at me, her eyes slightly widened, her mouth parted in surprise. “Is everything alright, Karl, dear?” she says.

I offer a smile, one that doesn’t quite reach my eyes. “I just remembered, there’s something I need to do. Please excuse me.”

Before Marissa or any of the other women can retort, I’m pushing away from the table and crossing the room. My hand is moving to loosen my tie, and I’m unbuttoning my suit jacket. I pause for a moment by the door, thinking, then grab a bouquet of flowers out of a vase, not caring that water and loose petals splatter all over a tray of petit fours.

It’s then that Marcus’ hand claps over my shoulder.

“Karl, where are you going?” His voice is a low hiss, meant only for my ears. “You can’t just leave. The organizers are expecting—”

Chapter 279

Abby

My hands tremble slightly as I reach the door, my thoughts racing a mile a minute.

The apartment still looks like a hurricane just blew through, the ingredients aren't prepped, I'm still a mess myself, and the judges are an hour and a half early. Great. Just great.

I hope that whoever shoved those paper towels and cardboard down my sink are happy with themselves. And if it was no one, and it was just a freak accident of some sort, I hope that the universe is having a good laugh over my misfortune.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for stern faces that I'm about to meet.

But when the door swings open, instead of three judges, I'm met with someone who I never expected.

"K-Karl...?"

He steps inside without a word and holds a bouquet of soaking wet flowers, like they've been plucked straight out of a vase, out to me. No, he doesn't just hold them out to me. He shoves them into my hand.

Our fingers brush, sending an uninvited jolt through my already-electrified body. Silence envelopes us as our eyes meet, and it feels as though time stops.

His eyes are locked with mine, and for an endless second, I'm convinced he's going to kiss me. But then he steps back, breaking the spell as he looks over the chaos of my apartment.

"Miss me?" he asks, his gaze meeting mine again.

My voice sounds far away, even to my own ears. "What... What are you doing here?"

He scratches the back of his neck, a small smile playing on his lips. "I got your voicemail."

My eyes widen slightly. "You did?"

He nods. "Yeah. I'm sorry for the late notice, but... I wanted to be here. I went to the restaurant, but it was closed, so I figured you'd be here. How did it go?"

I'm still in shock, my voice coming out with a tremor that can't be denied no matter how I try to hide it. "It hasn't happened yet. The restaurant... A pipe burst, and the electricity went out. But I'll get into that later. The judges are coming here. To this..."

I gesture to the disaster behind me with my free hand, the flowers still clutched in my hand, and it's now that the embarrassment hits me. My apartment is still a disaster, although slightly less so now than it was before. But it's still a disaster, the perfect picture of a depressed woman who has gone nothing but wallow for the past three weeks.

My hand falls back to my side. "This... mess."

Karl laughs, and it sounds more like disbelief than anything else. "Well, lucky for you, I'm here to help."

Help. That, after everything that's happened, is the last word I expected to hear uttered from his mouth.

"Help?" I echo, trying to ignore the way my heartbeat quickens. "You really want to help?"

He holds my gaze, steady and sure. "I do."

I don't know what to say. After everything, after the way he stormed out when I rejected him, I never expected him to actually come back to help me. Or maybe I did, in my own twisted, selfish sort of way. And here he is, dressed in a tuxedo...

Wait. A tuxedo?

"Why are you dressed like that?" I find myself asking before I can stop myself, blinking in surprise as I take in his appearance. He looks like he just came from a gala, although his tie is loosened, his jacket is unbuttoned and his hair is a little tousled.

He looks down at himself, as if he's also just now realizing he's not in his usual casual wear. "I was... at an event," he says simply.

My mind reels with questions, but the most pressing one pushes its way out. "Did you... Did you ditch an important event just for me?"

Karl smiles, and it's soft and sweet, but also strangely enigmatic. Like there's something he isn't telling me. "Yes, just for tonight," he says. "But I'll be heading back to the pack at the end of the night."

