

Kickass 311

Chapter 311

Amidst the sea of faces, though, another familiar figure approaches us. It's Daniel, an Alpha who used to be close to both Abby and me when we were married years ago. His warm smile is genuine as he greets me.

"Karl, my old friend!" Daniel exclaims, extending a hand toward me. "It's been far too long. Who's this lovely lady you have with you tonight?"

I can't help but offer a polite smile as I introduce Shana. "Daniel, this is Shana. Shana, meet Daniel."

Daniel takes Shana's hand and gives it a kiss. "A pleasure to meet you, Shana. You look stunning."

Shana remains silent aside from a thank-you, her polite smile never wavering. It's becoming increasingly clear that she's not the most conversational of companions. I didn't see it as much when it was just the two of us on dates, but I really see it now that we're around other people.

Daniel's friendly demeanor takes a curious turn as he leans in a little closer, lowering his voice. "So, are you two officially dating now?"

I pause for a moment, feeling the weight of the question. Shana says nothing, and I can sense her discomfort. I decide to answer honestly. "We've just started seeing each other, but we haven't discussed any official plans yet."

Daniel gives me a sideways look, his expression thoughtful. He then gestures for me to step aside with him, away from Shana's earshot. His tone becomes hushed as he pulls me aside.

"Karl, I've known you for a long time," he says. "And I have to be honest with you. It's not a good look for an Alpha to be 'unofficial' with a woman. You need to establish a firm connection, especially if she's a potential Luna."

I'm a bit taken aback by his words. "Daniel, I appreciate your concern, but—"

He cuts me off with a knowing look. “Can I be honest with you, Karl? Man to man?”

His words give me pause, but I nod anyway. “Hit me.”

He sighs. “Karl, I can tell. The spark isn’t there like it was with Abby. You can’t fool us Alphas. If you want to be taken seriously as a leader, you need to make a decision.”

I’m left momentarily speechless, grappling with his words. Daniel has always been straightforward and observant, and his assessment hits me harder than I’d like to admit.

“I understand what you’re saying, Daniel,” I finally reply, choosing my words carefully. “But Shana and I are taking our time to get to know each other. Rushing into things won’t benefit either of us.”

Daniel claps me on the shoulder with a friendly but firm grip. “I get it, Karl. Just remember, not everything is about duty. You deserve to have a spark, too. Someone who you would proudly announce as your future Luna in a heartbeat.”

With that, he leaves me standing there, pondering his advice. I can’t deny that there’s a tiny bit of truth in his words. As an Alpha, I’m expected to lead by example, to make decisions and stick by them. But at the same time, I don’t want to rush into something just for the sake of appearances—especially not something that lacks any real substance.

Chapter 312

Abby

The dinner rush has finally died down, and Anton, John and I are just finishing up our last batch of orders. We’ve been working tirelessly all night, and I can’t wait to have a moment of reprieve. Music is playing over the kitchen speakers, but I’ve hardly heard a word of it, too focused on the food to think about anything else.

At some point, Mr. Thompson slips into the kitchen. I don’t notice his presence until he speaks up, his voice carrying across the din. It almost makes me jump.

“Hello, team,” he says.

I quickly look up, a bit of hair falling into my eyes, and blow it away with a puff of air. "Oh! Mr. Thompson," I say, straightening a bit. "Is everything going okay out there?"

"Abby, Anton, John," he acknowledges each of us with a nod. "The food tonight is an absolute hit. The guests are raving about every dish."

I can't help but feel a sense of pride wash over me. After everything, the food is a hit. It feels good. Really good.

"Thank you, Mr. Thompson," I reply with a satisfied grin. "It means a lot. We've all been working really hard."

Mr. Thompson's eyes twinkle with admiration as he continues. "In fact, some of your fans are asking to meet the chef responsible for these exquisite creations. I suggest you join the party now that the food orders have slowed down. It's an opportunity for you to bask in the recognition you rightfully deserve."

I feel a surge of nervous excitement at the prospect of mingling with the guests, but I'm also aware of my disheveled appearance from hours spent in the kitchen. I glance down at my flour-dusted apron and smudged chef's coat.

