

Kickass 361

Chapter 361

“Abby, that’s not healthy,” Karl chides, although his voice holds no real heat. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lie, just wanting to change the subject. “Tell me about the interviews. Did you hire someone?”

Karl’s voice brightens a bit as he responds. “Yes, actually. Her name is Sarah, and she seems very capable. I think she’ll be a great addition to the team. Maybe I actually have a chance at winning this.”

“You’ve always had a chance,” I say. “But I’m happy for you, Karl. I hope she’s a good asset for you.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Karl finally speaks again. “No more deflecting. How are you really feeling?”

I hesitate for a moment, debating whether to share my current state of mind. But then I decide to be honest with him. It’s no use to lie; he can always tell. He’s always been that way.

“I’m just a little freaked out,” I admit with a wry chuckle. “The reporters and police outside are making it impossible for me to sleep. It feels like I’m under constant surveillance, and it’s really getting to me.”

Karl’s voice softens with concern. “Is there anything I can do to help?” he asks gently.

I appreciate his offer, but I also don’t want to burden him with my problems. He’s already done so much for me in the grand scheme of things, between the restaurant, the cook-off, and now this.

“I’ll be fine,” I assure him. I glance around at my dark kitchen, at the brewing pot of coffee and the white glare of camera lights seeping through the curtains.

“You sure?” he asks.

I can't help but sigh. "I could use some distraction, I guess," I admit. "Could you talk to me for a while? Maybe until I feel tired enough to finally get some sleep?"

"Of course," Karl says without hesitation. "You know I'm here for you."

I climb back into bed, holding the phone to my ear, and we begin to talk about anything and everything. Before I know it, it's been more than half an hour.

It's amazing how easy it is to lose track of time when you're so engrossed in conversation with someone you care about. We discuss our favorite movies, childhood memories, and even share a few embarrassing stories.

As we talk, I can't help but feel a warmth spreading through me, a sense of comfort that I've been missing in the chaos of the past few days. Karl's laughter is infectious, and I find myself laughing along with him, feeling like a lovestruck teenager.

Eventually, as the conversation starts to wind down, Karl speaks up. "Abby, I am worried about you," he says. "Maybe you should come here after all."

I consider his offer carefully. The idea of escaping this chaos and being with Karl is incredibly tempting, but I also don't want to interfere with his election preparations. "Karl, as much as I'd love to, I don't want to get in the way of your campaign. You need to focus on that right now."

"But Abby—"

"No," I insist. "Really, Karl, I'm fine here."

There's a hint of disappointment in his voice, but he doesn't seem to press any further. "Alright, Abby. I respect your decision. But promise me you'll call the moment things get to be too much."

"I will."

There's a silence, and without meaning to, I yawn. Karl, hearing this, lets out a chuckle. "Maybe it's time to get some sleep."

Chapter 362

Abby

After I hang up the phone with Karl, I finally slip off to sleep, feeling more relaxed now than I have in days. I fall into a pleasant slumber, one that's deep and uninterrupted by the lights and sounds coming from outside.

But then it happens.

The sound of glass shattering suddenly wakes me from my sleep. I jolt upright in bed, my heart pounding. That was real; I'm sure of it.

Quietly, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and reach for my phone with one hand and the baseball bat I keep behind the nightstand with the other. With the baseball bat raised just in case, I tiptoe out of my bedroom.

The sound of the news reporter vans idling outside is louder now, with no shield from the window. I furrow my brow, my heart pounding as I slowly and silently tiptoe down the hall and round the corner where the sound came from.

And then I see it.

What I see freezes me in my tracks, my fear momentarily replaced by shock. The back window of my living room, facing the alleyway behind my apartment, has shattered. And below the window, laying on my carpet amidst the mess of shattered glass, is a red brick.

"Hello?" I call out in a shaky voice. Of course, there's no answer. But I'm certain I'm alone. My house is quiet now, aside from the glass shattering just a few moments ago.

Carefully, I tiptoe over to the mess and peer out the window. There's no one there, and I allow myself to relax just a little. I bend down and pick up the brick, flipping it over in my hand to see a piece of paper taped to it.

And on the paper is a handwritten message.

"ABBY IS A LYING WHORE!"

