

Kickass 371

Chapter 371

With my coffee in hand, I decide to do a bit of shopping. I step into a nearby clothing boutique that I haven't seen before and begin flipping through the racks, pulling out various items and holding them up to myself in the mirror.

"That's a nice color," a familiar voice says as I'm holding up an emerald green sweater in the mirror..

I turn around, surprised to see Elsie, the maid who used to be my friend, standing there. She doesn't seem to recognize me through the mask. I tug it down just enough so she can see me, and her eyes widen.

"Ab—"

"Shh," I hiss, drawing closer. "I'm laying low."

Elsie nods slowly, then grins. "I didn't know you were going to be in town today," she says. "How are you doing? I heard about..." Her voice trails off, but we both know what she's thinking: the disaster of an Alpha party.

"It's a long story," I explain quietly. "But it's under control. I needed to get out of the city, though."

Elsie shoots me a knowing look, then loops her arm around my shoulder. She's in her plain clothes; it must be her day off, hence the reason why she didn't know I was going to be here. It was all so last minute, after all.

After a moment, Elsie glances at the items I've got in my hand: a mini dress, a sweater, and a scarf.

"Are you shopping for something special?" she asks.

I hesitate for a moment, then decide to extend an invitation on a whim. “Actually, Elsie, I was wondering if you’d like to join me for coffee and shopping,” I say. “It’s been so long since we hung out like we used to.”

Elsie’s eyes brighten with excitement. “That sounds perfect. There’s a new shop down the street that I’ve been dying to check out...”

We continue our shopping adventure together, just like old times. It feels as though we just picked up where we left off, and the familiarity of our friendship makes me feel more at home here.

After I pay for my things, we head to the new shop down the street, a boutique with all kinds of candles and lotions. I decide to pick up some face lotion and a new scented candle, and a pair of earrings on a whim.

As we walk down the street, bags in hand, Elsie suddenly looks at me with a curious expression on her face. “So... does all of this mean that you and Karl are back together?”

I freeze for a moment, my smile faltering. “It’s complicated, Elsie,” I reply. “We’re keeping things casual.”

Elsie’s brow furrows, and she studies me intently. “Well, it certainly doesn’t seem casual,” she says softly. “Everyone has been talking since the Alpha party. We all thought you were getting back together.”

Chapter 372

Abby

“I think I just spent my life savings.”

Elsie giggles as she holds up her most recent purchase: a new pair of earrings for her mother. They’re beautiful, made of translucent crystals that catch the light of the setting sun.

We just spent the entire afternoon in town, and I didn't realize until now just how much I needed this. Back when Karl and I lived together and I had more free time on my hands, Elsie and I would go out to town almost once a week.

But that was before everything happened. I didn't have a job then, or really anything to do with my spare time other than 'Luna' things; cutting ribbons at shop openings, volunteering, promotional stuff.

Honestly, I hated it. Looking back, I'm glad that I left that life behind.

And I hope I never need to fall back into that lifestyle again.

The sun hangs low in the sky as Elsie and I begin making our way back to the mansion, our shopping bags filled with various items. I picked out a few new outfits, something to cheer myself up.

Despite the initial unease I felt about running into familiar faces, the afternoon has been enjoyable. Elsie's presence has brought a sense of normalcy back to my visit, and I find myself smiling as we chat about the latest gossip in town.

"I don't know if you remember Veronica Newman," Elsie says, referring to a woman that used to be married to the local post office owner, "but she and John got divorced."

My eyes widen. "Really? Veronica and John got divorced? But they seemed so in love," I say.

Elsie shrugs. "Trust me, I know. But she was cheating on him the whole time from what I hear. As soon as the divorce was finalized, she ran away with a guy from another pack."

As we walk along the quiet streets, the distant sound of laughter and conversation reaches our ears. I glance ahead and notice a couple of people approaching us.

I stop in my tracks. "Is that..." I murmur, leaning forward.

My heart skips a beat when I recognize them. It's two women from the pack, people who I used to know from volunteering.

"Oh, shit," Elsie mutters. "God... It's Karen and Susan."

