

Kickass 291

Chapter 291

Abby

“Abby, I...”

Karl’s voice wavers ever so slightly, his words trailing off. There are a few moments that feel like an eternity as his eyes dart around the room, and I feel like I can’t take it anymore.

“Karl, just say it!”

His eyes widen slightly as my voice raises an octave, but I’m not backing down. I need to know what Logan meant; I need to know what this secret is that Karl seems to be keeping.

“Alright,” he finally says. “Can we sit down, though?”

I almost consider saying no, but the look in his eyes makes me soften. I nod and follow him over to the couch, where we both sink down onto the cushions, or knees touching. I’m perched on the edge of the seat, watching him intently as my fingers worry the hem of my shirt.

“Go on.”

He takes a deep breath, and finally he speaks.

“On the day of the competition, I wasn’t being completely truthful with you,” he says quietly. “Yes, it’s true that I didn’t try to bribe the judges or anything like that. I did just want to talk to Logan. But the things he said about you, Abby, I...”

Karl pauses, but I’m still watching intently, urging him silently to go on despite the pounding in my chest.

Finally, he continues. “Abby, I don’t know how to put this, but Logan said that you had no passion,” he says. “He said that you’re lazy, and that you foist off all of your cooking onto the men in your life.”

I stare at him, disbelief and hurt washing over me in waves. Logan’s words, delivered with that infuriating smirk, now take on a more painful clarity in my mind. I’ve always prided myself on my dedication to my craft, and the idea that I’ve lost my passion and become lazy in my work is a harsh blow.

“Why... Why didn’t you tell me this, Karl?” I manage to spit out. My voice trembles with a mix of anger and disappointment. “You promised we wouldn’t keep secrets from each other. I thought you would be honest with me.”

Karl rubs his temples, a pained expression on his face. “I didn’t tell you the truth that day because... because I wanted to protect you, Abby. I didn’t want to crush your spirit. I meant to tell you later, but you were so heartbroken that I just couldn’t do it.”

I bristle at his words, my frustration bubbling to the surface. I stand without meaning to, my hands clenched into two tight balls at my sides. “I’m not some fragile princess who needs to be coddled, Karl. I would have preferred to know the truth, even if it stung. How could you keep this from me?”

Karl’s shoulders slump, and he sighs heavily. “I know, Abby. I should have been honest with you, and for that I’m sorry.”

The room falls into a tense silence as we both process what has been said. My mind is racing, and I can’t help but wonder what else Karl might be hiding from me. The trust between us feels fragile, and I’m not sure how to mend it right now.

But what hurts even more is what Logan said about my passion. It feels like a blow that was aimed directly at me, and I don’t know how to handle it.

And the even more painful thing is that maybe, just maybe, Logan isn’t wrong.

Ever since I opened this restaurant, my involvement in the kitchen has dwindled more and more by the day. I started off being the head chef, but lately I've been more of a manager than anything. I don't want to believe Logan's words, but maybe he's onto something.

Finally, Karl speaks up again, his voice resigned. "And if you want me to be honest, Abby, I'll be honest. There's something else I feel I should tell you."

I meet his gaze, my heart pounding in my chest as my mind wracks what else he could possibly have to tell me. "Go on," I say hesitantly.

Karl takes a deep breath before he speaks. "I wasn't just at a family event today," he says. "I was holding a luncheon today... a luncheon to meet potential candidates for a date for the Alpha party, and possibly a future Luna down the road."

My eyes widen, and I feel a pang of hurt deep in my chest. It's a stark reminder of what has transpired between Karl and me—and what can never transpire again.

I want to scream, to cry, to tell him not to do it. But is that really my place? He's an Alpha; of course he's expected to have a Luna, and our love has run its course. And I can't really be mad at him; it's his right to find a new wife. After all, I did have a new fiance, Adam, until recently.

I swallow hard, my voice barely above a whisper. "I see."

Karl's expression is a mixture of surprise and sadness as he looks up at me. "Are you... angry?"

I shake my head, even though my heart aches. "No, Karl. I can't be angry at you for doing what you have to do. It's the way our world works, and I can accept that. I just wish you had been honest with me about everything."

Karl's shoulders slump even further, and he looks down at the floor. "I understand, Abby. I should have been more open with you."

We stand there for a moment, each of us too stunned to speak. Hot tears prick at the backs of my eyes as a lump rises in my throat, but I manage to blink them back. I won't cry. I can't cry. I should be happy for Karl.

