

## **Kickass 351**

### Chapter 351

Abby

It's been two days since I submitted my statement about the footage to the police, and nothing has happened. The health department is taking their sweet time testing my food samples, and there's nothing more that I can do other than wait.

Sleep has become a rare luxury, and my appetite has all but disappeared. Not to mention the fact that the constant barrage of news coverage and social media frenzy over the "worst Alpha gathering in history" only adds to the turmoil swirling in my mind.

I can't bring myself to watch the news or scroll through the endless comments and posts dissecting every aspect of the scandal. Every time I do, it makes me feel sick.

One evening, as I'm sitting on my couch wondering what to do, I make a decision. I need a break from the suffocating isolation of my apartment and the judgmental eyes of the world.

The thought of a dive bar down the street that I visit somewhat regularly crosses my mind—a place where I'm sure nobody will bother me, if they can even make out my face beneath the dimmed lights.

I put on a simple outfit, determined to keep a low profile, and head out.

As I step into the bar, I'm relieved to see that it's almost empty. There are a few other patrons crowded around a small TV, watching some sports game or another, and a couple of college kids playing darts off to the side. No one even looks my way when I walk in.

The bartender, a middle-aged man with a weathered face and a salt-and-pepper beard, acknowledges my presence with a nod. He starts to mix my drink without asking for my order, because I come here often enough that he knows what I like. We've never talked, though.

As he works, he glances at me and asks the question I've been dreading to hear.

“You’re Abby, right?”

I hesitate for a moment, my heart sinking. But there's no point in hiding my identity, especially in a place like this. I nod reluctantly and reply, “Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

The bartender doesn't offer a judgmental look or a harsh comment. Instead, he simply shrugs and continues to prepare my drink. “I’m sorry all of this is happening to you,” he says in a sincere tone.

My eyes widen. “Pardon?” I blurt out, genuinely surprised.

He nods. “It’s unfair, you know. Sometimes, the voices of the few can be so loud that they drown out the voices of the many. It’s just a fact of life.”

His words catch me off guard, and I’m grateful for his empathy. It’s a rare thing to find in a world that seems so quick to condemn. I watch as he places the drink in front of me, and I offer him a faint smile of appreciation.

“Wow. Thanks,” I say, taking the glass. It’s cool against my fingers. “I, uh... I haven’t heard anything so nice in a little while.”

He chuckles. “I kinda figured. You look a little worse for wear.”

“Yeah. It’s been a tough few days,” I admit, my voice thick with exhaustion. “I thought everything was going so well at the Alpha party. I just don’t understand why everyone got sick.”

The bartender leans on his elbows, his eyes filled with understanding. “Sometimes, life can throw us curveballs that we can’t predict. You’d be willing to admit if it was your fault, wouldn’t you?”

I nod, my gaze fixed on the amber liquid in my glass. “Of course I would. I take my responsibility as a chef seriously. But deep down, I don’t believe it was my fault.”

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I feel a bit more relaxed now after that stranger's kind words; even though I don't even know his name, he managed to uplift me. And that means a lot.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I slip it out and quirk an eyebrow when I see it's a call from Karl. I haven't heard from him since he left, and in my drunken state of mind, the thought of hearing his voice makes me smile.

"Hey," I answer, my speech a little slurred. "Miss me?"

It's late, and I half expect him to be making a midnight booty call, but the voice that comes through the phone tells a different story.

"Abby," he says, sounding exasperated, "We need to talk. Now."

My heart skips a beat. I stop in my tracks, confused. "Is everything okay?"

He lets out a sigh, and I can just picture him running a hand through his hair. "I just got word from the police. They want to question Gianna. Because of you."

I feel a lump forming in my throat. I guess I should have suspected this, but it still took me by surprise. "Already, huh?" I ask, starting to walk again.

"So you did turn her in?" he asks.

"Well, 'turn her in' is a bit of an overstatement," I point out as I fumble in my pocket for my keys. "But, Karl, I found out that my CCTV footage on the night of the Alpha party was tampered with, so I took it to the police. When they asked if I had any enemies, I could only think of two names."