My hands tremble as I read the awful words. Who would have written something like this? And why throw the brick through the window? I knew that people would be angry, but I didn't think that anyone would go this far; and certainly not with a police car sitting right outside.

Speaking of the police officer...

Cursing under my breath, I put the brick back on the floor and approach the door. I pull the slats of the blinds apart to peer out, and just as I suspected, he's still sleeping. His head is still lolled back on his seat, his mouth open.

"Dammit," I hiss. Without a second thought this time, I fling the door open and rush outside in my bare feet and pajamas.

I rush up to the car, my baseball bat still in hand, and take a moment to look down at the sleeping officer. The sounds of his snores emanate through the window, and it only makes me even more angry.

Rage surges inside of me, and I slam my palm against the glass. Startled, the officer jerks awake, his eyes widening as he meets my furious gaze.

I grip the baseball bat tightly, ready to confront him for his failure to protect me. "Wake up!" I shout, my brows knit together with frustration. "And get out here!"

The officer, his eyes wide, slowly cracks the window. "Ma'am—" he begins, reaching for the gun on his belt, but I interrupt him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” I hiss, my voice quivering with anger. “While you were sleeping on the job, someone threw a damn brick through my window!”

The officer’s eyes widen even further. I step back, allowing him to swing his door open and step out. “A brick?” he asks.

I nod. “See for yourself.”

Without another word, I lead the officer up to my back door, where I let him in and point at the mess beneath my window. “You see this?” I growl. “Right in front of your face, and you were too busy dozing off to see it!”

For a few moments, the officer just stares down at the mess with a red face. He fumbles for his words, guilt and embarrassment evident in his eyes. “I... I’m sorry, ma’am,” he stammers. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Yeah, to hell you didn’t,” I berate him. “I’m lucky it was just a fucking brick.”

His face goes a little more red, and he runs a hand through his disheveled hair. “Okay, um... Let me check my dash cam footage. The perpetrator was likely caught on there.”

“Oh, you’ll do more than just check your dash cam footage,” I snarl, still too angry and frustrated to let it go. “I want a new officer sent here to replace you immediately.”

The officer nods. “I understand, ma’am. I’ll take care of it. I apologize for this lapse in security.”

Turning on his heel, he heads back to his patrol car to radio for backup. As I watch him go, a mixture of anger and fear churns inside me.

The violation of my home, the hateful message left behind—it’s all too much to bear. The baseball bat slips from my hand and falls onto the floor, and it’s all I can do to not sob outwardly right here and now.

Once the officer finishes his call a few minutes later, he returns to me. "Backup is on the way," he says, his tone more composed now. "We'll investigate this thoroughly, and I promise we'll do everything we can to find the person responsible."

I nod, still trembling from the adrenaline coursing through my veins, although I feel a little less angry right now. "Thank you," I reply, my voice slightly softer. "Just... please make sure this doesn't happen again."

Chapter 363

Karl

"I have to say, Karl, I'm excited about this merger."

Richard, the Alpha from a neighboring pack, sits across from me at the conference table. Our Betas sit beside each of us, furiously scribbling down notes. Between the four of us is an array of papers: forms, contracts, written agreements, and multiple drafts of each.

"As am I, Richard," I say with a smile as I sign my name on the dotted line for what feels like the millionth time today. "I believe, with our combined resources, both of our packs will benefit from the merging of this textile trade."

"Oh, absolutely," Richard says, leaning back in his chair. He's an older man with salt-and-pepper hair and a well-tailored Armani suit. "My company needs more workers, and your workers need room to expand."

"Of course, we'll split everything fairly, just as it's outlined in the contracts," I say. "So long as we ensure a smooth and seamless transition..."

As we delve deeper into the details, my phone buzzes on the table, and I glance at the screen to see Abby's name flashing.

A mix of emotions washes over me, and for a moment, I hesitate. I know I should pick up, and I want to hear her voice, but I'm keenly aware of the watchful eyes around the table—especially Richard's, who's awaiting my attention.

Reluctantly, I decline the call and set my phone face down, silently apologizing to Abby. I can't afford any more interruptions, especially after the disastrous meeting I had last week.

"Apologies for the interruption," I say, directing my attention back to Richard. "Please continue."

Richard nods, his expression serious, and we resume our discussion. The negotiation is no easy task; there are still a lot of kinks to work out. But, after what feels like hours, we finally shake hands, sealing our agreement.