Chapter 292

Karl

The drive home feels like an eternity, each passing minute melting into the next. I can't stop thinking about how I left Abby's house, with nothing but a stiff hug and a half-smile.

Abby's words, or rather, her lack of words, continue to echo in my mind as I drive. I thought she might react differently, maybe with jealousy or a desire to win me back. And in a sick sort of way, I think I really wanted her to react like that. I wanted her to get upset, to tell me that she didn't want me to find a new date, to tell me that she wanted to be my Luna again.

But she didn't do any of those things. Instead, she calmly said she wished me well on my 'romantic journey'. The words almost make me feel sick just thinking about them. She seemed so calm, so collected.

I can't help but wonder: Did she ever have the same feelings for me that I have for her? What about all of the times we kissed? What about all of the times we almost hooked up? What was any of that to her?

Suddenly, my wolf's voice permeates my mind, a calming echo in the back of my head. "Do you think she was telling the truth?" he asks, sounding just as pained as I feel.

I grip the steering wheel, my knuckles turning white as my mind goes over my conversation with Abby over and over and over again. "It certainly seems that way," I say out loud, even though the words sound hollow to me. "Like she doesn't even care. Like she's a little relieved, even."

My wolf's voice is filled with sadness as he responds. "I think she was bluffing," he says. "She had to be. I know she cares about us."

"I don't believe it," I answer as I guide the car around a sharp country road, the curve causing my wheels to skid slightly on the asphalt.

I'm going too fast; I'm too distracted. I should slow down, but I don't. When I come out of the curve, I just hit the gas a little bit harder, reveling in the sound of the engine roaring.

"Take it easy, Karl," my wolf urges me, sounding worried now. "You're angry, and you're being reckless."

"I'm not angry," I say, even though we both know that's a complete and utter lie. "I'm just..."

My voice trails off. God, I don't even know what I am right now. I don't know what I want to be. I hit the gas a little harder as I come to a long stretch of straight road, the trees looming all around me.

The road is pitch black save for the bright beams of my headlights, casting eerie shadows onto the sides of the road.

"Karl..." My wolf sounds even more worried now.

"I thought she cared," I find myself saying, feeling as though I'm on autopilot now. The trees are whirring by in a dark green blur, patches of leaves and pine needles. Their tall, slender trunks are like silent sentinels, flickers in time that are long gone by the time I take my next breath.

But then, suddenly, I see it up ahead. Movement in the road.

I slam on my brakes as the creature comes into view. The world turns into a cacophony of screeching tires and shuddering breaths, the scent of burnt rubber and the sight of two wide, terrified eyes.

Somehow, I manage to come to a stop mere inches before hitting it. My breath comes out in a short gasp, my fingers so tight around the steering wheel that it almost hurts.

I stare at the creature, and it stares at me. A lone buck crossing the road. His antlers are still velvety; he's young, and if I hadn't stopped a moment ago, I would have ensured that his velvet never turned into something studier and older.

Before I know it, the buck is leaping off into the trees, and I'm alone again. I take another shuddering breath, cursing quietly, before I lift my foot off of the gas.

I'll go slower now.

My wolf falls silent now, but there isn't much else to say.

As I continue to drive, I glance at the voicemails on my car phone, a dozen missed calls during the dinner with Abby. Ignoring them wouldn't be wise, so I decide to call my Beta, Marcus, back.

I need a distraction, something to occupy my thoughts and provide a brief respite from the ache in my chest.

"Karl, where the hell did you disappear to during the luncheon? You left everyone hanging," Marcus scolds as he answers the call without so much as a hello.

I sigh, realizing that my abrupt departure probably raised more questions than answers. "I'm sorry, Marcus. Something important came up, and I had to handle it."

There's a moment of silence on the other end of the line before Marcus grumbles, "Well, you better not make a habit of it. You had three women at that luncheon who were still interested, and I collected their information for you."

I can hear the annoyance in Marcus' voice, and I can't blame him for being frustrated with my behavior. "Thanks, Marcus," I find myself saying, feeling as though I'm on autopilot again. "I'll consider which one I want to pursue and call her personally."

After we exchange a few more words, I hang up, leaving Marcus to deal with the aftermath of my unexplained absence. The road stretches ahead, and I can't help but think back on those women at the luncheon.

Personality-wise, I didn't particularly like any of them. They were all mostly polite and well-mannered, but they were just so... superficial. It was clear that they were interested in my position as Alpha more than anything else.

My wolf nudges at my thoughts, his voice filled with concern. "Karl, are we really considering choosing a mate who's not Abby just for the pack's sake?"