He sighs again. "Let me guess: Gianna and Daniel."

“Yup,” I say with a nod. I approach my apartment and jog up the steps. In my drunkenness, I drop my keys and giggle a bit at my clumsiness, then stoop to pick them up. Getting a bit dizzy, I wind up sitting on the step, taking a deep breath.

Karl, somehow drawing this conclusion without even seeing me, says, “Abby, are you drunk?”

I can’t help but giggle a little again. “I may have had one or two or three drinks.”

“Abby...” I can tell he’s exasperated, but he also chuckles on the other end. “You’re a mess.”

“I’m trying not to be, I promise,” I say, running my hand through my hair as my tone grows serious. “It’s just...”

“I know it’s hard,” he says softly. “And I know you’ve been under a lot of stress lately, and I get why you’d suspect Gianna. Hell, I’d suspect her, too. But you should’ve reached out to me first. Gianna is my brother’s election manager, and this is going to cause a lot of issues.”

I’m taken aback. “Election? What election?”

He pauses for a moment. “Shit,” he says, “I’ve been so busy I forgot to mention it to you: Ethan and I are holding an election to decide who gets to be Alpha. It’s been crazy these past few days.”

My head is spinning with the revelation. Two major crises seem to be unfolding simultaneously for us. While I’m fighting to salvage my restaurant’s reputation and clear my name, Karl is ensconced in a political campaign with his own brother.

“Wow,” I breathe, still in shock. “That’s... Do you need help, Karl? I could—”

“Just stay there,” Karl says, and it’s now that I can really hear the exhaustion in his voice. “Focus on yourself. I’ll be fine.”

Chapter 353

Abby

The next few days feel like a blur. I can barely sleep, I can barely eat, and my mind is consumed with thoughts of nothing but my poor restaurant. My phone is ringing off the hook with a combination of calls from worried friends and nosey journalists; I choose to ignore the latter. And all the while, I feel like a tiger pacing in her cage.

The activity outside of my apartment has increased thanks to the press, and I can barely even leave the house. Yesterday, Chloe brought me some groceries, which she had to sneak through the back door.

I told her to go straight home after I paid her, because I feel like my apartment is a ticking time bomb. It doesn't feel safe here anymore. I feel like I'm on display, all because of something that I'm sure was sabotage.

In the midst of my restless pacing this afternoon, I decide to call Officer Martinez, the police officer I spoke to when I provided my statement. She seemed sympathetic to my struggles, and I figure that maybe she has some updates on the investigation.

I dial her number and wait, my heart pounding in my chest as the phone rings. After what feels like an eternity, she finally answers.

"Officer Martinez speaking."

"Hey, it's Abby," I say, my voice trembling slightly. "I was wondering if you've made any progress with the investigation."

There's a brief pause on the other end, and I can hear the weariness in her voice when she replies.

"I'm afraid not, Abby," she says gently. "We've sent the surveillance tapes in for analysis, but it'll be a few days before we have any results."

I let out a frustrated sigh, my impatience getting the better of me. "A few days? Officer Martinez, I understand that these things take time, but my restaurant could be shut down within that time frame."

She sounds sympathetic, but her response is firm. "I know it's difficult, Abby," she replies, "but we have to be thorough in our investigation. Rushing things won't help anyone. I would advise you to just lay low and wait for me to call you back."

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the storm of emotions swirling inside of me. "Thank you, Officer Martinez. I know you're doing your best. I just... I can't help but feel helpless in all of this."

"I know how you feel," she says, her tone softening. "But just trust me. I'm doing the best I can."

I nod, even though I know she can't see me. "I'm sorry. I'll be more patient."

"Don't worry, Abby," she adds. "We'll get to the bottom of this. I believe you, even if no one else does."

Her words are a soothing balm, and I let out a relieved sigh. It feels good knowing that other people are believing in me, even if my friends seem to think that I'm losing my mind.

"Thanks, officer," I say with a slight smile. "I appreciate it."

...

It feels like torture. Another day passes without hearing anything, and I feel like I'm going to lose my mind. I can't even turn on the TV without seeing some news report about the horrific Alpha gathering.