"I'll have to put on my dress and freshen up a bit first," I say, "but I can mingle for a while after that."

Mr. Thompson's smile widens, and he nods in understanding. "Of course, Abby. Take your time. We'll be looking forward to your entrance."

When Mr. Thompson leaves, the kitchen falls quiet. I can feel Anton and John's eyes on me, and it's obvious that they know now what I've really been waiting for all night. When I turn to face them, the looks on their faces tell me all I need to know.

Anton grins, his hands covered in cocoa powder from his most recent batch of tiramisu. "Go on, Abby," he says. "Go to the party. We know you want to."

John nods in agreement, his focus on the sizzling grill in front of him. "Yeah, we've got the rest covered here. Get out there. Have some fun. You deserve it."

"And besides," Anton chimes in before I have the chance to say anything else, "surely Karl is out there, isn't he?"

My eyes widen. They shouldn't know that Karl is an Alpha. And they especially shouldn't know about the... feelings between the two of us.

"Er—He's not—"

"Quit playing dumb," John interjects with a wave of his spatula. "We've all known for ages now. He's an Alpha, obviously. And I don't know the exact history between you two, but it's obvious that you've got feelings toward each other."

"Yeah," Daisy, who was just passing by to grab an order from under the warming rack, says. "We all know how you two look at each other. You should go out there and see him. I know you miss him."

My face heats up even more, and I can't meet their teasing gazes. "Well, it's not just about that," I defend. "I just want to mingle a bit and... meet people. That's all."

Chapter 313

My heart sinks, and I feel a lump forming in my throat. It's like a punch to the gut, seeing him with someone else. I turn away, tears welling up in my eyes. I was so foolish to think I could just waltz back into his life and everything would be the same.

What was I expecting, anyway? He told me that he was holding interviews for a date. Did I just assume that he was bluffing, or that he would change my mind for my sake? Of course I did. And it was silly.

As I watch from my secret corner, Karl leans close to the woman he's dancing with and says something in her ear. She smiles, her foxen face lighting up at his words. There's an intimacy between them; I can sense it.

Maybe I shouldn't get involved. Maybe I should just go back to the kitchen, return to my work, and let Karl have his night.

And that's exactly what I'll do.

But as I begin to walk back to the kitchen, my head hung low, I suddenly feel hands on my shoulders, and someone shoves me into my office. The door clicks shut behind me, and when the light turns on, I see that it's Chloe and Leah.

They exchange worried glances before turning their attention to me. Chloe speaks first, her voice gentle. "Abby, what are you doing?"

I sniffle, wiping away a tear. There's no use lying. Not to them. "... I wanted to put on my new dress and maybe attend the party for a bit. But then I saw Karl with his date, and it just hurt too much. I can't do it."

Leah steps closer, her expression filled with concern. "Abby, you can't let Karl's presence dictate your actions. People are excited to see you here, to taste your incredible food. You don't need to worry about him."

I shake my head, feeling utterly defeated. "But it's not just that. I feel silly, wearing..." I pause, gesturing to the gown hanging on the back of my door. "That. God, it's like a wedding dress. I'd be making a spectacle out of myself."

Chloe looks over at the dress, then exchanges a look with Leah before returning her attention toward me. She walks up to me and places both of her hands on my shoulders, forcing me to look at her.

"You listen to me," Chloe says. "Abby, you're gorgeous, successful, and this night was made possible thanks to you. The gown is beautiful and you deserve to wear it. Are you really going to let your ex-husband's new fling change that for you? Are you really going to let him deter you from walking out there, looking every bit as radiant and lovely as you deserve?"

Leah nods in agreement. "We believe in you, Abby. Don't let this moment ruin what should be a celebration of your success."

I take a deep breath, my gaze flickering from them to the dress hanging on the back of the door. I begin to realize that it's not just a dress; it's a manifestation of all of my hard work. All of the blood, sweat, and tears that I put into making tonight happen.

And then, my mind wanders back to that little girl, Charlie. The way her chef's hat was too big for her head but it never stopped her. The way she called me her hero, the way she threw her arms around my neck.