I grip the steering wheel even tighter, willing myself not to do anything reckless again. "I don't have a choice. I need to find a date to the Alpha party if I want to keep my status. Being without any potential Luna for so long isn't a good look."

Chapter 293

Abby

The morning sun warms my tired body as I step out of my apartment. Chloe and Leah are waiting outside so we can all walk to work together, leaning against the wrought iron fence outside my apartment.

"There's the star chef," Chloe says, pushing away from the fence as I approach. She's wearing her all-black work uniform consisting of a short skirt, a button-up top, and a pair of tights and heels, a stark contrast from Leah's neat and tidy sweater vest and slacks.

It was all I could do this morning to put on something neat, though. I'm still exhausted after last night, so all I could manage was a clean long-sleeve top and some jeans.

I join them, a smile on my face as I jog down the steps. "I don't know about 'star' chef," I say with a chuckle, "but last night did go pretty well, if I'm being honest."

Leah's eyes go a little wider, her curiosity piqued. "Tell us everything."

We begin walking toward the cafe where we normally stop before work, and that's when I launch into the story about last night: the kind words from Vanessa and Xavier, the delicious three-course meal, the perfect setting. Everything except Karl. And Logan's comment, of course.

But as I talk, I can't help but feel a little guilty for leaving Karl out of the picture.

I do appreciate everything that he did for me by showing up last night, but I just can't bring myself to mention it. Not after the way things ended. It's still too raw, too painful to talk about, and I know that my friends will want every little detail.

"That's amazing!" Chloe exclaims as we approach the cafe. "Abby, I'm so happy. I think you've got this in the bag."

"I hope so," I answer, biting my lower lip slightly.

Finally, we stop at the cafe. There's a long line, and Chloe is dancing a little in her spot as she waits.

"God, I need to pee," she finally blurts out. "Can you guys order for me? I'll give you cash."

"Oat milk latte as usual?" I ask.

She nods, already a few steps on her way toward the bathroom. "With vanilla, please!"

With that, Chloe is gone in a flash. Now it's just Leah and I, and Leah wastes no time with her interrogating.

"Well? Did Karl call you back?"

My heart skips a beat, and I glance at her, searching her eyes for any sign of judgment or curiosity. I can't hide the truth, but I can choose how much to share. After a moment of silence, I decide to be honest without revealing too much.

"He... did call," I reply, trying to keep my tone neutral. "He called to congratulate me on the second chance and nothing more."

Leah nods, her expression thoughtful. "That's good to hear. I know things have been complicated between you two."

I feel a little guilty for lying, because the truth is, Karl didn't just call. He showed up at my apartment in a tuxedo, flowers in hand. And he had left a luncheon where he was supposed to be picking out a new date for the Alpha party, all just to see me.

And yet, at the end of the night, we still parted ways; our romance has run its course. It's about time for us to move on.

But, before I can confess the truth, Leah speaks. "Abby, I heard a rumor that Karl is looking for a new Luna. Is that true?"

Her words pierce through me like a dagger, and for a moment, I feel as if the air has been sucked out of the room. So she knows. I swallow hard, trying to keep my composure. "Yes, it's true," I admit, my voice trembling slightly. "He told me."

Leah's eyes widen a little bit, and she reaches out to place a comforting hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Abby. I know how much he meant to you."

I offer her a small smile, trying to mask the pain that's lingering just beneath the surface. "It's okay, Leah. I want him to be happy, even if it's with someone else."

Leah looks surprised, her brows furrowing in confusion. "You're taking this surprisingly well. I expected you to be more upset."

I take a deep breath, mustering the strength to meet her gaze. "I've had time to think, Leah. Karl and I had our chance, and things didn't work out. If he's moving on, I should too."

She squeezes my shoulder gently. I can see a hint of sadness in her eyes, but she looks proud, too. "That's good," she says. "I'm glad that you're taking it so well. This could be good for you."

"Thanks," I say, managing a smile. "I think so, too."

Before we can say anything else, the barista calls us up to the counter. We order our drinks, reunite with a much more comfortable Chloe, and make our way out of the cafe.

Before I know it, the conversation has evolved into something entirely different, but I'm glad for it. I need a little distraction right now, not just from Karl, but from the looming call from Mr. Thompson that's supposed to come today.

...

"We need to get that pork loin out, John!" I call out over the din of the kitchen, my voice hoarse from yelling all morning.

"On it," John replies.

"Behind," Anton calls out. "Knife."