Karen and Susan... They're some of the biggest gossips in town. They're nice enough, but it's always been clear that they have nothing better to do than spread rumors ever since their kids grew up and left for college.

They slow down as they approach, their curious eyes narrowing as they take in my presence. It's clear that they recognize me despite the mask. One of the women, Karen, a tall and elegant lady with a piercing gaze, steps forward.

"Abby? Is that you?" she asks, her tone a mix of surprise and suspicion.

I give a small nod, trying to keep my composure. "Yes, it's me. How are you?"

The two women exchange glances, and then the other woman, Susan, a friendly and talkative lady, chimes in, her voice tinged with skepticism. "What are you doing back in town again? We heard about the Alpha party. It was a disaster, wasn't it?"

"I, um..." I swallow, not sure how to respond. I don't want to say anything that I shouldn't, seeing as how it'll just get spread like wildfire.

Suddenly, Elsie steps in, coming to my defense. "Abby is visiting me," she says with a warm smile.

Karen raises an eyebrow, crossing her arms. "Oh?" she asks. "That's interesting. I would have thought you were visiting Karl."

"What makes you think that?" I ask, trying to keep my tone neutral.

Karen shrugs. "Well, the news is that you and Karl were together at the Alpha party," she says. "Everyone thought you had made amends."

"We're on good terms," I say vaguely.

"Speaking of the Alpha party," Susan chimes in, "I heard it was a disaster. So many Alphas got food poisoning, correct?"

I take a deep breath, trying to maintain my composure. "The incident is under investigation," I reply carefully. "There may be more to it than meets the eye."

The two women give me a strange look. Karen takes a step forward, clearly intrigued.

"It's under investigation?" she asks. "Is Alpha Karl aware?"

At her words, I can feel myself blanching a bit. "Uh, yes, he is," I say, gripping my bags just a little tighter.

"So is he supportive of you?" Karen presses. "That could be a concern, you know. I would hate it if our Alpha was getting himself involved in anything suspicious."

There's that word: suspicious. Something about it makes my blood run cold, and suddenly, it feels as though all of my worst fears are coming true. I don't want my involvement in this whole debacle to harm Karl's approval ratings, especially not when he's been working so hard to improve them.

"Trust me, he's not involved," I say flatly. "Don't worry. Alpha Karl has nothing to do with any of this, and I plan on keeping it that way."

Susan and Karen stare at me for a moment, saying nothing. Finally, they nod almost in unison.

"Well, it's nice seeing you," Susan says with a smile. "Enjoy your stay, Abby."

As they walk away, I can't help but feel a bit shaken by the encounter. Elsie turns to me with a sympathetic expression. "You okay?" she whispers.

I let out a sigh and adjust my mask on my face as we continue walking. "Yeah, I'm fine," I reply. "It's just... I was really hoping not to run into people who recognized me. It's complicated, Elsie. I don't want to cause any trouble for Karl."

Chapter 373

Karl

With the election preparations well underway, Ethan and I only need to finalize some dates before the campaign will begin.

It's a grueling process, though. Juggling my own Alpha duties and this upcoming campaign is a bit more difficult than I thought, and although I'm handling it, it does feel somewhat overwhelming. Plus, with my plans to do some volunteering and public relations work before the campaign is announced, I feel like I'm just trying to tread water at this point.

Ethan is sitting across from me, and between us are stacks of paperwork and hastily scrawled notes. Gianna sits to Ethan's left, her nose buried in her notebook, while Sarah sits to my right.

Sarah has, honestly, been a godsend. She's just as organized as I hoped she would be, and she's even more intelligent than she seemed in our interviews. With such a good campaign manager by my side, I have high hopes that this election will fall in my favor.

I just need to make sure that nothing gets in the way of that in the meantime.

Ethan's enthusiasm is palpable as he leans forward, his dark eyes shining with anticipation. "I think we should go big, Karl," he says. "A televised announcement with all the bells and whistles. It will make a statement."