Chloe and Leah are right. I can't let one setback derail me. I can't let Karl's presence with a new woman overshadow everything I've achieved. It's time to put on that dress, walk out there with my head held high, and enjoy the party.

Chapter 314

Abby

"Hey, Abby."

There he is: Karl, standing in front of me, looking as handsome as ever in his all-black suit. He's got his hands in his pockets in that way that just screams Karl, and for a moment, I feel my chest tighten at the thought of the fact that he has a different date who isn't me.

"Um... Hey," I reply.

There's a brief silence, slightly awkward, before he responds. "I didn't expect to see you here tonight. Not like..." He pauses, pulling one hand out of his pocket to gesture to my dress and my hair. "...This."

For a moment, I feel as though I'm about to throw up. I feel like he doesn't like the dress, and I'm suddenly back in the past, back when he used to police what I wore.

I bashfully look down at the gown and touch the fabric. "I know it's silly," I stammer, although I don't entirely know why. "I just... I saw it in the store window, and—"

"Abby," he cuts in, shaking his head with an almost amused look on his face. "You look stunning."

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I suddenly feel flustered, excruciatingly embarrassed, and surprised all at once. “Th-Thank you, Karl,” I manage.

There’s another silence, just as awkward as the last. My heart is practically pounding out of my chest now, and in order to ease some of that tension, I speak again. “Are you enjoying the food tonight?”

“It’s perfect,” he says with a grin. “I’m so proud of you. You’ve really outdone yourself. Honestly, this might be some of the best food I’ve had at an Alpha gathering in a long time.”

I scoff, punching his arm lightly. For a moment, it’s as though nothing has changed; we’re already falling back into that easy dialogue between us. “Oh, stop. The food is fantastic every year.”

Karl simply shrugs, shooting me a sheepish grin. “It is, that’s true. But it’s especially good this year.”

Before I can say anything else, a voice from behind Karl interrupts our conversation. “Hi there.”

Surprise, both of us turn to see a woman with striking red hair extending her hand toward me. It’s the woman that Karl was dancing with, and she’s even more beautiful up close. Her hair falls in gentle waves over her shoulders, and her nose is dotted with delicate freckles. She’s slender, but also curvy in all of the right places, and there’s an understated sort of elegance about her.

With a gentle smile, she extends a hand. “I’m Shana.”

I take her hand and shake it, trying to hide the pain in my chest. “Nice to meet you, Shana. I’m Abby.”

Karl steps in suddenly, looping his arm around the woman’s waist. “Shana is my date tonight, Abby.”

“I see.” The words come out faster than I intended, but I can’t stop myself. It feels like my chest is on fire, or like I was kicked in the gut. Maybe both.

Shana doesn't seem to have much to say about the revelation, and instead, she looks around the room. There's something that's slightly detached about her mannerisms, like her heart is somewhere else. I can't help but wonder if I offended her by talking to Karl, but when she turns back to look at me, there's a kind smile on her face.

"You cooked everything tonight, right?" she asks.

I nod. "Yes," I reply. "Well, me and my team."

Her smile widens ever so slightly. "Well, it's delicious. Really."

I nod, a bit taken aback by her kind demeanor. "Thank you, Shana," I manage. "That means a lot."

As I'm about to say something more, the other Lunas suddenly appear around us, their smiles sickeningly sweet. My heart sinks as I realize they've come to play their usual games.

"Well, well," Emily, the ringleader of her little troupe, says as she approaches with that god awful diamond tennis bracelet dangling around her wrist. "If it isn't the chef. I've been wondering when we'd see you tonight, darling."

A chorus of giggles and snide remarks follows her statement, and I can feel anger and frustration bubbling up inside me. But before I can respond, Karl steps forward, a protective look in his eyes.

"Emily, if you're here to cause trouble, you should know that we were just in the middle of a conversation," he says. "Abby may be my ex-wife, but she's still my friend. And I saw what you did to the cakes."

I'm stunned by his words, not expecting him to reveal our past relationship so openly in front of Shana. But Shana doesn't seem to react at all, which makes me wonder if she already knew or if she simply doesn't care.