"Thank you, Karl," Richard says, offering a rare smile. "I believe this will be a prosperous partnership for both of our packs."

I return the smile, relief washing over me that the negotiations have ended on a positive note. "I agree, Richard. It's been a pleasure working with you."

With the deal settled, I gather my papers and prepare to leave the conference room. Marcus turns to me with a reassuring smile as we walk down the hallway together.

"Karl, your approval ratings are looking good," Marcus says, his tone optimistic. "It's a promising sign, especially with yours and Ethan's campaign announcements coming up."

I nod, feeling a sense of satisfaction. "Good. That's encouraging. Once we officially announce our campaigns in the next couple of weeks, I think I'll be in a strong position."

Marcus nods in agreement. "Absolutely. I suggest we speak with Sarah, your election manager, about organizing some volunteering opportunities to help further boost your approval ratings before the campaign officially launches."

I consider Marcus' suggestion. It's a good idea, and it will also give me a chance to test Sarah's abilities.

"Set up a meeting with Sarah soon to discuss the details," I say. "We need to maintain this momentum."

Marcus nods. "I'll get right on it."

As I head toward my office, though, I finally remember Abby's missed call. I pull out my phone, and there it is—the missed call notification.

I feel a bit guilty. She's going through a lot, and right now, I never know if something horrible has happened. I feel helpless being so far away from her, but it's like she refuses to let me help.

"I've got to make a call," I say, glancing at Marcus.

Marcus nods understandingly as I slip into the privacy of my office and shut the door behind me.

I dial Abby's number, the phone ringing in my hand as I wait anxiously for her to pick up. She answers after a few rings.

"Karl?" she says, and I can immediately sense a hint of urgency in her voice.

"Hey," I reply. "I saw your call, but I was in a meeting. Is everything okay?"

There's a pause, and I can sense her hesitation. "Oh, um..." She pauses again before continuing. "It's nothing. Just a, uh... butt dial."

I furrow my brow, not convinced by her dismissive tone. I've always been able to see right through her, and right now I can tell that she's being hesitant about telling me something. "Abby, tell me," I say, my voice growing stern. "Now."

She sighs softly, and I can tell that she's debating whether to share whatever is bothering her. Finally, she speaks, her voice low and troubled. "Someone... someone threw a brick through my window last night."

My heart clenches at her words. "What? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replies a little too quickly, and I can sense her attempt to downplay the situation. "It's just that... the police officer who was supposed to be watching my apartment, he fell asleep on the job. They checked the dash cam footage on his car and found out it was just a local teenager being a punk, but still. It freaked me out."

Instantly, a wave of fury washes over me. I want to throttle that officer. "This is unacceptable, Abby," I growl. "That's it. I want you out of that city. Now."

Abby hesitates again before speaking softly. "Me too," she murmurs. "I just... I just don't know what to do."

"I'm going to send Marcus to get you," I reply instantly. "No ifs, ands, or buts. Got it? You're coming here."

She seems to blanch at my words, and her voice wavers as she asks, "Are you... too busy to come and get me yourself?"

I sigh. "I am busy, Abby, but it doesn't mean I don't want you here. Trust me, Marcus will be there in no time. Besides, you always got along, right?"

There's a moment of silence on her end before she speaks, her tone softer now. "Yeah, I guess you're right," she murmurs. "I just... I don't want to get in the way of your election, you know? What if people find out I'm there?"

"Abby, I don't care," I say. "Marcus will pull up out back. We'll make it discreet. Once you get here, you won't have anything to worry about. Okay?"

Chapter 364

Abby

Karl hangs up with one final request.

"Be ready in a few hours."

I can't help but feel a sense of relief at the thought of getting out of here, and at the same time, I can't deny that I'm excited to see him.

My heart races as I pack a small bag with enough clothes and essentials for a few days. The events of last night still weigh heavily on my mind, but knowing that Marcus is on his way to pick me up provides a glimmer of relief.

But as I zip up my bag, a strange feeling washes over me. It feels as if I'm preparing for a secret rendezvous, like some kind of celebrity on the run from the paparazzi. The thought makes me chuckle nervously, and I take a deep breath to calm my racing thoughts.