I step forward closer to the line to give Anton some space to get behind me. It's the dinner rush, and we've barely stopped moving for the past hour and a half. But it's a pleasant sort of chaos, the type of chaos that I sorely needed.

"I need an extra order of risotto!"

"Pork loin coming up!"

"Hot pan!"

"Fries are in!"

Chapter 294

Abby

I'm still clutching my phone so tightly that my knuckles are probably turning white. I'm standing in the middle of the cold storeroom, my hands shaking slightly as I wait for Mr. Thompson's verdict.

"I've called to inform you of the results from last night," he says. "First of all, I hope you're doing well."

"Y-Yeah, I'm doing good," I manage, struggling and, quite frankly, failing to keep my voice steady. "And you?"

Mr. Thompson chuckles lightly. "I'm well, Abby," he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. I can picture him on the other end of the phone, probably smirking as he speaks. Is he enjoying toying with me? I need to hear the results!

My heart skips a beat, and I grip the phone even tighter. "Look, Mr. Thompson—" I begin, but he cuts me off.

"After careful consideration," he interrupts, "the judges have decided..."

My heart feels as if it's about to stop. This is it. My career feels like it's hinging on this moment. Everything I've worked for, everything I've sacrificed, all comes to this. And Mr. Thompson, kind, sweet, compassionate Mr. Thompson, is taking his damn time with telling me. I want to scream.

"You're going to cater the Alpha gathering."

A rush of joy floods through me, and I can't contain my excitement. "Um.. ahem... excuse me," I manage. Without waiting for a response, I put the phone down for a moment and just stand there.

Then, I'm suddenly jumping up and down, squealing with delight. I clamp my hand over my mouth, trying in vain to hide the absurd sounds that are coming out of me.

This is it! This is the opportunity I've been waiting for. No, not just waiting for, working for. And despite my odds, I made it. Everything is going to change from here on out.

Mr. Thompson's voice crackles through the speaker then, breaking through my reverie. "Abby?" he calls out, his voice muffled by the distance. "Abby, are you there?"

I pick the phone up again, my voice breathless. "Mr. Thompson," I breathe, "I can't believe it! Thank you so much! I promise I won't let you down."

He laughs warmly. "I have no doubt about that, Abby. Your talent and passion shine through in your cooking. But that's not all."

I quirk an eyebrow. "It's not?"

"No," he replies. "Look, Abby, your story has captured the hearts of many. People are fascinated by your journey, and we believe it could be a great opportunity for your restaurant as well. I've scheduled a TV interview for you. It's tomorrow. Can you attend?"

I swallow, nodding even though I know he can't see me. "O-Of course," I say. "Of course, I could do that."

But then, Mr. Thompson's tone turns more serious as he continues. "But there's one more thing I'd like to discuss. We've received numerous requests from viewers who are enamored with your mysterious sous chef, 'Ken.' He should appear on the show with you."

Chapter 295

After all, our paths have diverged, and it's time for both of us to move on.

Mr. Thompson's voice brings me back to the present. "Well then," he continues, "I'll be looking forward to your interview tomorrow. I'll email you the details as soon as we're done here."

I can't help but smile. "Thank you, Mr. Thompson. Really."

With a deep breath, I hang up the phone and lean back against a storage rack, too stunned to even stand up straight. I just can't believe it; despite everything, I'm catering the Alpha party.

After taking some time to calm down a bit, I push away from the storage rack and walk over to the door. And when I push it open, I find myself face to face with none other than...

Daisy, Ethan, Chloe, John, and Anton, all huddled together by the counter as if they weren't just eavesdropping on my conversation. Their guilty expressions are comical, and I can't help but raise an eyebrow.

"What's going on here?" I ask, thoroughly amused.

They scramble to break apart, each of them pretending to be engrossed in something else entirely. Chloe suddenly finds her coffee cup fascinating, John starts examining a tray of pastries, and Ethan pretends to be deeply absorbed in his phone.

But I meet Chloe's eyes and can't help but grin. With a dramatic flair, I throw my arms up in the air and announce, "I'm catering the Alpha party!"

The effect is immediate. My friends erupt into cheers, and we gather in a tight circle for a big group hug. I can't help but laugh as they shower me with congratulations and well wishes. John's bear hug sweeps me off my feet, leaving me breathless when he finally sets me back down.

"Abby, that's amazing!" Chloe exclaims, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Daisy wipes away a tear of joy. "I knew you could do it."

Ethan claps me on the back, his grin infectious. "See? Told you."

Anton nods vigorously. "I can see it now in shining lights: Chef Abby, Extraordinaire."