Emily, always quick with a cutting remark, smirks in response. "I'm not sure if I know what you're talking about, Karl. I haven't touched any cakes tonight. Everyone knows I don't eat sugar." She leans a little closer, eyeing my waist in my dress. "I like to watch my waistline, you know."

Before Karl can retort, I take a deep breath, deciding it's time to stand up for myself. "You know, it's really sad how we all used to be friends," I say, my voice steady despite the pounding in my chest. "But it turns out that some people can be so nasty."

A few of the Lunas exchange uncomfortable glances, and I continue, my tone unwavering. "I used to think we were true friends, but now I see how wrong I was. So, enjoy the food, and if you ever have a problem, come to me. I know what you said about Daisy, and I won't stand for the abuse of my staff."

When I'm finished, Emily and her little posse just stare at me for a moment, their eyes wide. "Well then," Emily finally says with a huff, "I think this conversation has run its course. Let's go, girls."

With that, Emily and her troupe leave. Karl, Shana, and I watch them go, and a silence falls over us. I feel just as stunned as Karl, although a quick glance at Shana makes me wonder what she's thinking.

Chapter 315

Karl

"Come on, let's dance."

Shana's hand slips into mine, her fingers delicate and warm as she pulls me away from Abby. I'm still at a loss for words, both stunned and unbelievably proud of Abby standing up against Emily and her little gang of mean girls. But as soon as it was over, Shana pulled me away, and I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to Abby.

And, god, she looks so stunning in her dress. The white reflects the light like a freshwater pearl, the beading creating little rainbows as the lights over the dancefloor land on her. The plunging neckline flatters her in an elegant yet sexy way, and when I got a glimpse of the low back earlier when she turned away to tell off Emily and the other Lunas, I had to look away before my face turned a bright shade of red.

But I shouldn't be thinking about her. I'm with Shana now, and she looks beautiful, too. It would be wrong of me to be looking at my ex-wife when I'm with another woman.

And yet, as we step onto the dance floor, I can't help but feel a pang of unease beginning to blossom in my chest. I wonder if she's upset about our conversation with Abby, but the way she smiles at me as we begin to dance makes me wonder.

The soft strains of music surround us, and we begin to sway to the rhythm. Shana's graceful movements and the way her red hair catches the dim light create an enchanting atmosphere. Despite my initial concerns, the dance is surprisingly comfortable, and we fall into a smooth rhythm.

But neither of us speaks. It's not a comfortable silence, either. Instead, it feels as though we just... have nothing to talk about. And it's not the first time tonight that it's felt that way.

After a while, however, Shana finally breaks the silence. "Karl, can I ask you something?"

I meet her gaze, a bit apprehensive. God, here it is; she's going to tell me off for talking to my ex-wife. But I couldn't help it. Was I rude earlier when I excused myself to go say hello to Abby? Shit, of course I was. I acted like a jerk. And now she's standing here, staring at me, waiting for me to say something.

"Of course, Shana," I finally manage. "What's on your mind?"

She studies me for a moment, her eyes searching my face before she takes a deep breath and speaks. "Do you still love Abby?"

Her question catches me off guard, and I hesitate. "I, um..."

"Be honest," she says. "I can tell if you're lying. I'm not an idiot, you know."

"I...I don't know, Shana," I finally admit, realizing that she's right: there's no use in lying. "Abby and I... We've been through a lot, and things have changed."

I expect Shana to freak out, maybe even to slap me across my face like any woman would. But she doesn't. Instead, she smiles gently, her eyes warm in the glow of the dance floor lights. "I can see the way you look at each other, Karl. It's as if there's still something there, a connection that hasn't faded."

I shift uncomfortably, unsure of how to respond. "Well, we do share a history, but that doesn't mean..."

Chapter 316

I raise an eyebrow, surprised by her words. Without meaning to, I stop dancing for a moment. "Why would you say that?" I ask, feeling my heart as it pounds in my chest.

Shana, however, doesn't miss a beat. Instead, she pushes me to keep dancing. Her eyes twinkle with a secret, and she leans in closer. "Because, Karl, I'm only here tonight because my father forced me to attend. There's no real spark between us, no connection."