Before I know it, it's almost time. I'm all packed, dressed in a low-key outfit, and I've made my call to Officer Martinez to let her know I'm leaving town.

"I'm glad to hear it, Abby," she says. "Stay safe. I'll keep you updated."

As I step into the chilly morning air, I spot the sleek black car waiting for me in the alley, the tinted windows providing a shield from prying eyes. Marcus is in the driver's seat, his expression somber.

I can't help but remember a time when he used to be so chatty with me, especially when I was still married to Karl. Now, there's a palpable awkwardness hanging in the air. But can I blame him?

I climb into the car and meet his gaze. "Hey, Marcus," I say. "Long time no see."

"Yeah," he says as he puts the car in drive. "You got everything?"

I nod. I only packed one bag, because I don't plan on staying for long; and besides, there are still some things of mine at the house. I realized during my last visit that Karl never cleared them out.

As Marcus shifts the car into gear and pulls out of the alley, neither of us says anything. The silence is almost suffocating. I can feel Marcus' discomfort, and it gnaws at me, despite the relief in my stomach as I watch the news vans fade into the distance. They're oblivious to my secret escape, or so it seems.

For a long time, we just drive in silence. Eventually, we get onto the highway, and neither of us has said a word. I'm not sure if I can bear another three hours of this.

In an attempt to break the ice, I reach for the radio and turn it on. The familiar melody of a pop song fills the car, and I can't resist the urge to sing along. My voice is a bit shaky at first, but as I continue to sing, I start to feel a sense of liberation.

Marcus, however, remains stoic.

"Come on, Marcus," I say, flashing him a playful grin. "Don't be so serious. Join me!"

He hesitates for a moment, his grim expression softening just a bit. And then, to my surprise, he starts to sing along with me. His voice is surprisingly good, and I can't help but laugh.

"See, this isn't so bad, is it?" I say as I dance in my seat, feeling strangely carefree in this moment.

Marcus chuckles, and it's a genuine, warm sound. "You're right, Abby. It's been a while since I've let loose like this."

As we continue to sing and dance in the car, the tension between us gradually eases. It feels like a glimpse of the past, when things were simpler, and I was still a part of Karl's world.

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"Thanks for picking me up, Marcus," I finally say, breaking the silence.

He glances at me with a small smile. "No problem, Abby. Karl wanted to make sure you're safe."

I nod, appreciating Karl's concern. "I know. I just... I never thought I'd wind up in a situation like this. It feels weird. Like I'm a celebrity on the run from a scandal."

Marcus turns onto a winding road, the scenery becoming even more picturesque. "Hey, it's just part of the job when you make it big and start doing things like catering the Alpha gathering," he says. "Which, by the way... was impressive."

“You really think so?” I ask.

He nods. “Of course. Lots of people are talking about it. Abby, our old Luna, is moving on up in the world. Good for you.”

His words make me smile, and I turn to look out the window again to hide the blush in my cheeks. “Thanks, Marcus. That’s nice of you.”

We drive in silence for a while longer, the tranquility of the countryside providing a stark contrast to the chaos of the city I left behind. The tension that had hung in the air earlier has dissipated, replaced by a sense of ease.

“So, how’s Karl doing?” I ask, wanting to steer the conversation away from my own troubles. “I mean, how’s he really doing. He doesn’t usually say.”

Marcus glances at me, his expression softening. “He’s... been busy with campaign preparations, but he’s holding up well. His approval ratings are on the rise, and he’s optimistic about the upcoming election.”

I smile, genuinely happy to hear that things are going well for Karl. But I knew all of this already; I want to know how he’s doing, not just as an Alpha, but as a person.

“But how is he really?” I find myself asking. “How stressed is he?”

Marcus pauses for a moment, then finally lets out a sigh. “On a scale of one to ten?” he asks.

“Yes.”

Another pause. Then, “A solid twelve, at the very least,” he admits. “I’m a little bit worried he’s biting off more than he can chew. He always puts on a good show, but I know he’s freaking out on the inside. And Abby...”

Marcus falls silent again, and his gaze meets mine for a split second. "I think he'll feel a lot better having you around," he says quietly. "Because he really does worry about you. Constantly."

My eyes widen slightly, and my face flushes red. "Is that true?"

Marcus nods. "It is. Karl worries about you all of the time, Abby. You're always at the forefront of everything for him. He... cares about you."