There's a beat of silence as I try to make sense of it all. I clutch the flowers a little tighter in my hand as if they're a lifeline in a stormy sea, and I shake my head incredulously.

"What?" he asks, cocking his head to the side.

I shake my head again. "I just can't believe you left an event—an important one from the looks of it—just to come here. Especially after..." My voice trails off, but I don't need to finish. We both know the implications.

"The cook-off never finished, though, did it?" he suddenly says, his voice lighter than I expect. I meet his brown-eyed gaze and feel my heart skip a beat. "It's just the final round, now."

My mouth opens, then closes. I don't know what to say, but it seems I don't have to. He's already pushing past me, and it's then that it hits me. The scent of perfume emanating off his tuxedo. Women's perfume. And a lot of it.

"You smell like you've been hugged by a dozen women," I blurt out, a wry laugh escaping my lips that belies the niggling sense of jealousy that's fluttering in my chest.

Karl pauses for a moment, his back turned to me, then laughs as he slowly turns around to meet my gaze again. "It's my aunt's."

"Your aunt?"

“Yeah,” he confirms with a nod. “Family event. But when I heard about your cooking trial tonight, I figured you might need some moral support. Or at least someone to help you chop onions.”

Chapter 280

Abby

I shuffle from one foot to the other, still shocked by Karl’s sudden appearance. But the flowers in my hand are grounding, like a lifeline.

“Are you sure about this?” I find myself asking. “Your Alpha duties... You’ve already given up so much to help me. I don’t want to jeopardize your status or anything.”

He sighs and shakes his head. “Abby, I told you, it was just an event. Besides, I think you could use the help, even if you don’t want to admit it.”

I suck in a breath. He’s right; I do need help and I don’t want to admit it, but it still feels wrong to make him be the one to help me yet again. “But if you’re here, you need to be here because you want to be, not because you feel like you owe me something,” I finally say.

His smile is genuine. “I’m here because I want to be. Enough said.”

I exhale slowly, the tension in my shoulders easing ever so slightly. “Okay, but I have to make this up to you somehow. I can cater an event for you, for free,” I offer, hoping it’s enough to make this all worthwhile for him in one way or another.

He shakes his head, and there’s a softness in his eyes that makes me pause. “Abby, that’s nice of you, but you don’t have to do that. I’m here as your friend. That’s it.”

The word friend lodges itself in my throat. It both soothes and stings. I nod, unable to voice the gratitude and the myriad of other tangled emotions.

Together, we start to tackle the apartment, picking up scattered cookbooks, aligning shoes by the door, fluffing cushions and folding blankets.

I grab the vacuum out of the closet and get to work on the carpets. Meanwhile, Karl picks up a stack of unopened mail, a frown momentarily creasing his brow. "You haven't opened these."

I shrug, not meeting his gaze. "Bills and junk. It's not like they're love letters."

"Could be a check in there," he teases, but there's a note of concern.

"It's fine, Karl. Just... stuff I didn't have the energy for."

He nods. I can tell that there's more he wants to say, questions he wants to ask, but he's clearly chosen to let it go. And I'm grateful for that. I don't want to admit to my depression, my wallowing, my fear of setting foot into my own kitchen.

We work for a while longer, eventually moving to the more tedious task: cleaning the kitchen.

"You know," Karl starts, breaking our comfortable silence as he wipes down the counter, "I always thought you had a nice place here."

I laugh, feeling a bit surprised. "You really thought that? You sure you're not just pitying me for not living in your mansion with you anymore?"

He chuckles, throwing the paper towel into the trash. "I don't pity you. It's cozy in here. If anything, I pity myself, living in that sprawling mansion all alone."

That sprawling mansion. It was once my home. Our home. I do miss it sometimes, no matter how much I like it here. But I won't admit it, not now, at least. "Thanks," I say, managing a smile. "That means a lot."

The conversation lulls as we continue, and soon, the apartment is about as presentable as it'll get. We pause for a moment and look at our handiwork, at the tidy living room, the spotless kitchen, the perfectly-set table with the white tulips as the new centerpiece.