

## Kickass 331

### Chapter 331

Abby

The night air is cool against my flushed cheeks as I sprint down the dimly lit street. My heart is pounding in my chest, and my feet carry me forward with a sense of urgency I don't think I've ever felt before.

It feels as if time itself is slipping away, and I need to catch it before it disappears.

But then I see him, illuminated by the amber glow of the streetlights, and I recognize him immediately by his tall stature and the way he's walking with his hands in his pockets. I stop in my tracks, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Karl!"

He turns at the sound of my voice, and his gaze locks onto mine. For a moment, the world around us seems to fade away, and it's just the two of us, drawn together by an invisible force.

I quicken my pace, closing the gap between us until I'm standing right in front of him.

"Abby," he breathes, his eyes slightly wide. "I didn't think you—"

Before he can finish, I rush forward and throw my arms around his neck. I press my lips against his with fervent passion, feeling the world tilt beneath our feet. He returns my kiss without hesitation, and in those moments, it's as if there's nothing else in the universe except the two of us.

And in that moment, I feel her. My wolf.

When we finally pull apart, there are tears in my eyes. I don't know if they're from joy or melancholy, but before I manage to blink them away, one slips out and rolls down my cheek.

Karl gently lifts his hand and wipes it away with his thumb. His hand lingers on my cheek, and I lean into his palm, shutting my eyes for a moment.

We stay like that for a long moment, just holding each other, the world around us forgotten. But eventually, I pull back slightly, my eyes searching his.

“Are you leaving again?” I ask, my voice hardly more than a whisper.

Karl nods, his expression serious. “Yeah, Abby,” he says quietly, his voice full of regret. “I have to go home to my pack. And this time, I’m afraid that I won’t be able to come back anytime soon.”

My heart sinks at his words, a heavy weight settling in my chest. The thought of him leaving, of us being separated once again, is almost unbearable. But I knew that this day would come. He has responsibilities to his pack, and I have my own life here in the city.

Tears well up in my eyes again, but I manage to blink them away this time. “I’m going to miss you,” I whisper, my voice trembling.

Karl brushes a strand of hair away from my face, his thumb caressing my cheek. “I’m going to miss you too, Abby,” he murmurs. “More than you would believe.”

I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. “Is there any chance you’ll come back?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

He shakes his head, his gaze filled with regret. “I’m sorry, Abby, but no. With my brother awake, I need to preserve my status as Alpha. But Abby...”

He pauses, and I feel my heart skip. I don’t know what he’s going to ask of me, but whatever it is, I’m sure it’s important.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Will you come home with me?”

As he speaks, his voice is hardly more than a whisper. And for a moment, I can feel my heart almost stop.

The thought of going home with him, of moving back into the place we used to live in together, is intriguing.

But it can't happen. Not now, at least. And maybe not ever.

I appreciate his offer, but it's not a decision I can make lightly. The past few years in the city have been a whirlwind of success and growth for me.

I've built a life here, a career, and I've found a sense of independence that I never had before. Leaving it all behind is not something I can do lightly.

And going back to the pack, back to the place where the old version of Abby used to live?

I'm not sure if that's in the cards for me.

I take a step back from Karl, feeling a pang of sadness in my chest. “I like it here, Karl,” I admit. “I like the city, my restaurant, my friends. I don't think I can see myself leaving. I'm sorry.”

Karl pauses for a moment, and there's a flash of something in his eyes—disappointment, maybe, or pain. But I can't give in now. I'm not the girl who would change my life for someone else anymore.

Finally, he nods. “Okay,” he says quietly. “I understand.”

I smile through my tears, grateful for his understanding. “Thank you, Karl.”

“But just know that my door is open to you,” he adds with a gentle smile. “It’s still your home; it never stopped being your home. And you’re missed.”

His words make my heart swell, and I find myself nodding. “Thank you,” I murmur. “Really.”

We stand there for a moment, just looking at each other, each of us unsure what to say. The moment feels charged with an unspoken tension, like there’s electricity crackling in the air. I don’t know if I’ll take him up on his offer. I don’t know what will happen after tonight. Hell, I don’t even know what I want.

But I’m glad to have spent this evening with him.