I lean back in my chair, my fingers steepled in front of me, considering his proposal. "I understand the desire for a grand spectacle, Ethan, but I think a smaller-scale announcement in the form of a press release might be more strategic," I reply. "It allows us to control the message and keep a lower profile."

Ethan furrows his brow in thought, his gaze shifting between Gianna, Sarah, and me. After a moment, Gianna speaks up.

"I disagree," she chimes in, her stony gaze meeting mine. "Karl, I think you're just trying to manipulate the press."

"Manipulate the press?" I scoff. "Gianna, you—"

Suddenly, Ethan, always the mediator, steps in. "Now, let's not be harsh," he says. "Maybe Karl is right, Gianna. A press release would give us more control, and then we can go our own ways once the campaign begins."

Gianna sighs, but says nothing and leans back in her chair.

I offer a faint smile of approval, appreciating my brother's words. It still stings that he's with Gianna, but at least he's still seeing some semblance of reason.

"Very well," I say with a nod. "Press release it is; we'll do it on December 8th, just as we discussed."

"Right," Ethan replies. "Now, onto the campaign schedule. We need to set a date and location for the debate, and we'll need to hire a mediator."

Sarah nods. "January 22nd seems like a good date," she says. "I could block that day out right now."

Gianna scoffs. "January? That's too soon," she hisses. "February is better."

Sarah and I exchange glances. I want to say something, but I decide to simply concede for both my brother's sake and the sake of the campaign. "Okay. February is fine," I say.

Gianna, seemingly satisfied, leans back in her chair again. The conversation continues, and we bounce from topic to topic: voting dates, rules, mediators, the works.

But the whole time, I can feel Gianna's stony gaze from across the table. Every time she looks up from her notebook, her eyes bore into me, and it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore her silent scrutiny.

Finally, unable to bear it any longer, I turn my attention to Gianna. "Is there something you'd like to add, Gianna?" I ask, trying to keep my tone neutral.

"Oh, nothing at all," she says with a shrug.

"Really?" I ask. "Because you've been shooting daggers at me for the past ten minutes."

Ethan shoots both of us a warning glance, but Gianna's determination prevails as always. Setting her notebook down, she leans forward, her eyes locking onto mine. "Actually, Karl, there is something I'd like to know."

I raise an eyebrow, waiting for her to continue.

Gianna doesn't mince words. "I heard Abby came to visit amidst her... investigation."

Ethan's eyebrows raise as he looks back and forth between me and Gianna. I sigh inwardly, realizing what Gianna is trying to do; but I won't let her win this round.

"Yes, it's true, Gianna," I admit. "I invited Abby here to keep her safe from the paparazzi and the chaos in the city. She's my friend. I'm helping her."

Gianna's lips curl into a disapproving sneer. "So, she's on the run from her own disaster in the city, and now you're harboring a fraud in your house right before the election?"

I can feel my patience waning, and I struggle to maintain a calm demeanor. "Gianna, it's really none of your business. And I don't appreciate how you're speaking about Abby—especially during a meeting."

Gianna opens her mouth to retort, but suddenly, Ethan intervenes, attempting to defuse the tension. "Come on, you two. Let's not let personal matters interfere with the campaign."

"I agree," I say, shooting my brother a glance. "Let's finish up the meeting."

But Gianna remains undeterred. "Oh, I'm not the one who's letting personal matters interfere with the campaign. I just find it interesting, Karl, how you're always quick to defend Abby, despite everything she's done."

I resist the urge to snap back, my focus shifting to Ethan and Sarah, who both seem uncomfortable with the escalating confrontation. Sarah meets my eyes and subtly shakes her head, a silent plea for restraint.

Ethan finally steps in decisively. "That's enough, Gianna. Let's move on from this topic."

My brother's stern tone effectively silences Gianna, although she clearly has more she wants to say. As the meeting draws to a close, Ethan changes the subject with an unexpected suggestion.

Chapter 374

Abby

Elsie and I are sprawled out on my king-sized bed, a movie playing on the TV.

But we're barely watching. I'm trying on one of my new dresses in the mirror while Elsie is watching me, a glass of wine in her hand. For the first time in what feels like forever, I finally feel as though I can let my guard down.