I can't help but giggle, tears of joy filling my eyes. I can't believe I've made it this far, all thanks to them.

But there's one other person who I want to thank, and he's not here.

The space where he would normally be standing, arms folded across his chest and leaning against the counter, is empty. The apron he wore, stained with tomato sauce, is still hanging on the hook, untouched.

And my heart feels just the tiniest bit colder.

But Chloe's voice brings me back to the present. She's shoving something in my hand: a glass of champagne. Apparently she had the bottle hidden behind her back, and during my reverie, she popped it and began to pour.

Now, everyone is looking at me with their own champagne glasses in hand, waiting expectantly for me to say something.

I feel awkward as I clear my throat, wondering what to say.

"Gosh, guys, I..." I begin, but my voice falters. "I... I don't know what to say. I just..."

Chapter 296

Karl

"You've been staring at those profiles I gave you for hours, Karl," Marcus says, his eyes flickering over to me from where he sits across my desk. "What's on your mind?"

I run a hand through my hair, feeling deflated after the hectic morning. "It's just... None of them feel right, Marcus. These women are undoubtedly qualified and capable, but I'm just not interested in any of them."

Marcus nods. "Well, maybe you just need a different approach," he suggests. "Why don't you hold a private date with each of them? It might be easier to get an idea of what they're really like that way."

I lean back in my plush leather chair, considering Marcus' words. While I hate the idea of going on a private date with any of these women, the Alpha party is ticking closer and I have yet to find a partner.

“Alright,” I finally concede with a sigh. “I’ll set up dates with the top three candidates.”

With that decision made, I instruct Marcus to arrange the private dates with Marissa, Meg, and Shana, the three women who seem like the most viable candidates for not only a date, but also a future Luna.

None of them are Abby, but it’s about as good as I can get. And who knows? Maybe I’ll have a real connection with one of them.

...

Marissa

“Karl, it’s a pleasure to finally have some one-on-one time,” Marissa purrs, her voice mingling with the sounds of the romantic bistro that I’ve chosen as our date spot.

I return her smile, although it feels like a hollow gesture. “Likewise. You made an impression on me at the luncheon, so I thought it only fitting if we met again.”

Her fingers twirl the stem of her wine glass as she leans in closer. “I knew we hit it off. I’m known for making... lasting impressions. Especially on men.”

Her words make me uneasy, but I choose to ignore it for now. “So, Marissa, what are your interests?”

She tilts her head slightly, her eyes gleaming with hubris. “I’m quite the socialite. You’ll often find me at the most exclusive events and parties. And of course, I love fashion.”

“Fashion,” I echo, nodding. “I’m intrigued. Tell me more.”

Marissa launches into an extensive monologue about her favorite designers, mentioning high-end brands and exclusive collections. It’s obvious that it’s something that entices her, but something nags at the back of my mind.

“I think it’s great that you’re so passionate about fashion,” I say when she’s finished. “Personally, I enjoy—”

Before I can answer, she cuts in with another monologue, leaving no room for me to respond. It’s off-putting, and I’m left reeling, feeling like this is a very one-sided conversation.

By the time she finishes, I’ve made up my mind. This conversation isn’t going anywhere, and in fact, her self-absorbed nature is making me want to dunk my head into the fish tank that’s on the other end of the bistro.

“Marissa,” I say, keeping my tone steady, “I appreciate your company tonight, but I just don’t see this going anywhere. I’m sorry.”

She lets out an exasperated sigh, her irritation thinly veiled. “Karl, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

Without another word, she storms off, leaving me alone with an exorbitantly expensive bill and a bad taste in my mouth.

...

Meg

Meg arrives in a whirlwind of energy, her long hair cascading down her back as she approaches the table. She’s dressed in a vibrant red dress, her makeup bold and eye-catching. But what stands out the most is that her phone is practically glued to her hand, just like at the luncheon.

Chapter 297

But people are staring, and I feel like I’m making a fool of myself. So after a few pictures, I hand the phone back and step away.

“There you go.”

Meg takes a look at the photos I've taken and frowns. "Karl, these are terrible! I can't post any of these. They make me look fat. Try again."

I'm taken aback once more, but in the spirit of giving people the benefit of the doubt, I do as she asks. We repeat the process several times, with Meg growing increasingly frustrated each time she reviews the photos.

At one point, she even asks the waiter to take a few shots, but nothing seems to meet her standards.

Finally, she snaps. "Karl, you're supposed to make me look good! This is your job, you know."

"My job?" I scoff.

She folds her arms across her chest. "You could at least try to take one good picture of me. It's like you don't even care."