Chapter 332

Abby

It’s well past two in the morning by the time I unlock the front door to my apartment. My feet are so sore that all I can think about is collapsing onto the couch, but I also smell like a kitchen and there’s a solid layer of sweat coating my entire body, so the shower comes first.

I quickly shed my chef’s uniform and turn on the hot water. While the bathroom fills with steam, I comb out my tangled hair and allow myself a few moments to just breathe.

The Alpha gathering was a success; a huge success. And although my parting with Karl was bittersweet, I feel like a new door has opened on the next chapter of my life.

With a satisfied smile, I climb into the shower and let the hot water cascade over me. I spend a long time just scrubbing, washing away the grime from cooking all night. By the time I’m finished, I feel as though I’ve just shed a whole layer of skin, and I step out of the shower feeling like a new woman.

After drying, I wrap my hair in a towel and grab my plush robe. I wrap it around myself, reveling in the warmth and comfort, and then get to work with my various lotions, ointments, and perfumes.

But I’m just finishing up brushing my teeth when I hear my doorbell ring.

Instantly, the nerves in my body coil. It's well past two in the morning now; who the hell could be visiting now?

As I'm hesitating, the doorbell goes off again. I tentatively make my way out to the foyer, my heart in my throat. Is it one of my staff, maybe? A neighbor?

But then, as I peek through the peephole, my heart nearly stops. It's not either of those things.

It's Karl.

I quickly unlock the door and swing it open. Karl looks somewhat disheveled, his hair windswept and his expression conflicted. He's still wearing his tuxedo from earlier, although his tie is loosened and his jacket is missing.

"Karl?" I stammer, utterly surprised.

"Hey," he says, his voice a mix of uncertainty and what sounds like determination. "Can I come in?"

"Sure, but... What are you doing here? I thought you went home."

Karl runs a hand through his hair and takes a deep breath. "I... I got halfway home, and I couldn't do it," he admits. "Abby, I couldn't just leave you like that. I had to come back."

I'm taken aback. I don't know what to say; he came back for me? But what about his pack? What about his duties?

But before I can fully process what's happening, he's stepping forward, closing the distance between us. Our lips meet in a passionate, hungry kiss. The world fades away, and I'm left in a void of nothingness with him, my body coursing with electricity.

The kiss lingers for a long time before I finally work up the strength to pull away. My heart is pounding in my chest, my eyes wide. "Karl..."

Karl's eyes are dark with desire as he looks at me. "Abby," he murmurs, his voice husky, "can I come in?"

Chapter 333

And then, in one swift motion, I pull the belt loose and shrug the robe off of my shoulders.

Karl's eyes wander my naked body, a hungry look in his gaze that I haven't seen in its full intensity in years. Without hesitation, he steps forward and touches my skin, my breasts, my hips. His touch sends a shiver down my spine.

Our lips meet once more. It's a fiery, passionate kiss filled with longing and pent-up desire. His tongue works its way into my mouth, exploring it like new territory. Our bodies press together, and I can feel the heat of his skin against mine through his clothes.

Desire courses through me, and I can't hold back any longer. I reach for the buttons of his shirt, eager to feel his skin against mine. As the last button comes undone, his shirt falls to the floor, and I trace my fingers over his chest, savoring the sensation of his bulging muscles and soft skin.

In a swift, careful movement, he then loops his arm around my waist and picks me up with ease. I wrap my legs around him and suck on the soft skin of his neck as he carries me to the bedroom. He lays me down on the bed, and I watch as he loosens then removes his belt and pants before he crawls on top of me.

All at once, it's as if the years we spent without each other have stretched on endlessly and yet they never happened at the same time. A soft moan escapes his lips as I reach down, stroking him through his briefs. He's hard already, and his hips buck slightly at my touch.

"Karl," I whisper, my voice trembling slightly. "Are you sure..."

"Quiet," he murmurs in a commanding yet gentle tone. He bends down to press his lips to my neck, and our bodies melt together. I roll my hips against his instinctively, my wolf churning inside of me.

Neither of us speaks after that—not in words, at least. Our bodies do the speaking for us. His lips trail along my bare skin, sending jolts through my body, and I reach down to work my hand into the waistband of his briefs.

But he grabs me by the wrist, pinning my arm to the bed and making me breathless.

“Not yet,” he hisses, his voice husky and thick.