Her words leave me taken aback. So I'm not the only one who sensed it. "Shana, I'm sorry," I say. "But you're right. I like you, but I just don't think we..."

"Click?" she asks, cocking her head to the side.

I nod, feeling guilty. "Yes. I'm sorry."

But much to my surprise, Shana simply shrugs. "Of course we don't," she says gently. "Because we're both in love with other people."

My heart skips a beat at her confession. "You... You are?"

She nods. "Karl, I'm in love with someone else; someone that my family doesn't approve of. That's why I'm here—to make my parents happy, even though it's killing me on the inside."

"Wow, Shana, that's..." I pause, unsure of what to say. To think that I almost wound up in a relationship with someone who was only interested in me to please her parents hurts, but I guess I was no different. Here I was, dancing with a woman who I only agreed to go out with to fulfill my own duties.

“Thank you for telling me,” I finally say with a gentle smile. “And... I have to admit, I feel a sense of kinship with you now,” I continue, laughing slightly.

Shana returns my laugh. “I knew as soon as you saw her walk in,” she says, “that you couldn’t get her off your mind. And on our previous dates, I saw how you always seemed so far away. I knew you were thinking of someone else.”

Now, I feel a little guilty again. “I’m sorry. I never meant to make you feel—”

But Shana just shakes her head, cutting me off. “Don’t apologize, Karl. I was far away, too, thinking of my girlfriend. I guess I thought that you and I could maybe grow to love each other in our own twisted way, but seeing the way you looked at your ex-wife just now... I think we would both be suffering in the end,” she says.

“So you think we should go our separate ways? Is that what you’re suggesting?” I ask.

She nods, her expression sincere. “Exactly, Karl. Thanks to you, I’m going to go to my love, and I’m going to run away with her, just like we’ve been wanting to do. And if there’s a chance for you to find happiness with Abby again, I would be genuinely happy for you.”

I don’t know what to say. I feel an immense relief, as though an enormous weight was just lifted off of my shoulders. But at the same time, I feel a sinking sense of dread, because I’m not sure if Abby even wants me.

After our last encounter in her apartment, I’m not so sure if she’s keen on romance anymore. Not with me, at least.

Chapter 317

Abby

I can’t stay here any longer.

Watching Karl and Shana dance together is more than I can bear. The music, the laughter, and the way they move together on the dance floor—it’s like someone just thrust an invisible dagger into my heart.

So, I slip away from the crowd, pushing through the side door and making my way to the dimly lit alley behind the restaurant. No one sees me go, or at least I hope they don't.

I can just imagine Emily and her friends now, sneering at me. I can imagine what she's saying now: that despite my proud attitude, my ex-husband is still dancing with another woman, and I'm standing on the sidelines like a wallflower at a middle school dance.

And suddenly, my little speech earlier seems hollow and pointless.

When I get outside, I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

The ground is dirty, and the sounds of the music are drowned out by the sounds of the city. Somewhere nearby, a car alarm is going off. Somewhere else, I can hear the sound of a couple arguing through the open window of their apartment. And somewhere else, there's a baby crying.

But right now, this cacophony of city noises is a welcome distraction from the whirling thoughts in my head

Leaning against a brick wall, I try to steady my breathing. The cool night air helps clear my head a bit, but the ache in my chest remains, and the hot prickling behind my eyes makes it feel as though the tears could slip out at any moment.

I can't deny it any longer; seeing Karl with someone else hurts more than I ever could have imagined, and I hate that I feel that way right now. I feel like a hypocrite.

Is this how he felt when he found out that I was with Adam? Did his chest hurt like this? Surely it did; and suddenly, the lengths he went to to result in our breakup make just a little bit more sense. How can I be mad at him when I'm here, already praying for the demise of his newfound relationship?

Just as I'm lost in my thoughts, the sound of footsteps approaches. I turn to see Anton making his way toward me with a cigarette in his hand. He raises an eyebrow when he sees me standing alone in the alley, clearly not expecting me to be here.

“Abby? What are you doing out here?” he asks, eyeing me up and down. “I thought you were enjoying the party.”