By this point, I've had enough. We've been here for almost an hour, and we still haven't even ordered our drinks. I finally push my chair back and stand, grabbing my jacket.

"Where are you going?" she asks, her eyes wide.

"I'm leaving," I reply. "If you wanted a photographer, you could have just said so."

Without waiting for a response, I leave the rooftop restaurant, ignoring her calls behind me.

...

Shana

This is it: the third date. I'm standing outside a small Italian restaurant, a low-key place that was much needed after the first two failures. The air smells like fresh bread and oregano, and I can hear the sound of accordion music playing inside.

Shana, my third date, is a few minutes late. I'm checking my watch, wondering when she'll arrive, when a sleek white car pulls up and out of the back steps a lovely looking woman with long red hair and freckles across her nose.

I remember her from the luncheon, but she was quiet the whole time; we barely got to talk. Maybe that's why I picked her as one of my top three—because she's not loud and obnoxious.

"Shana?" I say, stepping forward.

"Karl," she says as she approaches, her white dress swishing around her legs. "It's nice to see you again."

"Likewise. Would you like to head inside?"

We head inside and take our seats by the window. Shana is quiet, but I chalk it up to nervousness, and besides: the quiet is nice for a change.

After we order our meals, I decide to break the ice. "So, Shana, what do you do for a living?"

She chuckles softly, a hint of shyness in her eyes. "Well, to be honest, my father runs a successful business, and I help him manage it. It's not very interesting, I'm afraid."

I nod. "Business rarely is. What would you rather do, if you weren't working for your father?"

Shana's light up at my question. "Well, I love to paint..."

Before I know it, we've fallen into an easy—albeit sparse—conversation. Shana is a painter, and likes to read. She's pretty, sweet, and although she's not the most exciting or talkative company, she's good company nonetheless.

I can't help but think to myself that I wouldn't mind her company in the future, even if it's just for a date to the Alpha party. At the very least, she's leaps and bounds more pleasant than the first two dates. Of course, she's not Abby... but no one ever will be, and I'll just have to get used to that.

Chapter 298

Abby

I walk into the TV studio, my heart pounding with excitement and nervous energy. This is it, the day of my interview, and I'm determined to make the most of it.

As I step inside, I'm greeted by a flurry of activity. People are rushing around, setting up cameras, adjusting lights, and making final preparations for the interview.

I feel as if I've just traveled back in time to the day of the cook-off, which feels like it was eons ago by now. At least this time, there are no contestants trying to sabotage me.

Instead, I feel like the star of the show. The security guard lets me through with a warm smile, the interviewer gives me a wave from afar, and a friendly makeup artist approaches me, a makeup kit in hand.

"Hi there, Abby," she says with a warm smile. "I'll be doing your makeup for the interview. We'll make sure you look your best on camera."

I nod appreciatively, but ever since the cook-off, I've made a resolve in my mind: I want to be myself. No masks to hide behind.

"Thank you, but I'd like to keep it as natural as possible," I say with a smile, not wanting to be rude. "Just the essentials to make me look decent on camera, please."

The makeup artist looks a bit puzzled. "Are you sure? We usually go for a more polished look for these interviews. You know, to cover up any imperfections and enhance your features."

I shake my head, my determination unwavering. “I understand, but I’m not here to look like a doll. I want to be myself, imperfections and all. That’s what makes me who I am.”

She hesitates for a moment, then sighs. “Alright, if that’s what you want. But just so you know, a little makeup can go a long way in enhancing your natural beauty.”

I appreciate her concern, but I stand my ground. “I appreciate your expertise, but I’m comfortable with my appearance. Let’s keep it light, please.”

With a resigned nod, the makeup artist begins her work. She applies a minimal amount of makeup, focusing on evening out my skin tone and adding a hint of color to my lips just so I don’t look like a corpse on camera.

I glance at myself in the mirror and smile. It’s exactly what I wanted—just a subtle enhancement that doesn’t mask my true self.

Once the makeup is done, I thank the makeup artist profusely and head to the set where the interview will take place.

The host, a friendly and charismatic woman named Sarah, greets me with a warm handshake. “Abby, it’s a pleasure to have you here. We’re excited to hear your story and get your perspective on the recent cook-off incident.”

I return her smile, feeling more at ease now that I’m on set. “Thank you, Sarah. I’m happy to be here and share my experiences.”

The interview begins, and the questions flow smoothly. Sarah asks about my background, the restaurant, and how I got to where I am today.