In this moment, beneath his Alpha gaze, I feel my instincts kick in. I nod, tilting my head back to give him access to my neck. He lets out a soft growl and bites my neck, hard at first, but then more gently, and softly licks the skin up to my earlobe. I let out a soft moan, my back arching away from the bed.

Then, his fingers are trailing down my body, over my breasts and nipples, down the soft skin of my belly and toward my bare pussy. His fingers are cool and smooth as he works them into me. I instantly cry out in ecstasy, resulting in a cheeky grin on his part.

“I never forgot what you like,” he whispers as he moves his fingers inside of me, twisting and thrusting them back and forth with ease. “Not for a moment.”

“I-I can tell,” I stammer as a hot flush creeps into my cheeks.

Karl chuckles, a low rumbling sound. I feel small beneath him as he uses his free hand to work his cock out of his briefs. My gaze follows his hands, and my eyes widen slightly.

“What?” he asks.

Chapter 334

Abby

I wake up in the soft morning light, nestled in the warmth of Karl’s strong arms. It’s a comforting feeling, one that makes me want to nuzzle closer to him, seeking his closeness. But as the haze of sleep begins to lift, reality comes crashing down on me like a wave.

I still remember what we did last night. I can still feel the sensation of his body moving on top of me, my nails digging into his back, our lips locked in an endless battle. God, I haven’t felt like that in years. I forgot how good we were together, how our chemistry was so innate and natural.

And yet, in the light of the morning, it feels like I moved too fast, like I made a mistake.

What have I done?

I quickly untangle myself from Karl's arms and scramble out of bed, my heart pounding in my chest. Panic sets in as I try to justify the actions of last night, but there are no justifications. It just sort of happened, as though instinct took over.

My wolf is still present in the back of my mind, pleased with what she urged me to do.

Karl stirs and blinks sleepily at me. "Abby, what's wrong?" he asks, his voice husky and gravelly with sleep in that way that always made me crumble when we were together.

I swallow hard, trying to find the right words. "We shouldn't have... last night, I mean," I stammer, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

Karl props himself up on one elbow, his eyes searching my body. I suddenly come to the realization that I'm still wearing nothing but a pair of underwear and no bra, and I quickly run over to my dresser and pull out an oversized t-shirt to cover myself.

When I turn back to face him, he's still sitting there, looking more puzzled than ever.

"Why shouldn't we have?" he asks, confusion clouding his handsome face. "I thought you enjoyed it."

I can't meet his gaze. It's too embarrassing. "Because... because it was a mistake," I admit, my voice barely a whisper.

Karl's brow furrows, and he gets out of bed. He's still in his underwear, and seeing him like this makes my face turn beet red. I start picturing us together again, the idea of sharing an intimate morning together filling my mind. The very thought of it makes my heart race.



“Abby—”

“I, uh, should go,” I murmur, quickly turning away as he approaches me, a desperate attempt to not look at his morning wood straining through his briefs.

But he just chuckles as I try to scurry away. “Abby, you live here. Where exactly do you plan on going?”

I shrug as I scurry out into the living room, but I can hear him following me. “Somewhere,” I say, hunting around for my robe. “Somewhere that’s not here.”

Karl seems to watch me, leaning against the bedroom door frame with his arms folded across his chest, still in his underwear. I pick up my robe off of the floor and put it on. My face turns an even deeper shade of red as I turn to face him.

Chapter 335

Our bodies are sandwiched together, and before I can stop him, he’s grabbing my wrist and pinning it to the wall, his other hand pulling my robe open and reaching down toward my panties. His fingers graze me there, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

“You don’t need to pretend anymore,” he says huskily. “Can’t we just be glad it happened?”

Biting my lip, I finally meet his gaze, and there’s a flicker of something in his eyes—desire, longing, and maybe a hint of frustration.

“Stop,” I murmur, my voice pleading. But the word sounds hollow even to my own ears.

He pulls his hand away, but only a little. I’m still sandwiched between him and the wall. My wolf is urging me to pull him back, to let him take me right here in the hallway, but I know I shouldn’t.

“We shouldn’t have done that last night,” I finally manage, swallowing.

Karl tilts his head, his expression curious. “Explain.”

I take a deep breath, trying to gather my thoughts. "My restaurant is taking off, and I need to focus on that," I say. "And you... you have your responsibilities as an Alpha. We're in two different worlds, Karl."