But then, I'm sitting on my couch, trying to read a book although I'm not comprehending any of the words, when it happens.

My phone rings.

Without a moment's hesitation, I throw my book down and practically leap across the room. "Hello?" I answer breathlessly without even checking the caller ID.

There's a pause, and then a man's voice on the other end. "Is this Abby?"

"Yes," I reply cautiously. "How can I help you?"

"Hello, Abby," he says. "This is Mr. Harrison from the health department. I'm calling to let you know that the results from your food samples have come back from the lab."

Finally. After almost a week of waiting, they've arrived. But instead of feeling excited, I just feel a sense of dread settle in my stomach.

I swallow hard, my voice barely more than a whisper. "And?"

There's a heavy pause, and my mind races with a million different possibilities. Please, let it be okay. Let it be a mistake. But something tells me that that's not the case.

"The results," he finally says, "showed a significant presence of *Escherichia coli* bacteria in one specific dish—your flatbread pizza."

My heart sinks like a stone in my chest, and I can hardly believe what I'm hearing. "E. coli?" I repeat, my voice trembling. "But that's... that's impossible."

I can almost hear the indifference in his voice as he responds. "I assure you, miss, the results are accurate. We don't make mistakes here."

"But the flatbread pizza?" I protest, desperation creeping into my voice. "It was a vegetarian dish, and it's cooked at high temperatures. E. coli usually comes from meat, right?"

He doesn't sound sympathetic in the least. "While it's more commonly associated with meat, E. coli can still be present in vegetables or other ingredients," he explains. "And cooking temperatures may not always eliminate it entirely."

“But it just doesn’t make sense,” I argue, my mind racing to find an explanation. “I use fresh ingredients, and the pizza oven reaches incredibly high temperatures. I’ve never had any issues before.”

The health department official remains unmoved. “Regardless, the test results are conclusive, miss. Due to the contamination found in your restaurant, we have no choice but to take immediate action.”

Dread washes over me, and I can barely find my voice. “What kind of action?”

“Your restaurant will need to remain closed while we conduct a more thorough investigation,” he replies. “We will need to ensure that all necessary measures are taken to prevent further contamination.”

My world shatters at that moment. The restaurant I poured my heart and soul into, the place that was not just my livelihood but my dream—it’s all slipping through my fingers.

“And then what?” I mutter. “What will happen after that?”

Chapter 354

Abby

The next day passes by in a blur. I can’t bear to tell my friends about the call from the health department; not yet, at least. Not until I know for certain.

My body feels heavy as I roll out of bed and make my way to the kitchen to make some coffee. It’s already eleven in the morning, but I’ve only just woken up. I’m sure I look like a mess, too; my hair is tangled, my eyes are surrounded by dark circles, and I’m in my disheveled pajamas. I’m just too exhausted to care.

Maybe my exhaustion is exactly why, when I hear my doorbell ring, I don’t think twice. Rubbing my eyes, I shuffle over to the door and swing it open.

And that’s when the microphone is shoved into my face.



“Abby! Why did you intentionally poison the guests at the Alpha gathering?”

My eyes widen as I take in the scene in front of me. There’s a reporter standing on my front step, shoving a microphone at me. There are two cameramen behind her, and both cameras are trained on me.

I shield my face from the unrelenting camera flashes and go to close the door, but the reporter has shoved her foot in the doorway to stop it from closing. Surely this is illegal, right?

“Please leave,” I mutter, trying to nudge her foot out of the way. “Don’t make me call the police.”

“Abby, it’s just one question,” she replies without budging.

I sigh. At this point, I just want to do whatever it takes to get her to go away. “Look,” I say, “I didn’t do anything intentionally. It was—”

The reporter cuts me off, immediately twisting my words. “So, you admit that your food was poisoned?”

My heart races. “No, that’s not what I meant. It wasn’t my—”

But the reporter persists, her voice raising. “Do you plan on confessing to your crimes? Or are you just going to frame someone else for sabotage, like you did at the cook-off?”