I feel like I’m beginning to get a hang of this whole television thing, and I’m much more relaxed than before. But then again, there’s no studio audience this time around; just me, Sarah, and the camera.

But then, the topic shifts to what I was dreading: the sabotage at the cook-off. Sarah's tone becomes more serious as she asks, "Abby, can you tell us about the incident at the cook-off and how it affected you?"

I take a deep breath. I was expecting this, but it doesn't make this moment easier.

"It... was a challenging moment for sure," I begin. "The sabotage was unexpected and disheartening. It's disappointing when someone resorts to such tactics in a competition meant to celebrate food and talent."

Sarah nods in understanding. "And what can you tell us about the person responsible for the sabotage, Daniel? Many viewers are curious about your thoughts on him."

I pause for a moment, considering my response carefully. I could easily let my anger and frustration out, but then I remember the promise I made to myself. I don't want to stoop to Daniel's level.

I don't want to be that person. That's not me. That's not Abby.

"I... I hope that Daniel will learn from this incident," I say calmly. "We all make mistakes, and it's important to reflect on our actions and grow from them. I wish him the best in his culinary journey."

Sarah raises an eyebrow, clearly expecting a more dramatic response. "That's a very forgiving attitude, Abby. Some might say you're being too kind."

I smile, my resolve never wavering. "Kindness and forgiveness can be powerful forces for change. It's important to remember that we're all capable of doing things we shouldn't, but it doesn't define who we are."

"That's very sweet, Abby," Sarah continues with a smile. "And you're right. But I must ask, what does your mysterious sous chef, Ken, think of all of this? He was personally affected by Daniel's sabotage, after all. Accusing someone of assault is very serious."

For a split second, I freeze. The mention of Karl, disguised as Ken, brings a rush of conflicting emotions. I can't deny that I miss him and wish he could be here, standing by my side.

I manage to compose myself and offer a warm smile. "Ken has chosen not to comment," I say on the fly. "I'm sorry."

Sarah looks a little disappointed, but apparently that's not all. "And where is Ken today?"

"Um... Ken had to go back to his hometown to deal with some family matters," I say, which isn't a total lie. "Unfortunately, he won't be returning to the city anytime soon."

Chapter 299

Abby

The interview comes to an end, and I let out a sigh of relief, feeling a mix of emotions. It went well, and I managed to stay true to myself. Mr. Thompson approaches me with a warm smile.

"Abby, you did great out there," he says. "Your kind words and forgiveness towards Daniel were truly commendable. It was a good look for you."

I nod, feeling a sense of validation. "Thank you, Mr. Thompson. I just wanted to be honest and genuine."

He pats me on the back. "Well, it paid off. Keep up the good work, Abby."

As I make my way out of the studio, I'm greeted by a small group of fans who have gathered outside. I'm shocked by their presence, but flattered.

"You don't need to engage," Mr. Thompson whispers as we approach. "I understand if it makes you uncomfortable."

But I shake my head. "No, not at all. I'd be happy to talk to them."

I approach the group and am immediately met by smiles and kind words. I spend the next few minutes signing autographs and taking pictures, genuinely thrilled that a group of women, no matter how small, felt so moved by my story that they were willing to come out here to meet me.

“You’re my role model, Abby. I hope to be as successful and talented as you one day,” one young woman who introduces herself as Lisa tells me.

I smile at her. “Thank you, Lisa. Just keep working hard and following your passion. You can achieve anything you set your mind to.”

But as I’m about to leave, my breath hitches when I spot a familiar little chef hat in the crowd. It’s the little girl from the cook-off, the one who kept me grounded all this time.

My heart swells with emotion as I stoop down to her level.

“Hey there,” I say with a smile. “What’s your name?”

The little girl’s eyes widen with excitement, and she practically bursts with energy. “I’m Charlie!” she explains. “Abby, I can’t believe it’s you!”

Her mother, standing nearby, chuckles. “She hasn’t stopped talking about you since your first interview. She had to come and meet you.”

I can’t help but feel a lump in my throat. To think that I made such an impact on a young child is incredibly heartwarming. I hug the little girl gently.

“That’s so sweet of you,” I tell her. “And what about you? Do you want to be a chef when you grow up?”

The little girl nods enthusiastically. “Yes! I want to be just like you, Abby!”

Tears fill my eyes as I look at her with genuine affection. “You know what, sweetheart?” I find myself saying, reaching out with my index finger to boop her little button nose. “You’re the one who kept me going all this time.”

Charlie’s eyes widen, and she gasps. “Really? How?”