He chuckles softly, his eyes never leaving mine. "You're right, Abby," he says, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "We are in two different worlds. But that doesn't mean we can't find a way to be together."

I'm taken aback by his words. "What are you saying?" I murmur.

Karl reaches out and gently cups my cheek, his touch tender. "I'm saying that, maybe for now, we could just be... casual," he suggests, his eyes searching mine. "No commitments, no expectations. Just... whatever feels right."

I blink up at him, my mind whirling with possibilities. I never expected him to be so understanding, so willing to adapt to my circumstances. This isn't at all like the old Karl I used to know.

"You're really suggesting we just keep it casual?" I ask with a wry chuckle. "What happened to you, Karl?"

He shrugs and takes a step back, leaving a sense of coldness where his warm body just was. "If that's what you need, then yes," he says. "I don't mind taking things slow. And besides, after last night..." His eyes flicker up and down my body, and he licks his lips. "I think it's obvious that you've been needing a release."

His words make me blush. I did need a release. "I think you've been needing one, too," I say with a chuckle as I remember how feral we were together last night.

He laughs. "That's true. It's been a while."

"So," I say, running a hand through my hair, "you're really okay with this? Keeping it casual for now? Taking things slow?"

Karl nods. "We're both busy people, Abby," he says. "There's no harm in it. If we crave intimacy, wouldn't you rather we share that intimacy with each other than anyone else? I know you can't handle the thought of me with someone else. And I can't imagine you with someone else, either."

His words ring true. I hated seeing him with Shana last night. It only made me realize just how shitty it was for him to see me with Adam.

"Okay," I say with a nod, meeting his gaze. "I'm okay with that. We'll keep it casual, quiet—"

Chapter 336

Abby

After we shake on our new agreement, I can't help but feel a sense of relief wash over me. It feels as if a weight has been lifted off of my chest, and I can finally breathe a little easier; all thanks to a promise to keep things casual and take it slow for now.

I look at Karl and smile, grateful for his understanding.

"Let's have breakfast," I say, meeting his gaze. "What are you hungry for?"

He shrugs. "I'll take you out. Anywhere you want to go, just tell me. Ask, and it's yours."

The thought of going out together sounds nice, but at the same time, I think it's better if we just stay at home. "How about I make us something instead?" I ask. "Maybe going out right now isn't the best idea if we want to keep things private, and besides; I'm too tired after yesterday to go anywhere."

Karl nods, his eyes filled with a mixture of tenderness and desire. "Whatever you want," he says.

While Karl is putting on something a bit more comfortable, I head into the kitchen and start brewing the coffee. While it's brewing, I pull eggs, cheese, and milk out of the fridge. A few moments later, the sound of Karl's footsteps approaches, and I turn to face him.

"Omelet?" I ask, holding up the ingredients.

He nods as a smile flickers across his face. “You always made the best omelets.”

I chuckle. “I know I do.”

I get to work mixing the eggs and milk into a bowl along with various spices. Karl puts on some music over the bluetooth speaker, and soon the kitchen is filled with the sounds of pop tunes and sizzling pans.

“You know I’ll have to go home after this,” Karl says as he leans on the counter, watching me. “I don’t want you to take that the wrong way.”

I meet his gaze from across the counter and shoot him a sideways look. “I know.”

He doesn’t say anything else, and neither do I. Truthfully, I’m still a little sad that he has to go home to his pack; but at the very least, I feel a sense of hope now that we’ve come to our agreement—hope that maybe, just maybe, it doesn’t have to mean goodbye. Not yet, at least.

My wolf is happy as Karl turns up the music. I find myself bobbing along to it as I cook, sprinkling shredded cheese and chopped mushrooms into the egg and then carefully folding it over. Karl’s laughter is infectious as he comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist, swaying along with me.

As we wait for the omelets to cook, I sit up on the counter, swinging my legs back and forth. I watch Karl move around the kitchen, his movements confident and sure.

He looks so at ease, so comfortable in his own skin. I missed this; seeing his body in the mornings, shirtless, his hair tousled from sleep.

And then, without thinking, I reach out and pull him close, pressing my lips to his. It’s a soft, tender kiss as I tangle my fingers through his hair. His hands slip up the back of my shirt and wander my waist.