I manage a weak smile. “I just needed some fresh air, that’s all. It’s getting a bit stuffy in there. And it’s loud.” Then, I add with a hollow chuckle, “I don’t think I’m much of a party person.”

Anton studies me for a moment, his eyes searching mine. “I know you are not telling the truth, Abby,” he says in that thick French accent of his. “There is simply no way a beautiful mademoiselle such as yourself would rather be in a dirty alley than at a party in that gown. Go on, you can be honest with me.”

I hesitate for a moment, unsure if I want to confide in him. But I’ve known Anton for long enough at this point to know that my secret is safe with him, and that he won’t judge me.

My eyes flick down to my dress next, taking note of the way that the color seems dull now in the orange glow of the streetlights. This alley isn’t a place for this dress. I belong inside, with the others, but I just can’t bring myself to do it. Not when Karl and Shana are in there, falling in love right before my eyes.

“Alright, fine. It’s Karl,” I finally admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “He has another date, and she’s beautiful. Seeing him with someone else... it’s so much harder than I thought it would be.”

Anton nods, a knowing expression on his face. “Ah, Karl. Everyone in the restaurant could see there was something between you two.”

I sigh, feeling a tear threaten to escape my eye. “We... We did,” I mutter. “But it doesn’t matter now. He has a new girlfriend, and our relationship... it won’t go anywhere. We used to be married, you know.”

Anton’s eyes widen. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “Dead serious, Anton. It’s all a mess, but... I’m afraid that ship has long since sailed. He’s moved on. I probably should, too.”

Anton remains silent for a moment, his gaze distant as if lost in his own memories. Then, he lets out a heavy sigh. "You know, Abby, love can be a tricky thing. Sometimes, it takes time to find its way back."

I furrow my brow, not sure where he's going with this. "What do you mean?"

Anton leans against the wall next to me, his eyes fixed on a distant point. "I met my wife many years ago. We were deeply in love, and everything was perfect. But I had a gambling problem, as you well know, and I let it destroy our relationship. She left me, and I thought I had lost her forever."

His words strike a chord with me, and I turn to look at him with empathy. "I'm so sorry, Anton. But you two are meeting up in a few days! That's something, isn't it?"

He smiles sadly. "Thank you, Abby. Yes, we are speaking soon. But I don't think she'll ever want to get back with me, not in a romantic way. Even so, I will never stop loving her and regretting what I did."

I can feel the weight of his words, the depth of his pain. Without thinking, I reach out to grab his arm, giving it a squeeze. "I'm sorry, Anton. I'm over here complaining when I shouldn't be."

Chapter 318

Abby

With Anton's words of encouragement still fresh in my mind, I take a deep breath, gather my composure, and push through the door back into the party.

The music and chatter rush back over me like a wave, and I feel a sense of déjà vu wash over me. It's as if I never left, as if I never took that detour into the alley to escape the sight of Karl and Shana dancing together.

My eyes begin to scan the room for Karl, but I don't see him amongst the crowd, which has thickened since I was last here. It seems as though more guests have arrived, and for a moment, I almost consider rushing back to the kitchen to check in on my team.

But I can't. I know that's just an excuse, a way for me to get out of having to confront Karl.

Suddenly, however, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I whirl around, Karl's name on my lips, but it's not him.

It's Logan.

"Kar—Oh, Logan," I say, straightening a bit. "Hello. I wasn't expecting to see you."

He smirks. "I figured as much. You seem like you're looking for someone."

"I... I was," I manage stiffly, resisting the urge to look around more. "But it doesn't matter. How are you enjoying the party?"

Logan stares at me for a moment, a knowing look in his eyes, before he lifts his champagne glass slightly and offers me a slight smile. "It's a nice party," he says. "The food is good."

Good. That's really all he has to say? That, after all of the shit I went through, the food is 'good'?

But then my mind wanders back to Vanessa, how she mentioned that Logan was an advocate for me, and I feel myself soften.

I take a deep breath, searching for the right words. "Actually, I... I wanted to thank you, Logan," I begin. "Vanessa said that you advocated for me."