“I didn’t—”

Before I can finish my sentence, the reporter continues to talk over me, the microphone inches from my face, her words relentless. I can feel my world spiraling out of control as she continues to ask her venomous questions.

Finally, I manage to shove her foot out of the way and slam the door shut. Without a moment’s hesitation, I immediately rush through my entire house, closing blinds and curtains, double-checking locks on windows and doors in a futile attempt to regain a semblance of safety and privacy.

Once I've sealed myself away from the prying eyes of the outside world, I sink down onto the couch, my head buried in my trembling hands. The relentless intrusion has left me feeling violated and powerless. I feel like an animal at the zoo, trapped and on display against my will.

Hours pass in suffocating silence. I manage to shower and drink my coffee, but not much else. I feel like I'm on autopilot.

I can't help but think to myself that if I had known that I would be getting this much attention, I never would have agreed to the cook-off to begin with. I just want to go back to being a nobody, a meaningless restaurant owner in a sea of mediocrity. I think that would have been much easier.

Finally, I turn on the TV for the first time in days, figuring that a movie might help me get my mind off of things. But as the screen flickers to life, I'm immediately met with a news channel—the very last thing I had been watching before I shut my TV off several days ago.

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"There's nothing to fess up to," I hiss through my teeth, standing. "This is all bullshit!"

Without thinking, I grab a nearby pillow and hurl it across the room in a fit of rage. The force of the impact knocks a fragile vase off a side table. It shatters into a thousand pieces on the floor.

"Shit," I murmur, realizing what I've done.

In my frenzied state, I rush to clean up the shards of glass. But then, as I gather the scattered remnants, I accidentally cut my hand on a sharp shard.

A single drop of blood drips onto the floor, staining my white carpet.

Finally, defeated and emotionally drained, I collapse onto my knees on the floor, my tears flowing freely. Right now, I feel like the vase: broken, shattered, and angry.

However, as I sit there, sobbing, a sound breaks through the silence.

It's my phone ringing on the coffee table.

I sigh, wiping away the lingering tears, and drag myself up from the floor. As I approach the phone, I catch a glimpse of my disheveled reflection in the glass of the table, and I quickly run my fingers through my hair, trying to regain some semblance of composure.

Then I see it: it's Karl, FaceTiming me.

I hesitate for a moment, taking in the name on the screen. For a moment, I consider not answering; but I know Karl, and I know he'll just keep trying until I finally cave. Sighing, I wipe my tears away with my sleeve and swipe to answer. I'm met with his concerned face.

"Hey," I say, my voice shaky despite my attempts to sound normal.

Karl's brow furrows as he studies my face. "I saw the news," he says without preamble. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

He doesn't buy it, not even for an instant. "I can tell you've been crying, Abby. Talk to me."

I look away, my gaze falling to the shattered vase on the floor. There's no point in lying; Karl has always been able to tell when I'm upset. And besides, there's no hiding it now. My eyes are red-rimmed and swollen, my face still streaked with tears.

"The samples came back positive," I manage, although my voice is shaking. "My restaurant might be shut down, Karl."

Karl is silent for a few moments, processing, before he answers. "And the CCTV footage?" he asks.

I shrug. "They said they sent it in for analyzing. That was days ago, Karl. It's not looking good."

His jaw clenches, and I can see a whole host of emotions flitting through his eyes. “Abby,” he finally says, “I’m worried. Those reporters... They’re vultures. I think you should come here with me. Get out of the city for a little while.”

I glance toward the door, my heart sinking at the sight of the news vans and reporters still camped outside my house. “I might have to,” I say, my voice filled with resignation.

Karl seems distracted for a moment. I know his mind is preoccupied with his election, an election that I don’t want to distract him from.

“Look, Abby,” he finally says. “I’m dealing with this election...”

“I don’t want to distract you,” I interrupt.

But he shakes his head. “That’s not what I was saying. I’m trying to say that, no matter what, I’m here for you. And if you need to come here, don’t let this election or anything else stop you. Just say the word and I’ll do whatever I can.”