For a moment, I’m back in our old kitchen, and it’s like we were never divorced. And for that fleeting moment, it’s almost as if I’ve forgotten that we’re no longer together.

But as we break the kiss, reality comes crashing back in. We're not there yet, and I have to remind myself of that.

Karl, oblivious to the turmoil in my heart, smiles at me. "I missed this," he says, his voice low and husky.

I don't answer. Instead, I hop down from my perch and make my way back over to the stove, where the omelets are begging to be flipped. Karl watches me for a moment, but says nothing.

I think we both know the dangers of getting too close too fast. And I know it sucks, but if we want this to work down the road, we have to be careful. For both of our sakes.

...

Once we've finished eating, Karl makes his way to the bathroom for a shower before he needs to leave. I'm sitting on the couch, scrolling on my phone with a combination of excitement and nervousness in my chest.

But then, as I'm sitting there, my phone starts ringing. I look at the caller ID, and quirk an eyebrow when I see Mr. Thompson's name glaring back at me.

Why is he calling me right now?

"Hello?" I answer, both confused and a little concerned. I half expect him to be contacting me about the details of the overseas trip Xavier mentioned last night, but when I hear his voice, I know it's something far, far worse.

His voice is frantic on the other end. "Abby, something terrible has happened," he says, his words coming out in a rush.

I sit up abruptly, my eyes wide. "What? What happened?"

“Dozens of people got sick after the party last night,” he says, sounding both frantic and angry. “It’s food poisoning.”

I feel like I might faint. How is this possible? I was meticulous with my cooking yesterday, and my kitchen was spotless. There’s no way anything I prepared could have caused people to get sick.

“But I don’t understand,” I stammer, my hands trembling. “I made sure everything was perfect.”

Mr. Thompson lets out a sigh. “I know you did, Abby,” he says. “But a food poisoning on this scale has major implications, especially for something as important as the Alpha gathering. Bad reviews are pouring in left and right. The health department wants to investigate you.”

“This can’t be real,” I breathe, standing. “Mr. Thompson—”

“Abby,” he says, sounding a little impatient now, “there are no excuses this time. The fact of the matter is this: the food you cooked has made dozens of Alphas and their families very, very sick.”

“What can I do?” I blurt out as tears begin to well up in my eyes.

“Be at the restaurant in an hour,” he says quickly. “And be prepared for the most intense health department investigation you’ve ever experienced. And Abby...”

Chapter 337

Abby

I’m in the middle of dressing in a rush to go and meet Mr. Thompson and the health inspector at the restaurant. My hands are trembling as I try to button up my shirt, and I’m cursing under my breath when I hear the shower turn off in the other room.

A few moments later, Karl steps out into the bedroom. His hair is damp, and a white towel is slung around his waist.

“I have to say, your shower is really nice,” he says, drying his hair with another towel. “It’s—”

He stops when he sees how frantically I'm moving around. For a moment, he just stares at me with concern in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" he finally asks.

I can't speak. The words just won't come; it's too painful. After all of my hard work, after all of my blood, sweat, and tears, the Alpha party turned out to be a total failure.

Dozens of guests got sick with food poisoning, and I have no idea how that happened. I swear, my kitchen was spotless yesterday. My team and I know how to cook food properly. It makes absolutely no sense.

"Abby?" Karl says tentatively, taking a step closer.

Finally, I turn toward him, my phone in hand, and I can hardly believe what I'm about to show him. I swipe through my social media feed and bring up the posts that have sent my world spinning.

"Just... Look at this," I manage to say, my voice quivering as I hand him my phone.

Karl takes the phone with a raised eyebrow. But then, his eyes widen as he scrolls through the posts. The headlines are all variations of the same terrifying story—my food has made dozens of high-profile Alphas and Lunas sick at the Alpha gathering.

Hashtags and captions are coining this year's Alpha gathering as the worst in history, all thanks to me. I'm the culprit. Somehow, I'm the villain who intentionally tried to make everyone sick.

"How is this possible?" Karl mutters, his brows furrowed in disbelief. "Food poisoning? Are you sure that's what it is?"

I shrug. "Who knows at this point?" I ask incredulously as I button up my pants. "Everyone is sick."

“Not everyone,” Karl says. “You and I aren’t sick.”