At least here, in the privacy of my old bedroom, no one is gossiping. At least here, I don't have to justify myself just for being here.

Or at least, that was what I thought.

"Abby," Elsie says, taking a sip of her wine with a mischievous glint in her eyes, "can I ask you something?"

I raise an eyebrow, turning my attention away from the mirror. The dress I'm trying on is red and hits me mid-thigh, and it's tight all over; Karl would have hated it when we were married. But now, I think he'll like it. Not that I should care.

"What's on your mind, Elsie?" I ask, digging into one of my shopping bags for the black cardigan I bought earlier. I think it'll go with the color of the dress.

She hesitates for a moment before leaning closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "What's really the deal between you and Karl?" she asks. "You said it was casual earlier, but... you never explained."

I sigh, my shoulders slumping as I contemplate how to answer. I'm tired of all of the questions, but Elsie is also a friend and I know that I would be asking the same things if I were in her position.

"We're... hooking up," I admit, slipping the cardigan on and turning back to face the mirror as though that will somehow deflect Elsie's gaze. "But that's all it is. Really."

Elsie raises an eyebrow, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "Is that so?" she asks. "That's really all it is? Just casual?"

I feel my cheeks heat up, and I quickly avert my gaze, hoping Elsie doesn't notice in the mirror's reflection. "Yes, it is," I reply, my voice coming out more defensive than I intended. "End of story."

Elsie chuckles softly, her gaze unwavering. "Abby, you're blushing," she points out.

I blink in surprise and touch my cheeks, feeling the warmth beneath my fingertips. "Am I? I hadn't noticed," I mumble, avoiding eye contact. "Must be the wine."

"You've hardly touched yours," she says, nodding her head to the mostly-untouched glass of red wine sitting on my bedside table. It's true; I've only taken two sips.

She then reaches over and gently takes my hand, giving it a squeeze. “Abby, you can tell me anything, you know. I know we don’t get to see each other much anymore, but I still consider you my friend. Even though it’s been three years.”

I sigh, my shoulders sagging as I sink down onto the bed.

“Okay, fine,” I murmur. “Look, I just don’t know what I want from this, Elsie.”

Chapter 375

“That’s my plan for now,” I say softly. “But the truth is, Karl has his responsibilities here, and I have mine three hours away in the city. Neither of us can escape that. So I don’t think it’ll go anywhere, honestly.”

Elsie listens intently. “I know how difficult that is,” she says.

Just then, my phone vibrates with a text message, breaking the moment. I glance at the screen to see that it’s from Karl.

“Can I talk to you?”

I furrow my brow and stand, pocketing my phone. Elsie shoots me a curious look. “You good, Abby?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “Karl just wants to talk to me. I’ll be right back.”

Elsie nods and watches as I slip out of the room. I make my way to Karl’s office, which is located on the other side of the house. I always felt like it was miles away when we were together, but now, it feels as though it’s right next door.

I step inside and find Karl sitting behind his desk, a tired expression on his face. “Hey,” I greet him, shutting the door behind me. “What did you want to talk about?”

Karl looks up, his eyes meeting mine. “Hey. Sorry I had to text you. I’ve been... busy.” He then pauses, his gaze flickering over my red dress and black cardigan. “Is that new? You look nice.”

“Oh, um... Thanks. It is new,” I say, feeling my cheeks flush ever so slightly. I settle into the chair opposite from him, waiting for him to continue. “What’s on your mind?”

Karl takes a deep breath before he begins. “Ethan wants us to go on a double date tonight.”

I blink in surprise. The idea of going out with Karl’s brother leading up to what could potentially be a brutal election catches me off guard. “A double date?”

Karl nods, his expression earnest. “Yeah. With Gianna.”

My initial reaction is to decline, to avoid any situation involving Gianna, although I can see the exhaustion in Karl’s eyes.

I let out a reluctant sigh. “Karl, you know I can’t go out with Gianna. And besides, we’re not together in that sense,” I remind him.