Chapter 356

Abby

I approach the door cautiously, my heart pounding in my chest. The events of the past few days have left me on edge, and every unexpected sound or visitor sends a jolt of anxiety through me. I peer through the peephole, and my eyes widen in surprise when I see Officer Martinez standing on the other side.

I quickly unlock the door and swing it open. “Officer Martinez, what’s wrong?” I ask, peering behind her.

“Do you have a few minutes, Abby?” she asks.

I nod, stepping aside to let her in. Once she’s inside, I quickly shut the door and lock it again, hoping that no reporters have seen the interaction. The last thing I need is more fodder for them to use against me in the news.

She steps inside, and I lead her to the living room, where she turns to face me. "We need to talk," she says.

My heart sinks as I look at her. "What is it?" I ask. "Is it the footage?"

Officer Martinez takes a deep breath before she speaks. "Yes. This is about the footage. You were right, Abby. It's been tampered with."

I stare at her in shock, trying to wrap my head around what she's saying. "So someone did sabotage me?" I find myself asking. "Who?"

"As far as I know," she explains, "it's not a matter of someone sabotaging you. It might just be a plot to sabotage someone else entirely. And you just got caught in the crossfire."

My eyes widen as Officer Martinez speaks. I can't believe it. "What are you saying?" I ask, my voice shaking slightly.

She sighs and runs a hand over her face, thinking for a moment. "We were able to identify the face of the man in the footage," she says. "His name is Alexander Black. He's the beta of an Alpha who was in attendance at the gathering. And we believe he may have been tasked with poisoning the food."

I still must look puzzled, because Officer Martinez quickly slips her phone out of her pocket. She taps on the screen for a few moments, then turns it to me. It's the footage from the night of the party, zoomed in to see the man's face.

"This is him," she says. "Is he familiar to you at all? Did you see him that night?"

I stare at the screen for several moments, my brow furrowed as I try to think back on the night of the Alpha party. Finally, unable to come up with anything concrete, I shake my head.

"No," I reply, sinking down onto the armchair behind me. "There were so many people there. I wouldn't have noticed."

Officer Martinez nods and slips her phone back into her pocket. "It's no matter," she explains. "All we know is that this man is Alexander Black."

"So, he was sent to poison my food?" I ask, my voice trembling with disbelief. "But why?"

Officer Martinez sighs, her expression sympathetic. "Listen, I'm not allowed to say for certain yet," she admits. "But it's a possibility. We're bringing both Alexander and the Alpha he works for in for questioning."

A surge of relief washes over me as the pieces start to come together. If they can find out the truth, it means I might finally be able to clear my name and salvage what's left of my reputation.

Even though I don't know who either of these people are, I still can't contain my excitement, and without thinking, I stand quickly and throw my arms around Officer Martinez and hug her tightly.

"Thank you," I say, my voice filled with gratitude. "Thank you for helping me. I don't know what I would have done."

She pats my back gently before pulling away for the sake of professionalism. "I'm just doing my job, Abby," she says with a faint smile. "But I'm glad we could make some progress on this case."

"So what's the next step?" I ask.

Officer Martinez sighs. "Well, first we'll need to question Black and the Alpha he works for. This Alpha... He has a history of strife with a neighboring pack. If it turns out that the case was that this was some sort of hit job, then they'll both likely go to prison."

I let out another sigh of relief. "Thank god."

"But Abby," she says, growing more serious, "it could take a long time, especially if either of them gets a lawyer right away. I want you to be prepared for that. And I'd highly recommend not saying anything to the press until the details are confirmed."

I nod, realizing the implications. "Of course," I say. "I'll stay out of it."

She then grows even more serious. "And in the meantime, Abby," she says, "I'm going to recommend that you stay inside and keep your doors and windows locked. You could be in danger, especially now that we're getting closer to the truth. You could be a potential target if someone deems you as a snitch."

"I will," I assure her. My hands are shaking slightly with the implication; could I really be in danger, just for telling the truth?

"Now," she says, "if you don't have anywhere else to go, I can keep a 24-hour surveillance around your home. Just say the word, okay?"