I shake my head, my mind racing to find an explanation. “I really don’t know,” I admit, frustration and fear welling up inside of me. “Maybe we didn’t eat something that other people ate. That’s the only logical explanation.”

Karl hands me back my phone, and I clutch it tightly, as if it’s the only lifeline I have left. I take a deep breath, my mind racing through the events of the past day. And then it hits me—a chilling realization that makes my blood run cold.

“Wait,” I say slowly, my voice filled with dread. “Do you remember the day right before the cook-off when my entire staff got food poisoning when we had that party?”

Karl nods, a troubled look on his face. “Of course I remember,” he says.

I continue, my thoughts racing. “Well, what if... what if this is connected somehow? What if someone is sabotaging me, trying to ruin my reputation?”

Karl’s eyes narrow, his jaw clenching in anger. “Sabotage?” he repeats, his voice low and dangerous. “But who would do something like that? You think it’s Daniel?”

I shake my head, feeling overwhelmed by the chaos of it all. “I don’t know,” I admit, my voice trembling. “But after everything that’s happened—food poisoning, the fire, the power going out, the burst pipe—I’m starting to wonder if there’s someone out there who wants to see me fail.”

Karl steps closer to me, his expression fierce and protective. “If that’s the case, then I’ll help you figure this out, Abby,” he says. “I won’t let some low-life ruin your reputation.”

I look up at him, gratitude welling up inside of me, but I can’t allow him to help me with this. “Karl, this could be detrimental to you, too,” I point out. “You of all people don’t need my bad press affecting your status as Alpha.”



He stares at me for a moment, his eyes searching my face, but then he seems to understand. He says nothing, but he nods.

I pull away reluctantly, my mind returning to the urgent matter at hand. "I need to go to the restaurant immediately," I say with a sigh. "I have to meet with the health inspector and Mr. Thompson. Maybe I can prove that it wasn't my fault."

"Let me at least go with you," Karl insists. "To at least support you."

I shake my head, a pang of sadness filling me. "No, Karl," I say firmly. "You need to get back to your pack. And it's an especially bad idea for you to be here with all of this going on."

He shoots me a concerned look. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "I'll be fine. I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

Karl nods, his gaze locked onto mine. "Okay," he says, his voice filled with resignation. "But promise me you'll be careful at least? If shit starts to hit the fan, you should leave the city. People can be crazy, especially when they're hurt and angry."

I reach up and give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll be fine," I say, although the words sound hollow even to me. "Don't worry about me. And... thank you for last night."

Without another word, I turn and run out the bedroom door, my mind racing with a million thoughts and worries.

"Wait!" Karl calls out, running after me. I stop just as I'm about to reach the front door, my hand on the doorknob, and turn to look at him. He reaches into his tuxedo pants pocket from last night and pulls out a blue surgical mask to hand to me.

"Here," he says as I take the mask. "To keep yourself safe."

Abby

As I approach Mr. Thompson and the health inspector, I slip off my hood and my blue surgical mask, sticking the mask in my pocket. I'm sure I look like a wreck at the moment, but that's not at the forefront of my mind right now.

"Morning, Abby," Mr. Thompson says, his eyes filled with a confusing mixture of sympathy and disappointment. He nods toward my pocket where I've just stored the mask. "Hiding, are we?"

I swallow, feeling small under their gazes. "I usually wear a mask on the subway," I lie, not wanting to admit that I'm already terrified of the backlash that this entire debacle will create.

Mr. Thompson nods slowly, then turns to the health inspector. "Abby, this is Mr. Harrison," he says, gesturing to the portly older man wearing a tan jacket with a health department emblem on it. "Mr. Harrison, this is Abby, the owner of this restaurant."

Mr. Harrison shoots me an indifferent look and doesn't so much as shake my hand. He simply nods, pulling the clipboard out from under his arm. "Well, Abby," he says in a voice that screams cold professionalism, "shall we get started?"

I nod nervously, hoping beyond hope that I don't look too disheveled and terrified. I fish my keys out of my pocket and brush past the two men. My hands shake as I unlock the door, and I accidentally drop my keys.

"Sorry," I murmur as I stoop to pick up the keys. "Butter fingers this morning."

"Nervous, Abby?" the health inspector says as I struggle to open the door.