His words give me pause. I don't know what to say, don't know how to feel. Karl rarely expresses his emotions on such a deep level. He's always creating this image of a man who has it all together, even when things would send a normal person spiraling.

But maybe he is spiraling, in a way. He's just not showing it.

As the car continues to glide along the scenic route, I can't stop thinking about my own role in Karl's life. Once, I was by his side as his wife, but now, things are different. I'm grateful that he's offering me a safe haven, but it's also a stark reminder of how much has changed.

"I hope I'm not causing too much trouble for Karl," I say, my voice barely more than a whisper.

Marcus shakes his head. "Not at all, Abby. Karl cares about your well-being. He wouldn't have offered if he didn't want you here."

I appreciate Marcus' reassurance, but there's still a nagging doubt in the back of my mind. "I just don't want to be a burden, you know? His campaign is important, and the last thing I want is to distract from it."

Chapter 366

Abby

I step out of Marcus' car and take a moment to take in the mansion that stands in front of me.

I still can't believe that I used to call this place home. Hell, I designed almost all of it myself; the gardens, the fountain on the front walkway, the color of the shutters. They're a soft sage green, a nice contrast from the red bricks. There's ivy growing up the front, which is new. I like it.

Grabbing my bag, I follow Marcus up the front path and inside.

"Here we are," Marcus says as he opens the door for me. "I have to attend a meeting, but make yourself at home."

I nod and watch Marcus leave, then make my way toward the stairs. But as I pass by the dining room, my eyes widen in surprise.

Spread out on the dining table is an array of my favorite foods. My stomach rumbles at the sight of all the delicious dishes. It's clear that someone has gone to great lengths to make me feel welcome.

As I look at the array, I start to wonder where Karl is. Surely he'll share a meal with me. I scan the room for any sign of him, but the place seems empty except for a middle-aged woman I've never seen before. She approaches me with a warm smile.

"You must be Abby," she says, extending her hand. "I'm Sarah. Karl is in a meeting right now, but he wanted you to enjoy the food. He'll be here as soon as he can."

I shake her hand and offer a polite smile. This must be the woman Karl hired as his campaign manager. She seems nice. "Nice to meet you, Sarah. Thank you for the welcome. The food looks amazing."

Sarah nods. "It's our pleasure. Please, have a seat and help yourself. Karl left specific instructions to make sure you're well taken care of."

I take a seat at the table, feeling a bit awkward sitting here all alone.

The spread of food is tempting, though, and I decide to start with a small serving of my favorite dish. It's just as delicious as I remember, and instantly transports me back to a time when Karl used to surprise me with this sort of thing all of the time.

For a while, I just sit there, savoring the food. Karl is still nowhere to be found, but I don't mind the silence. It's a welcome reprieve after the days of chaos at my apartment, and I almost forgot how nice it was to hear the sounds of the birds outside rather than car horns and police sirens.

When I finish my meal, I decide to take my plate to clean it myself. I enter the spacious kitchen, which is well-lit and impeccably clean.

In fact, I'm just thinking to myself that I'll have to cook a meal later myself as I'm rinsing my dish, when a woman's voice startles me.

"Oh, let me take that for you, dear," she says. I turn to see Alice, the housekeeper, bustling toward me.

I chuckle softly. "Hey, Alice," I say. "Don't worry about it. I can wash it myself."

Alice gives me a warm smile. "Nonsense, Luna. I won't allow you to wash your own dishes."

I furrow my brow at the title she uses. "Alice, you know I'm not the Luna anymore," I say, a hint of sadness creeping into my voice.

She seems surprised by my response and gives me a curious look. "I thought you and Karl were back together."

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My eyes widen in surprise. "Dancing at a party doesn't mean we're back together," I clarify. "It was just a dance, Alice."

The housekeeper gives me a knowing look. "Of course, dear. I understand," she says in that tone of voice that tells me that she doesn't particularly believe me. "But you must know how people love to talk. They've been saying all sorts of things."

I shake my head, feeling a mix of frustration and amusement. "I forgot how gossipy people can be out here in the countryside."

Alice chuckles softly. "It is a small town, after all. News travels fast. Much faster than the big city, at least."