“Well,” I say, trying not to cry, “every time I was feeling sad or scared, I looked up in the crowd and saw you there with your handmade sign. It made me so happy that I knew I could do anything.”

Without a word, Charlie giggles and throws her arms around my neck. I can’t help but laugh, hugging her back.

Her mother thanks me for taking the time to talk to her daughter, and I can see the gratitude in her eyes. As I say goodbye and continue on my way, I can’t stop thinking about that little girl, Charlie.

The smile never leaves my face, no matter how much I try.

...

I’m back in my cozy apartment after the interview, feeling a mix of exhaustion and contentment. The encounter with the little girl at the studio left a warm glow in my heart, and I can’t help but smile as I recall her bright eyes and dreams of becoming a chef.

As I unwind on my couch, a sense of tranquility washes over me. The night outside is peaceful, the city’s sounds a distant hum. I’ve got a movie playing quietly on the TV and dinner cooking in the oven, and I’m content.

But then, a rustling noise coming from beneath my living room window catches my attention. My heart skips a beat, and my mind immediately goes back to that dreadful day when my apartment was set on fire.

Ever since that incident, I've been on edge, constantly vigilant. The police never found anything, but I can't help but worry that someone might be lurking, watching, waiting for the right moment to strike again.

With a deep breath, I try to calm my racing heart. It's probably just my imagination playing tricks on me. Maybe it's the wind rustling the leaves or a stray cat rummaging through the trash.

But the unease lingers, gnawing at the back of my mind. I can't ignore it. I need to make sure.

I stride over to the window and throw it open, peering out into the darkness. My eyes strain to make out any movement. And then, I see it—a fleeting figure darting away from the building. A human figure.

My heart pounds in my chest, and a rush of adrenaline surges through me. It's too dark to see clearly, but I'm certain I saw someone. Panic begins to set in, and my hands tremble as I reach for my phone.

I dial 911, my voice shaky as I explain the situation to the operator. They assure me that they'll send a patrol car to investigate. I try to steady my breathing as I wait, my eyes fixed on the window, half expecting the figure to return.

Chapter 300

Karl

Shana and I are strolling through the paths of the local botanical garden. It's a nice, sunny day, the perfect day for a second date. Figuring that it was best if we got to know each other a little more before the Alpha gathering, I decided to invite Shana out for a couple of hours.

But as we walk, I can't help but notice the occasional sidelong glances from people I know from the town, members of the pack, and even some acquaintances. It's clear that the rumors have spread like wildfire, and everyone is well aware that their Alpha is dating a new woman.

I glance at Shana, who's walking beside me without a care in the world, seemingly unfazed by the curious gazes. I feel a pang of guilt for putting her in this position, for subjecting her to the scrutiny that comes with being associated with me.

“I’m sorry about all of this,” I say, turning to face her. “If we continue to see each other, you’ll have to get used to this sort of thing.”

Shana gives me a nonchalant shrug, her expression inscrutable. “I figured it would be like this, Karl. It comes with the territory, right?”

I’m relieved by her calm response, grateful that she doesn’t seem to be bothered by the attention. But as we continue to walk, my thoughts drift back to Abby and how different things used to be with her.

Abby always had a fiery spirit. She was never the type to let nosy gossips get away with their intrusive questions or judgmental looks. She would hold her head high, radiating confidence and pride in who she was, regardless of what others thought.

And on more than one occasion, she would call those gossips out on their behavior.

I still remember one day when a group of teenagers had been huddling near the restaurant we were eating in, trying to sneak unflattering pictures of her to start a smear campaign. She marched right out of the restaurant and walked up to them.

All she did was hold her hand out, and after a moment’s hesitation, the girl taking the pictures handed her phone over. I felt so impressed that day; my wife, my Luna, could command people with just one look.

I miss having her beside me. I miss her sharp wit and her ability to put people in their place with a single cutting remark. Shana is nice, she’s refined, but she lacks that fire.

Shana’s voice pulls me back to the present, and I realize she’s been speaking to me. “Karl, I was asking you about the Alpha gathering. You mentioned that it’s coming up soon.”

I blink, refocusing my attention on her. “Oh, right. The gathering. Right.”

Shana nods, her interest piqued. “And you mentioned you’ll pick me up at seven?”

I confirm with a nod. “Yes, seven o’clock. Oh, and it’s a black tie event, so we’ll need to dress accordingly.”

As I utter those words, a sudden realization hits me like a ton of bricks. I used to be so controlling with Abby, always telling her how to dress, even when she looked absolutely beautiful just the way she was.