"Er, a little," I manage with a wry chuckle. I finally am able to unlock the door and push it open, revealing my dark restaurant. The tables are still in a state of disarray from last night, but other than that, it's as spotless as ever.

“Well,” Mr. Harrison says as he brushes past me, already jotting down notes on his clipboard as he looks around, “if your restaurant is as clean as you say, then you shouldn’t be worried, correct?”

I swallow. While the health inspector’s back is turned, I glance at Mr. Thompson; but his expression is inscrutable, and I quickly look away. I hate to say it, but it hurts, and it makes hot tears prick at the backs of my eyes,

After all we’ve been through together, I’d like to think that Mr. Thompson is just acting this way because the spirit of professionalism demands it, but I can tell that he’s disappointed in me—and maybe in himself, to a certain extent.

For the next half hour, the health inspector walks painstakingly around the dining area. He checks every table, inspects every corner, swabs every door knob with a Q-tip.

He spends even more time at the bar, taking more samples to add to his growing vial collection and taking photographs. The whole time, I feel as if my heart is in my throat.

Finally, he turns to me with a nod.

“Kitchen?” he asks, his gaze cold and calculating.

“Yes,” I say, gesturing toward the hallway that leads to the kitchen. “Right this way.”

I lead the two men down the hallway, pausing for a split second as I reach the door to take a deep breath. My team and I painstakingly cleaned the kitchen last night before we left, but in my mind, all I can picture is a disaster. It’s as if I expect the kitchen to be filled with rats and garbage.

But, when I open the door, it’s as clean as ever.

“Looks clean enough on the surface,” the health inspector says.

I manage a chuckle, although it sounds like nails on chalkboard to my ears right now. “My team and I are very thorough—” I begin, but he cuts me off with a raise of his hand.

“We’ll see about that,” he mutters under his breath, his tone far from reassuring.

For what feels like an eternity, he inspects every nook and cranny, checking storage areas, refrigerators, and even the ventilation system. His scrutiny is relentless, and I can feel the minutes ticking away, each one dragging me closer toward what feels like impending doom.

Finally, he straightens up, his expression inscrutable. “Your kitchen appears to be clean,” he concedes, though his tone lacks any hint of satisfaction.

Relief surges through me, but it's short-lived.

“However,” he continues, “I’ll be sending samples of your food and all of the swabs I’ve taken to the lab for testing. Until we receive the results and ensure your food is safe, I’m afraid I have no choice but to close down your restaurant.”

My heart sinks, and I can’t help but protest. “But closing the restaurant will be devastating for business! We’ve worked so hard to build a reputation, and now—”

The health inspector raises a hand to cut me off once again. “I understand your concerns, but I have a responsibility to the safety of the public. If there’s any chance that your food was what caused the recent outbreak, we must take the proper precautions. It’s simply protocol.”

As he leaves to gather the samples, I sink into a chair, burying my face in my hands. This nightmare is becoming a reality I can’t escape. I don’t know how this happened. My kitchen was impeccable, my staff well-trained. I’ve been meticulous in following every food safety guideline.

Mr. Thompson, who has been watching the proceedings in silence all morning, approaches me with a disappointed look in his eyes.

“Abby,” he begins, his voice heavy with regret, “I’ve been a staunch advocate for you, vouching for your abilities, and now it seems I’ve made a grave error in judgment.”

I raise my head to meet his gaze, shame and despair weighing me down. “Mr. Thompson, you have to understand that this wasn’t my fault,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. “I’ve given my all to make this Alpha party a success. Don’t abandon me now.”

Chapter 339

Abby

Once the health inspector has his samples, I see him and Mr. Thompson off at the door. Mr. Thompson gives me that disappointed look of his again, and it makes my heart sink even further than it already has.

“The tests should come back from the lab within a week,” the health inspector, Mr. Harrison, says in that matter-of-fact tone. “For now, you are formally requested to close your restaurant.”

Without another word, he hands me an official health department notice that I’m to put up in the restaurant window. My hands shake as I take it, and my eyes fill with tears. The health inspector walks away, leaving just me and Mr. Thompson in his wake, standing in the doorway of my restaurant.

“Mr. Thompson, I—”

“Abby,” he interrupts coldly, “if you receive any requests for interviews, please decline. There’s enough bad press as it is. Understood?”