Karl leans forward, his voice pleading. “Abby, just consider it. My brother really wants to see you, and...” He pauses. “I’d like to take you out regardless of what people think here.”

I waver for a moment, feeling my usual stubbornness beginning to rise inside of me. But as I look at Karl’s tired eyes and hear the sincerity in his words, I realize that this means a lot to him, even if he won’t fully admit it.

“Okay,” I finally say, even though the very thought of going out with Gianna makes me want to rip my hair out. “I guess I could go.”

Karl’s face lights up with gratitude, and he lets out a relieved breath. “Thank you, Abby. You won’t regret it. We can just view it as a platonic date, no strings attached.”

Chapter 376

Abby

There's still a smile on my face as I make my way back to the bedroom, where Elsie is waiting, engrossed in her phone. She looks up as I enter, a curious glint in her eyes.

"Well, spill it, Abby," she says, setting her phone aside without a moment's hesitation. "What did Karl want?"

I can't help but smirk a bit. Even though the idea of going out on a date with Gianna of all people makes me want to scream, I couldn't deny the sincerity in Karl's eyes. And in a way that I don't want to admit, there are butterflies in my stomach.

But I manage to keep my cool, and shrug as I sit down at my vanity to start putting on some makeup. "He wants to go on a double date."

Elsie's eyes light up with excitement. "A double date? That's fantastic!" She jumps up from the bed and rushes over to me. "We have to get you ready."

I shake my head, trying to downplay the situation. "Elsie, it's not what you think," I say. "It's with Ethan and... Gianna."

Elsie makes a face at the mention of Karl's old secretary's name. "Gianna? Ew. I mean, I knew she was dating Ethan, but..."

"Look," I say with a sigh, "I'm just doing this for Karl. He seemed to really want me there. We agreed on a platonic date, so don't get too excited."

But Elsie, despite my attempts at downplaying the situation, sees right through my facade. "Bullshit," she says, setting her wine glass down on the vanity. "A date is a date, and you're still blushing."

With a sigh, I finally relent. "Okay, okay. Maybe I'm a little excited. But I can only be so excited when Gianna is involved," I say.

Elsie shrugs. "All the more reason to get dolled up and look really hot," she says with a mischievous giggle. I can tell she's tipsy, and even though it's endearing, it's also a little frustrating.

“I’m fine in what I’m wearing,” I say, gesturing to the red mini dress and black cardigan.

She pauses for a moment, taking in my outfit, then places her hands on her hips. “The outfit is great,” she says, then gestures to my hair and face. “But this needs work.”

I can’t help but burst out laughing. “Wow. Thanks, Elsie.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she says with a wave of her hand. She grabs my makeup bag from me and begins digging through it. “You’re gorgeous, Abby. But everyone could always use a little enhancement, you know?”

Before I know it, Elsie is getting to work. Music plays out of the speaker on her phone as she applies my makeup, but my back is turned away from the mirror so I can’t see. Normally, I would be averse to the idea, but Elsie’s enthusiasm is too infectious to be annoyed.

“You’re going to knock their socks off, Abby,” she says as she finishes applying some lipstick in a shade that I can’t see. “Karl won’t know what hit him.”

Suddenly, with a final nod, Elsie turns me around to face my reflection.

Chapter 377

The last thing I do is pull on a pair of tights and some tall heeled boots, followed by a dainty necklace and some dangly earrings. I take one last look in the full-length mirror, turning this way and that as I take in my appearance.

“Va va voom, if I may say so myself,” Elsie says, making curves in the air with her hands to indicate the way my body looks in the slim-fitted dress. Her words make me blush, but I can’t help but agree. Va va voom indeed.

As I make my way down the stairs, I catch a glimpse of Karl waiting in the living room. He turns as I descend, and his eyes go wide.

For a moment, he seems utterly captivated, and I feel a warmth creep into my cheeks.

“You look... beautiful,” he says in a low, almost reverent tone as he approaches me.

I offer a shy smile, feeling slightly self-conscious under his intense gaze. “Thanks.”