Logan studies me for a moment, his expression unreadable. He says nothing for a few long moments, and then what he says next leaves me reeling.

"Did you talk to 'Ken?'" he asks, raising his fingers in quotation marks in the air. He clearly knows, but how could he not? Surely he put two and two together by now. I just hope he'll keep it to himself, which seems to be the case, thankfully.

I swallow hard, feeling a bit caught off guard by his question. "Er... Yes," I reply, my voice soft. "He explained what you said that day, about my passion, and I agree with you. I need to reconnect with my passion for cooking."

A faint smile tugs at the corner of Logan's lips, and his eyes seem to hold a glimmer of approval. "Good," he says. "I'll hold you to that."

I'm not entirely sure what he means by 'hold you to that,' but I nod, determined to take his words to heart. But before I can ask for clarification, he's being pulled away by someone else, and I'm left standing here, wondering about his words.

What does he have in mind? Will I see more of him in the future?

Chapter 319

Time seems to slow as we approach one another, but neither of us stops. My heart is practically pounding out my chest.

We finally meet in the middle of the dance floor, and for a moment, neither of us knows what to say. The music envelops us, and the soft glow of the overhead lights turns purple to match the slow beat of the song, casting a romantic, intimate atmosphere around us.

Karl breaks the silence, holding out his hand to me. "Abby," he says softly, his voice hardly more than a whisper, "may I have this dance?"

I look at his hand, then back into his eyes, searching for answers. But all I find is sincerity, a flicker of regret, and a hint of something else that I can't quite place. Without a word, I place my hand in his, and his arm loops around my waist.

For a few moments, we just sway together, our bodies pressed together like two puzzle pieces that fit perfectly. I can feel eyes on us, but I don't look away from him, and he doesn't look away from me. We're close enough to kiss, but we don't. We just gaze at each other, each of us too stunned to speak.

And then I notice it.

"Wait, is this...?" I begin, to which Karl nods, a slight smile flickering across his lips.

"It is," he says. "I noticed it, too."

The song playing is one that used to be very meaningful to us during our relationship. I can't help but remember the times we danced to it in our living room, holding each other close, feeling the warmth of his embrace. The memories flood back, and I can't deny the bittersweet feeling that washes over me.

Karl breaks the silence again, his voice low and heartfelt. "Abby, you look stunning tonight," he says, his eyes and fingers tracing the lines of my gown. "I should have never made you hide your beautiful body when we were together. I'm so glad to see you come into your own now."

I feel my cheeks flush at his compliment, and I look away, unable to meet his gaze. "Thank you, Karl," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. "Things have changed since then, haven't they?"

He nods, his expression serious. "Yes, they have," he says, and there's a hint of regret in his eyes. "But maybe it's not too late to make things right."

We dance for a little while longer, lost in our own little world. More people join us, and soon we're surrounded by other dancing couples, and Shana is still nowhere to be found.

"Shana..." I begin, but Karl shakes his head.

"She left," he explains. "She's in love with someone else. We mutually agreed that it wouldn't work between us."

I'm about to respond when the door suddenly opens, and my gaze darts to who's coming in. My eyes widen when I see him.

"Is that Ethan? Your brother?" I ask, pointing.

Chapter 320

Abby

My heart races as I watch Gianna push Karl's brother, Ethan, into the room in a wheelchair. The shock of her sudden appearance still hasn't worn off, and I can't believe she's here, of all places, especially right now.

Karl's eyes meet mine, and I can see the confusion and surprise mirrored in his expression. It's clear that he didn't expect to see Gianna here either.

"Did you know about this?" I ask, keeping my voice low so only the two of us can hear.

Karl shakes his head. "No," he murmurs. "I mean... I knew he had a date, but I never would have expected it to be her, of all people."

I swallow. "Maybe she's not his date," I try to justify it, even though the words sound hollow even to me. "Maybe... Maybe he just doesn't know about her treachery, and hired her to push his wheelchair."

But even as I speak, the words seem pointless. It's clear that they're together; I can tell by the way that she leans down and whispers something to Ethan. He smiles and says something in return, and she seems to giggle, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear for him.