I nod stiffly, feeling oddly numb after all of this. Mr. Thompson turns on his heel to leave, but before he’s a few steps away, I clear my throat and call after him.

“Mr. Thompson?”

He pauses, stiffening, before slowly turning to look at me. “Yes?”

“You know it’s not my fault, right? You know this has to be sabotage?”

Mr. Thompson stares at me for a long time. His expression is unreadable, and that's more terrifying than anything else. Finally, averting his gaze to the floor, he speaks in a hushed tone.

"Abby, you can't just assume that everything is sabotage," he says quietly and with a mixture of sadness and disappointment in his voice. "I've advocated for you enough already. I think it's about time you start taking accountability."

Without another word, Mr. Thompson turns on his heel again and strides away, his tall form disappearing down the street. I watch him go with tears in my eyes, my body trembling in an attempt to hold back a sob. Once he's out of sight, I avert my gaze to the notice in my hand once more.

"OFFICIAL NOTICE: Health Code Investigation Underway," the notice reads.

I want to crumple it up and throw it on the ground, but I know I can't. Instead, with shaking hands, I do what I've been told to do: I tape it up in the window of the front door, turn off the lights, and grab my keys.

I turn the key in the lock with a heavy heart, but there's a hint of hope there, too. All I can do for now is hope that those samples will come back negative, exonerating me from my supposed mistakes.

Because I know that that food poisoning couldn't have come from my kitchen, even if I'm the only one who believes it.

As I make my way back toward the subway station, I hear my name being called from behind.

"Hey! Abby!"

I turn around to see a small group of people standing on the sidewalk, their faces contorted with anger and disdain. They start hurling insults at me, each word more venomous than the last.

"Abby, you're a fraud!" one of them shouts. "You never deserved that second chance after your disaster of a performance at the cook-off."

## Chapter 340

I decide to stop at my usual local cafe for a cup of coffee, hoping that it will help calm my frayed nerves. But as I step inside, I'm greeted by a familiar sight on the cafe's television screen.

A news channel is broadcasting a report about the Alpha gathering disaster, and my face is front and center. The headline reads, "Caterer Abby Under Fire for Alpha Party Food Poisoning."

I feel the weight of the world crashing down on me as I order a coffee to go. The barista eyes me sympathetically, but I can't bear to stay in the cafe a moment longer. I grab my coffee and make a hasty exit, my heart pounding with the knowledge that, no matter how hard I try, people just hate me now.

Whatever happened to 'innocent until proven guilty'?

Finally, I arrive home after what feels like an eternity, and the solitude of my apartment offers some relief from the relentless scrutiny of the outside world. I slump into a chair and bury my face in my hands, trying to block out the hurtful words and accusations that still echo in my mind.

But my moment of solitude is short-lived as my phone rings, the shrill sound slicing through the air. I glance at the caller ID, and it's an unknown number. My first instinct is to let it go to voicemail, but curiosity gets the better of me, and I answer.

"Hello?" I say cautiously.

"Is this Chef Abby, the caterer for the Alpha gathering?" a female voice on the other end asks.

I swallow hard, my throat tight with anxiety. "Yes, this is Abby. Who's calling?"

"Hello," the woman says. "My name is Patricia Koehler. I'm a journalist from the Daily News. Do you have a moment?"

As she speaks, I can feel my throat clench. Mr. Thompson warned me that this would happen. And he was crystal clear when he told me that I cannot do any interviews. Considering that I'm already in deep

enough trouble as it is, I know it's best to listen to his advice, no matter how badly I want to attempt to make people see the light on my own.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts, and then I respond with a heavy sigh, "I'm sorry, but I cannot comment at this time."

The journalist pauses before clearing her throat. "Are you sure? I only need a few minutes—"

"I'm sorry, but I can't comment," I repeat. "Have a nice day."

The journalist continues to try to convince me, but I ignore her. I hang up without another word, then toss my phone down on the opposite end of the couch with a sigh.

All at once, another wave of anguish breaks through the numbness, a silent sob quaking my body. I don't understand how this happened, not one bit; and I'm almost certain that this was some form of sabotage. After all, it had to be.

My mind flickers back to all of the incidents over the past few months: the fire, the cook-off, the cut wires, the burst pipe, the first food poisoning incident, the stranger lurking around my apartment building... and now this?