He takes my hand and places a gentle kiss on it, sending a shiver down my spine. I can’t help but blush even more. I was worried that he would think my look is too much, but the way he stares at me just makes me feel even more beautiful.

“Ready?” he asks, offering his arm.

I nod, taking his arm, and together we head to the car. There are butterflies in my stomach in more ways than one, though, as we pull up to the fanciest restaurant in town; I can’t quite shake off the unease building inside of me.

I glance down at my outfit, suddenly worried that I’m underdressed for such an upscale place.

Karl must sense my apprehension because he gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “You look perfect, Abby,” he says gently, his eyes meeting mine in the dim light of the car. “Really.”

I nod hesitantly, trying to convince myself that I belong here. Karl’s confidence is infectious, and I take a deep breath and climb out of the car.

We walk up to the restaurant, and Karl opens the car door for me. I step out, and we make our way inside. The restaurant is lit with candles, creating a dim, cozy feel. There’s a lounge singer on the small stage who’s singing along to a soft jazz track, and the clinking of cutlery and glasses fills the air.

“This way,” Karl says, nodding his head for me to follow. We weave our way through the restaurant; and that’s when I see them.

Ethan and Gianna, sitting at a corner booth. Gianna already has a drink in hand, swirling the liquid around absentmindedly as she stares off into the distance. She’s dressed exquisitely, the perfect image of an expensive woman.

And here I am, feeling small beneath her gaze as I approach.

But then there's Ethan. He stands up as Karl and I approach, his smile warm.

"Abby," he says, leaning in to kiss my hand. "So nice to see you again."

Gianna, on the other hand, remains seated, her expression less than welcoming. She offers a curt nod in my direction, her lips pressed into a thin line. It's clear that she's not thrilled about my presence, but the feeling is mutual.

Chapter 378

Abby

Karl and I settle into our seats across from Ethan and Gianna, and although my heart is racing in Gianna's presence, Karl's knee touching mine beneath the table is enough to keep me grounded.

Gianna takes in my appearance from across the table. "Interesting dress," she says, her gaze flicking over me with a hint of disdain behind her eyes. "Is that velvet?"

I pause, glancing down at myself. Now I want to feel more self-conscious than before, but deep down I know that Gianna is just trying to get under my skin. Karl gives my leg a brief squeeze under the table, and that gives me a boost of confidence.

"Yes, it is," I say, meeting her gaze once more. "I just bought it, actually. You like it?"

Gianna simply shrugs. "It's nice, I suppose," she says before looking away, still swirling her drink around in her glass.

"So," Ethan suddenly says, seemingly oblivious—or perhaps willfully ignorant—to the tension, "Abby, how have you been?"

I exchange a glance with Karl, who gives me an encouraging look, before I turn back to Ethan. I realize that there's no use in beating around the bush. Everyone knows about the Alpha gathering disaster. "I've been... better," I admit with a chuckle. "I'm sure you've heard by now."

Ethan nods slowly. "I have heard," he says. "What a shame. So many people got sick."

His words make my heart sink just a little even just thinking about it. But Karl jumps in before I have to come up with a response. "It's under investigation," he says. He then pauses, his eyes flickering back and forth between Gianna and Ethan. "Well... You two know."

We all know what he's referring to: the interrogation that Gianna was subject to. She shoots me an angry glance, and I suddenly feel the need to apologize even though I know there's no real need to.

"Gianna, I'm so sorry you got wrapped up in that," I say. "I only did what the police wanted me to do, and given our history—"

"No need," Gianna hisses before I can finish. She takes a sip of her drink and levels me with an angry glare. "The interrogation was awful, but it's over. Are you happy now, Abby?"

I do genuinely feel bad. When Officer Martinez asked me about any enemies, Gianna of course came to mind. She has, quite literally, sabotaged me in the past, so it makes sense that she would have been on my list; but it doesn't mean that I don't feel awful that she went through that when it turns out that she was most likely innocent.

"Gianna, I really didn't mean to hurt you," I say, leaning forward slightly. "But can you blame me?"