For a moment, I think back on Karl's offer to go home with him. Maybe it would be safer there after all. The thought is tempting; it would keep me out of the city, away from the danger and the news, and it might offer me even the tiniest shred of comfort.

But then, I remember Karl's election. This is an important time for him; one wrong move could make him lose everything. He could lose his Alpha status, his home, his power, everything he's worked so hard for over the years.

If I went home with him, surely someone would find out. And what would happen to his reputation in the meantime? What would people think if Alpha Karl was harboring the woman who was 'responsible' for ruining the Alpha gathering?

I can't do that to him.

"I'd appreciate the surveillance here," I say. "If you don't mind."

Chapter 357

Karl

I watch the screen of my phone go dark as Abby abruptly hangs up.

My worry for her is only intensifying as time goes on, but I know I can't rush to the city right now. I have a meeting scheduled to hire my election manager in ten minutes, and as much as I want to be by Abby's side, I have to prioritize my responsibilities.

I sigh, hoping that she'll be okay on her own for a little while. All I can hope for now is that she's okay, and that she'll call back soon.

Turning my attention back to the conference room, I sit down at the head of the long table, ready to conduct more interviews.

The potential candidates for the position of my election manager are all gathered here for their second round of interviews, waiting in the other room, and I have to make a crucial decision today. This election means everything to me, and I can't afford to make a mistake in selecting the person who will help me win.

Clearing my throat, I call the first candidate in: Mark Anderson.

"Hello, Mark," I say, rising from my seat to shake his hand. "Please, take a seat."

"Thank you for meeting with me again, Alpha Karl," Mark says as he sits. "I was so excited to receive your call. Of course, I had a few other meetings that I needed to shuffle around today, but it all worked out in the end."

I manage a stiff smile as I sit across from him. "Well, Mark, I was very impressed with your resume. You said you were an election manager for..."

The interview goes on for nearly half an hour. Mark's skills are top notch, but his personality just isn't what I'm looking for. He seems more concerned with padding out his resume than actually helping me win the election, and he keeps name-dropping rather than talking about his actual merits.

I feel like I'd just be a stepping stone for him on the way to bigger and better things, and that's exactly why I send him off with a thanks-but-no-thanks.



Next up is Angela Davis, a young woman with a strong background in political consulting.

“Good afternoon, Angela,” I say with a smile as she enters. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Likewise.” Without so much as shaking my outstretched hand, Angela scurries past me and plops down into a chair at the conference table. She’s already pulling a stack of papers out of her briefcase; I can tell already that she’s going to be all business and no pleasantries.

“So, Angela,” I say, clearing my throat. “Tell me... What’s your priority here?”

“My main goal is to identify and target key demographics,” she says, her hands clasped on the table. “Establishing a loyal voter base is the most important thing.”

I nod as I listen to her spiel. She’s highly qualified and intelligent, but she’s a little too analytical for me. I don’t need to be treating my potential voters like numbers; I want to treat them like people; figure out what it is that they need from me, not the other way around.

I send her off with another attempted handshake, which she ignores during her efforts to gather her piles of papers into a perfectly neat and tidy pile.

Then, Sarah Turner enters the room. She’s the final candidate; I remember our first interview well. I remember that she was reserved when necessary but also outspoken when the need would arise, and that was what I liked about her.

I just hope that attitude will stick throughout the second interview and not fade with comfort.

“Hello, Sarah,” I say with a smile, shaking your hand. “Thank you for meeting with me today.”

“It’s a pleasure, Alpha Karl,” she says. “I’m looking forward to talking again.”

The interview continues, and as Sarah speaks, I can’t help but be impressed.

She talks about connecting with voters on a personal level, about engaging with the community, and about using social media strategically. Her approach is different from the others, and I find it refreshing. I can see her as a valuable addition to my team.

After she finishes her presentation, I address her directly.

“Sarah, your ideas are intriguing, and I believe your approach aligns with my vision for this campaign,” I say. “However, I need to ask, what drives you? Why do you want to be my election manager?”