"I can't believe it," Karl hisses, shaking his head again with incredulity. "It's one thing to fool me, but to fool my brother, especially so soon after he woke up from a coma? She's like a snake."

As Karl speaks, Ethan's eyes scan the crowd, clearly looking for Karl.

"Let's just try to stay calm," I say, giving Karl's arm a squeeze. "There has to be an explanation. And if not—"

Before I can finish, Ethan's gaze falls on the two of us, and his eyes light up with a mixture of surprise and excitement.

"Karl! Abby! Over here!" Ethan calls out over the din, sounding just as vibrant as ever despite his recent coma. "I want you to meet someone special!"

Karl and I exchange a hesitant glance before nodding almost imperceptibly to each other. We untangle from our dance and begin making our way over to Ethan and Gianna. My heart feels heavy, tormented beneath Gianna's cold gaze the closer we get.

Her eyes slide over me as I approach, and I can feel the judgment. I try to keep my chin up, but it's not easy when she's clearly sizing me up like I'm still nothing more than competition to her.

"Brother," Ethan says, holding out his arms. "You look dashing tonight."

With a tense smile, Karl steps forward and stoops to his brother's level to give him a hug. "So do you, Ethan," he says. "I'm glad that you were able to come. I was starting to wonder if you'd make it tonight."

"Ah, well..." Ethan pauses, slapping his hands on the side of the wheelchair. "This thing is a learning curve. But it's only temporary; the doctor says I should be back on my feet within a week at the most."

As they speak, I just stand there, feeling small beneath Gianna's penetrating, cold gaze. It's as if she can see right through me, like I'm both here and not here at the same time. I haven't seen or heard of her since Karl fired her after her treachery was discovered, which only makes it even more awkward.

"So," Karl says, breaking the brief silence as his eyes land on Gianna. "I take it this is your date."

"Yes," Ethan says with a chuckle. "I know it comes as a surprise, Karl, but your secretary was the one who always came to speak to me while I was in my coma."

"Is that so?" Karl asks, cocking his head to the side.

Gianna nods, her gaze snakelike as she glares at Karl. "Yes," she confirms. "Every day. I knew he could hear me, and I knew that he needed the company."

"She told me so many things," Ethan chimes in. "She was my only real, consistent link to the outside world. And although it sounds absurd, I fell for her during that time."

I almost laugh out loud, but I manage to control myself. Gianna? Ethan's link to the outside world? He's right; it is absurd.

“Well, someone had to do it,” she says, and her tone drops ever so slightly, her gaze flickering back and forth between me and Karl. “And I was quite taken with your brother. I always loved him from afar.” She chuckles, checking her nails on the hand that isn’t resting on Ethan’s shoulder. “In a silly way, his coma finally allowed me to overcome my anxiety.”

At her words, Ethan laughs; but Karl and I just exchange glances.

“Gianna, you could have approached me sooner,” he says. “But it doesn’t matter. Why don’t we all get a table together so we can catch up?”

Nodding, Karl replies stiffly, “Absolutely. Let’s... catch up.”

As we head to a table with Gianna pushing Ethan in the front, I fight to keep a composed expression, even as my mind races.

How could Ethan not know the truth about Gianna? Is he really that oblivious, or is there something more to her story that we don’t know?

No, I think to myself. Surely he doesn’t know. And surely whatever she told him is a complete and utter lie.

Karl turns to me, his expression full of rage. “I should tell him,” he murmurs, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. “He should know that his ‘date’ is a liar and a cheat.”

“Karl, wait,” I say, grabbing his arm to keep him from walking up to them. “Maybe we should be careful about telling Ethan right now. I don’t think that the Alpha gathering is the appropriate place for this discussion to be had, don’t you?”

Karl looks torn, his jaw clenched with frustration. I know he knows that I’m right, but it’s clear that he wants to expose Gianna for who she really is. And so do I; but now is simply not the time.

“Listen,” I continue, “with your brother awake, your status as Alpha is already on the rocks. You don’t need to start a fight in the middle of the most prestigious event of the year. It could mean the end for you.”