"Blame you?" Gianna scoffs. "Oh, Abby, you poor—"

"Hey, why don't we all just let bygones be bygones?" Ethan suddenly interrupts in that oh-so-pleasant tone of his. "Let's enjoy our night, shall we?"

There's a silence after Ethan speaks. Karl and I exchange the briefest of glances, and I can tell from the look in his eyes that this isn't the first time Ethan has done this since the Alpha party. I can't tell if Ethan

is in denial or if he simply doesn't know the full extent of what Gianna did, but something tells me that there's no point in trying to make him see reason. Especially not now, over dinner.

We don't bring it up again. The four of us return to our menus, and soon enough, a waiter dressed in a black ensemble stops by our table.

"Good evening," he says, filling our water glasses. "What can I get for you tonight?"

"I'll have the steak," Ethan says, then turns to me with a chuckle. "I'm still ravenous."

"Salad," Gianna says coldly when the waiter turns to her. "No dressing."

The waiter nods and jots down their orders. I can just barely make out Ethan whispering to Gianna, asking if that's really all she wants, and she simply nods. Something tells me that she won't be eating tonight anyway, and with the current state of things, I'm not sure if I can stomach any food either.

"Bring a bottle of red wine, would you please?" Ethan says after he and Gianna give the waiter their orders.

"Of course, sir," the waiter says, then turns to me. "And for you, miss?"

"I'll have... the grilled salmon and asparagus, please," I say, handing the menu back to the waiter.

Karl follows suit, ordering filet mignon with mashed potatoes and a bottle of white wine for the two of us to share. With our orders placed, the waiter disappears to retrieve the wine and some of the fresh bread and cheese that I've been eyeballing on other tables.

We sit in silence for a few moments longer, and I'm not sure if I should say something or just stay quiet. But then, finally, the waiter returns and pours our wine. Once he's gone, Ethan leans forward, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as he speaks.

“You know, Abby, this election is genuinely exciting,” he says. “I wouldn’t have thought of it myself, but it was an excellent idea.”

Karl chuckles. “I’m glad you think so, brother. A little friendly competition never hurt, eh?”

“Not at all,” Ethan says, raising his glass.

As I watch their interaction, I can’t help but smile. The old Karl never would have done anything like this election, especially not in such a friendly way. But the way he interacts with his brother now makes me think that he really has grown up over the years.

“I’m glad you two are doing this,” I say. “It’s admirable, to go up against your own brother like this, especially with such a good attitude about it.”

“Karl and I are all we’ve got left,” Ethan says as he sets his glass down. There’s a tense pause, a moment of remembrance for the family that they both lost years ago, before he continues. “There’s no use in being hateful. I realized that when I was trapped in that coma for all those years.”

Karl offers a nod, his gaze averted to the glass of wine in front of him. “I couldn’t have asked for a better outcome,” he says slowly. “No matter who wins, I’ll look back on this election knowing it was a just and fair trial.”

My heart swells at his words. “Wow,” I breathe. “That’s a very mature way to put it.”

Chapter 379

Abby

“I mean your cheating, of course.”

Gianna’s words cut through the air, leaving me feeling as though I’ve just been splashed with acid. It’s clear that her words were intended to cut deep, and all the while, Ethan just sits there beside her with a puzzled expression on his face.

My eyes are wide as I stammer out a response. “Ex... Excuse me?” I murmur.

An evil smirk tightens her face. “You heard me,” she says, her tone laced with pure and unadulterated venom. “You’re a cheater. I can’t even believe you’re sitting here right now, as if you did nothing wrong.”

Karl and I exchange a wary glance. It’s clear that he’s just as astonished as I am. My eyes slide over to Ethan, though, and his face betrays nothing.

I can’t tell what’s on his mind; I knew that Gianna must have spread some lies, manipulated reality while he was in his coma, and it seems to me that it somehow worked. But I can’t feel bad for him, not when he’s sitting here silently while his new girlfriend tries to start a fight at the dinner table.

“Well?” Gianna says with a chuckle, still swirling her drink around in her glass. She takes a slow, calculated sip, her eyes never leaving mine over the rim of the glass. “Nothing to say, Abby?”