Sarah meets my gaze with unwavering determination. “Alpha Karl, I’ve been watching your career for some time now,” she says. “I can see the potential for real change, not just in our pack but in the entire werewolf community. I want to be a part of that change, and I want to help you win this election so we can make it happen.”

Her words resonate with me, and I can’t deny the passion in her voice. “Well,” I say, shutting my notebook; my mind is already made. “When can you start?”

A smile spreads across Sarah’s face, and she extends her hand for a firm handshake. “I can start immediately. Thank you, Alpha Karl. I won’t let you down.”

I shake her hand, feeling a sense of relief that I’ve made the right choice. As we finalize the details of her employment, I can’t help but think that she might also make an excellent secretary down the road. Her organizational skills and dedication would be invaluable in managing the demands of my position.

The meeting concludes, and I see Sarah off, knowing that I’ve made progress in securing a strong team for the upcoming election. But my thoughts keep drifting back to Abby, and the worry gnaws at me.

Back in my office, I take a moment to collect my thoughts. Marcus enters and takes a seat across from me.

“How did the meeting go?” he asks.

I lean back in my chair, letting out a long breath. “Sarah is going to be my election manager. She seems promising.

Marcus nods in approval. “That’s great. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Chapter 358

Abby

After letting Officer Martinez out the back door, the loneliness and fear begins to set in again. Even though there’s a police car keeping watch, I can’t help but feel on edge. The front of my house is a media frenzy, and I feel like a target in more ways than one.

Finding myself unable to handle the profound loneliness, I decide to call Leah and Chloe. They’ve been spamming our group chat all morning, clearly having seen the horrendous news footage of me.

I dial their numbers on a group FaceTime call, and wait for them to pick up. Moments later, Chloe picks up first.

“Abby!” Chloe exclaims without preamble. “Oh my god, I’ve been so worried. I saw the news. Are you okay?”

Then, before I can answer, Leah picks up. She says almost the exact same thing.

“Oh, thank god, Abby,” she breathes. “Are you alright? I saw the news—”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” I say, hoping to ease their worries. “Everything is okay here. I promise.”

“That reporter was out of line, Abby,” Leah says. “She practically assaulted you with that microphone. You could press charges against her. It wasn’t shown in the footage, but it seemed like she wasn’t letting you close the door. That’s trespassing!”

I let out a sigh, the events of the morning replaying in my mind. “Yeah, she had her foot in the door,” I explain, having figured as much that they’d carefully leave that detail out of the shot. “But I’m fine, really. I don’t want to create even more waves over here.”

Chloe shakes her head, her frustration evident. “You shouldn’t have to endure that kind of harassment, Abby. It’s not right.”

“Seriously,” Leah chimes in. “Man, if I was there...”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Okay, okay,” I laugh. “Seriously, it’s fine. The truth will come out soon, I’m sure of it.”

Leah and Chloe both shoot me puzzled looks.

“Abby,” Chloe says cautiously, “are you still on about—”

“Guys, the police got back to me,” I interrupt. “The footage was analyzed. They linked the identity of the guy I spotted to a Beta, and it’s very possible that it was sabotage.”

Both Chloe and Leah gasp in unison, their eyes widening in shock. “Seriously?” Leah asks. “Were they sabotaging you? But why?”

“I’m not sure,” I reply. “It’s likely not even linked to me; the food was just a good cover-up. But I can’t say anything else until it’s confirmed, okay?”

Leah shakes her head, her expression a mixture of anger and regret. “I can’t believe we didn’t believe you, Abby. We should have known something was off, but we doubted you.”

I offer them a reassuring smile, wanting to put their minds at ease. “It’s okay, guys. Really, I understand that I probably seemed crazy at the time. But I’m just relieved to have you both on my side now.”

Chloe's brow furrows in concern. "Abby, do you want to come stay with me for a while? Or should Leah and I come to your place?"

I consider their offers carefully, grateful for their unwavering support. However, I shake my head. "As much as I appreciate it, I don't want you guys coming here," I explain. "It's not the safest right now. And I'm worried that the reporters or haters might follow me to your place and cause trouble there. I'll stay put."