As she takes my plate to wash it, I can't help but wonder why Karl hasn't corrected these rumors. Maybe he enjoys the speculation, or maybe he hasn't even heard about it. Regardless, it's not the kind of attention I want right now.

I thank Alice for her help, and she nods with a warm smile. "You're welcome, dear. If you need anything else, don't hesitate to ask."

I exit the kitchen, feeling a bit disoriented by the conversation. It's clear that my arrival here has stirred up some excitement among the pack members. I make a mental note to have a talk with Karl about it. I don't want any misunderstandings or false expectations.

Passing through the dining room, I start to head toward the stairs toward my room. Sarah is just coming down, and there's a smile on her face.

"Is there anything else you need?" she asks. "I just brought your bag upstairs for you."

I offer a grateful smile. "No, thank you, Sarah. The food was wonderful. I think I'll head up to my room now. Thank you for taking my bag, although you didn't have to."

She nods understandingly. "Of course. Enjoy your stay here. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

With that, I make my way up the grand staircase toward my old room. I feel a bit strange; the last time I was here just a few months ago, I felt like a stranger. Now, I feel like the guest of honor. What are people thinking?

Is it really the case that everyone thinks I'm the Luna again?

With a sigh, I step into my old bedroom; at least in here, I can relax for a little while. I figure that maybe my presence is just a little jarring and people don't know how to act, and maybe they'll settle down in a day or two.

On the bed, I notice a beautifully wrapped box with a card attached. I approach it and carefully open the box.

Inside, I find a new book—my favorite genre, murder mystery—and a set of spa items. The card, written in Karl's handwriting, reads: "Just some things to help you relax. See you soon. -K"

The gesture makes me feel spoiled, just like I did when I was married to Karl. It's clear that he's gone out of his way to make me comfortable, which is both sweet and a little odd.

But as I sit on the edge of the bed, another wave of uncertainty washes over me. Will being here again, surrounded by all these luxuries, make me fall back into my old routine with Karl?

Chapter 368

Abby

I'm standing in my old bedroom, surrounded by the furniture that I used to call my own, when there's a knock on the door. Karl's voice comes through a moment later before I can even get up.

"Abby?"

I jump to my feet and start smoothing down my hair for reasons that I can't even begin to comprehend. "Come in."

The door opens, and Karl steps in. He looks as handsome as ever in his tailored suit, his hair neatly combed to the side. I suddenly feel like a slob in my oversized sweater and jeans with my hair in a messy bun from the three-hour car trip.

"Hey," he breathes.

I swallow. "Hey.

I can see the surprise and warmth in Karl's eyes as he takes in my presence. A few moments pass, and then, unable to contain myself any longer, I rush towards him and throw my arms around him in a tight hug.

"Karl," I whisper into his neck, taking solace in his warmth. "I missed you."

Karl wraps his arms around me, holding me close. "I missed you too."

We stay like that for a moment, simply holding each other, finding comfort in the embrace. It feels like we've both been through so much in such a short amount of time, and seeing Karl again brings a sense of relief over me.

Finally, we pull back slightly, and I look up at him, a mixture of emotions swirling inside of me. "I'm so glad to be here," I blurt out before I can stop myself.

Karl smiles, his gaze never leaving mine. "I'm glad to have you here, where it's safe," he says. "I hope you'll find some peace and quiet here in the meantime."

I nod and take a step back. "Thank you, Karl. I really needed this."

He nods and gestures to the room. "Make yourself at home. If you need anything, just let me know. You can take one of the cars if you want to go anywhere, or I can arrange for someone to drive you."

One of my eyebrows raises. "You think it's a good idea for me to go out here, with everything going on?"

Karl shrugs and sticks his hands into his pockets. "It might get boring hanging around here all day while I'm in meetings," he explains. "Besides, you know what you're doing. It won't be an issue if you go out."

For a moment, I'm surprised. I would have expected Karl to be concerned about my current bad reputation rubbing off on him, and that he might want me to hide in the house until everything blows over. But I guess I was wrong.

Then, I feel a slight pang of disappointment; I knew Karl's schedule would be busy, but I had secretly hoped to spend a little more time with him.

"Well, thanks," I say with a smile, trying to hide my disappointment. "I appreciate it."

Karl's expression softens, and he reaches out to touch my cheek gently. "I'm sorry I can't spend more time with you, Abby," he says softly. "It's just... not a good time."