I don’t know what to say. I thought that we were all on the same page here; that Gianna set up that whole scheme to make it appear as though I had cheated, all for her own gain. And yet, here she is, acting as though I did do it all along.

Before I can muster a reply, Karl suddenly intervenes.

“What the hell are you talking about, Gianna?” he hisses.

Gianna’s eyes snap over to him. “Don’t act like you don’t know,” she says.

Karl lets out a wry chuckle. “Seriously, Gianna?” he replies incredulously. “Abby didn’t cheat. You orchestrated the whole scenario with that gardener so you could become the new Luna. And now that you’re bitter over the fact that your little plan didn’t work, you now prey on my brother?”

As Karl speaks, his gaze shifts over to Ethan. Ethan’s face is an unreadable mask of stoicism, but I can see the way that his knuckles are turning white from clutching his wine glass so tightly. If he grips it any tighter, it’ll surely break.

But Ethan says nothing. I feel incredulous; is he really so oblivious, or is he simply refusing to see the truth?

Gianna scowls, her perfect facade wavering for a brief moment before she retorts with a voice that's filled with venom. "I did no such thing," she growls. "You framed me because you wanted to get back together with your cheating ex-wife and you had to cover your tracks, otherwise no one would support the relationship."

A tense silence falls over the table. I can feel Karl's body stiffening beside me, and he looks over at his brother, his eyes wide. "You're just going to say nothing, Ethan?" he says with a scoff. "Seriously? You know she's full of shit!"

Chapter 380

"A manipulator?" Ethan lets out a chuckle. "Is that truly what you think my girlfriend is?"

Karl throws his hands up in exasperation. "Really, brother?" he snarls. "Are you that dense?"

There's a moment of silence, and I feel caught in the middle. I can't figure out who's truly at the root of this; me, or Gianna? Part of me wonders if none of this would have happened if I hadn't come tonight, and that hurts more than anything.

Then, Ethan's face darkens, and he shoots a warning glance at Karl. "Perhaps this dinner is over before it has even begun," he mutters.

Karl's resolve remains unshaken. He turns to Gianna with a stern expression. "I want to have a close relationship with my brother, but not at the cost of enabling this," he gestures towards Gianna, "deceit and manipulation."

"I've deceived no one," Gianna hisses. "My emails were tampered with, Karl. You were the one who wouldn't see reason."

"Oh, is that what happened?" Karl asks with an angry laugh. "Because if I recall correctly, you were admitting to everything and professing your love to me not long ago. But I suppose you never bothered mentioning that to my sick brother, did you?"

Karl and Gianna glare at each other for what feels like an eternity, each of them seething more and more by the moment. Realizing that Ethan is going to do nothing to step in, I stand, taking Karl's arm.

"Come on, Karl," I whisper, giving his arm a tug. "Let's just leave."

Karl pulls his gaze away from Gianna, and his brown eyes are full of fury. But they soften ever so slightly when he looks at me, and he nods. "You're right," he says as he pulls his wallet out of his pocket. "I think it's best if we do leave."

That's when Ethan finally stands. "Karl, there's no need for all of this drama," he says. "Please, stay."

But Karl simply shakes his head and withdraws a wad of cash from his wallet, throwing it down on the table.

"That's for the food and the wine," he says, shoving his wallet back into his pocket with force. He then meets his brother's gaze, and it's then that I can feel his arm trembling with fury as he looks at him. "I'll be more than happy to speak with you again once you've learned to see reason, brother," he says quietly. "But until that happens, then I guess this is goodbye."

Ethan stares at Karl for a while, his jaw clenched tightly, his hands gripping the edge of the table. Meanwhile, Gianna continues to sit beside him. Her face is twisted into a pout, but I can see right through it. Her eyes meet mine, and there's a hint of mischief there.

She knows exactly what she's doing; perhaps this was her plan all night. And, well, she's done exactly what she set out to do.

"I suppose it is," Ethan finally says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Goodbye, Karl. May the best man win this election."