#### Chapter 359

I spend the rest of the afternoon pacing back and forth, trying to create some semblance of normalcy after everything. I try to occupy myself with reading, but I can't focus on the words on the page. I try following a workout video, but I feel too tired. And I try to cook, but my hands shake as I try to chop the vegetables.

With a sigh, I glance at the clock. It's only four o'clock, but I need something to take the edge off, to quiet the constant buzz of anxiety in my head.

I spot a bottle of red wine on the kitchen counter, and without a second thought, I grab it and a glass. Pouring myself a generous portion, I take a sip, savoring the warmth that spreads through me.

With a glass of wine in hand, I decide to distract myself with a movie. I flip through N\*\*\*\*\*x, searching for something lighthearted. Eventually, I settle on an old romantic comedy that always manages to make me smile.

As the movie plays on the screen, I let myself get lost in the story, allowing the familiar dialogue and cheesy plot to transport me to a different world. The wine has its intended effect, and I start to feel a bit tipsy, the tension in my body slowly melting away.

"I... wanted to tell you about what happened earlier," I continue cautiously. "The footage was tampered with. Listen, it's a whole story, but... they think it was another Alpha and his Beta who plotted it. I don't know why. But they're working on it, so that's good, I guess."

I take another sip of wine, trying to steady my nerves. "It might get a little dangerous here," I add. "But I'm okay. Sorry for hanging up on you earlier."

I pause for a moment, my thoughts swirling in a haze of uncertainty. For a moment, I almost ask him to come get me just as he said he would. But then doubt begins to set in again, and I remember that it could possibly get in the way of his election.

I clear my throat, shaking my head as if to dispel the thoughts. "Anyway, good luck with everything," I say. "And... I miss you."

Chapter 360

No matter how hard I try, I just can't sleep.

Between the noise of the reporters outside, the curious onlookers, the flash of the cameras and my own anxieties, I feel like I'm trapped in a state of exhaustion with no way out. I've tried tossing and turning. I've tried covering my head with my pillow. I've tried headphones, white noise, the couch, the bed, tea, meditation...

And none of it works.

Finally, after what feels like hours of futile attempts to sleep, I finally give up. With a sigh, I sit up and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. I decide to make my way to the kitchen to brew some coffee this time, figuring that if I can't sleep, I might as well just get some caffeine in my system so I can power my way through the night.

Taking care not to turn on any more lights than necessary because I know that the reporters will just have a field day if they see the orange glow of a lamp through my blinds at midnight, I grab my robe off the back of my bedroom door and make my way out to the kitchen.

As I turn on the coffee pot and wait for it to brew, I lean against the kitchen sink and look out. The police car is still parked outside, with the officer sitting in the driver's seat.

I can't help but chuckle to myself as I watch. I never thought I would be the type to need my home under 24/7 surveillance, but here I am.

But then I notice something. The officer's head is moving in a way that can only mean one thing.

He's nodding off.

A surge of irritation, made worse by my current state of exhaustion, flashes through me. Is he seriously falling asleep out there?

I lean closer to get a better look through the tiny slat in the blinds, and just as I suspected, it's true. He's nodding back and forth. Then, finally, his head tilts back and rests on his headrest. His mouth is open, snoring.

"He's asleep!" I hiss under my breath.

That's not fair! How is it that the officer who's supposed to be keeping watch over my house, the officer who's supposed to be making me feel safe, is falling asleep right before my eyes?

Anger surges through me. Cursing under my breath, I storm over to the back door and shove my feet into my slippers, ready to storm out there and knock on his window.

I want to give him a piece of my mind; he's being paid to be here. I'm not being paid to spend sleepless, anxiety-filled nights in my home, and here he is, sleeping on the job.

But then I hear it, blaring through the silence: my phone ringing on the kitchen counter. I nearly jump from the sudden sound.

Startled, I pick it up and see that it's a call from Karl. I left him that voicemail hours ago, and I figured he was busy or something. But right now, I'm just glad to hear his voice when I need it the most.

"Hello?" I answer as I lift the phone to my ear.