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Flopping down on the bed, I stare up at the ceiling with my arms splayed out, feeling a mix of emotions wash over me. It's not only strange being back in the place that I used to call home, but it's also a strange feeling to be here right now.

In a way, it feels awfully like how things used to be; minimal contact, always too busy to see each other, spoiled by gifts and always craving more.

But also, at the same time, I know I shouldn't feel this way. I meant what I said; we're not really together. We made a promise.

So why am I so sad about it?

But at that moment, I feel a subtle shift inside of me, and I sense the presence of my wolf. It's as if she's been waiting in the shadows, observing everything.

"You were wise to come home to Karl, Abby," my wolf says, her voice calm and smooth.

I sit up abruptly, taken aback by her words. "Home? This is just temporary, a way to get out of the city," I reply out loud. "I'm not staying. You know that, right?"

My wolf's voice grows stronger, more insistent. "But it will be so much more than that, Abby. Trust me."

Rolling my eyes, I mutter under my breath, "You sound like a lovesick adolescent."

But my wolf continues, undeterred. "Being here makes me stronger, and if you want to have me back, you'll need to stay with Karl. Where you belong."

I scowl, frustrated by her persistence. "I don't want to stay," I say firmly, my voice laced with determination. "I want to go back to the city, back to my restaurant."

My wolf chuckles. "With time, you won't want to return to the city."

I curse softly under my breath, feeling a surge of frustration. "That's ridiculous," I retort. "I love the city. I love my life there. I won't give up my new life to go back to the way things were. Already things are falling back to our old ways..."

"What do you mean?"

I sigh. "I mean..." I pause, chewing the inside of my cheek. "Look at us. He's too busy being an Alpha. I don't fit anywhere into that life."

"You don't?" she retorts with another chuckle. "Or are you just afraid that he'll push you away again?"

"Maybe," I scoff. "What does it matter?"

"It matters a lot, Abby. Karl has changed, and so have you. You don't need to fall back into old routines... but you don't need to run away for the sake of avoiding them, either."

Chapter 370

Abby

I sink into the warm, fragrant bath, the spa items Karl left for me creating a soothing oasis in the spacious bathroom.

As I relax into the water, I let out a contented sigh. It's been a while since I've had a moment like this, away from the constant buzz of the city. Already, my body feels more at ease. All I can hear through the open window are the sounds of the countryside; no sirens, no people, nothing. Just birds and the breeze.

For a moment, it feels just like it did all those years ago. I used to spend hours in this bathroom, soaking in the claw foot tub, reading and doing skincare. It was how I coped with my stress, most of which came from our marriage.

But I won't think about that right now.

With the murder mystery book propped up on a small stand nearby, I lose myself in its pages, the tension of the storyline pulling me in. It's a welcome escape from the chaos of the past week, and before I know it I'm not thinking about anything else at all.

Time seems to slip away as I read, the warm water and calming scents of the lavender and lilac bath salts lulling me into a state of tranquility. Eventually, I emerge from the bath, feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

I wrap myself in a plush robe and make my way back to the bedroom. I dig through my bag in search of an outfit, but quickly realize that everything I've packed is loungewear. I guess, in my frenzied state this morning, I wasn't thinking clearly.

With a sigh, I head over to the closet where some of my old clothes still reside. I find a zippered case on the floor with some old clothes and grab a comfortable dress and a sweater since it's chilly out. It still suits me, but not as much as it used to.

"Maybe I'll do some shopping," I mutter to myself as I turn back and forth in the mirror, looking at how the modest dress falls on my frame.

Deciding to venture outside for a change of scenery, I make my way downstairs and through the grand foyer. The mansion is vast, and it takes me a moment to remember my way around. It's quiet, and I can't help but feel a sense of nostalgia as I explore the familiar hallways.

As I reach the front door, I pause to check my reflection in a nearby mirror, adjusting my blue surgical mask to make sure that it's securely in place.

It's uncomfortable, but necessary in the city right now. For a moment, I almost consider not wearing it; I don't want to be too confident that I'm safe here, though, so I decide to keep it on just in case.

With a sense of determination, I open the door and step outside. The scent of pine trees and earth fills my nostrils, and with a deep breath, I adjust my purse on my shoulder and begin my walk to town.

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