

## **Kickass 381**

### Chapter 381

Abby

As we burst out of the restaurant, I feel the chilly night air hit my face, a stark contrast to the heated atmosphere we just left behind.

“I can’t believe it,” Karl hisses under his breath as he pulls me further and further away from the restaurant. “That lying little...”

Karl’s grip on my hand is like iron. I can tell he’s furious, and for good reason; but I can also tell that he’s not necessarily in the right headspace right now. I stop suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk, tugging my hand free from his grip.

“Karl,” I say, my voice trembling with a mix of emotions that I can’t even begin to describe, “what are you going to do about all of this?”

Karl stops as well, his shoulders slumping, and he lets out a deep sigh. He’s silent for a long time, his body shaking with anger, before he finally runs a hand through his hair in frustration. “Honestly, Abby,” he begins, “I wanted this election against my brother to be amicable, you know? But it just doesn’t seem like it’s going to be possible at this point. Not after... whatever that was.”

My heart aches for him, and I reach out to touch his arm gently. “Do you think you’ll have time to rectify things before the election is announced?” I ask. “I’d hate to see you and Ethan be at such odds throughout the entire election.”

Karl’s gaze is distant, and he throws his hands up in exasperation.

“I’m not sure, Abby,” he says, his eyes finally meeting mine. They’re full of pain and anger.

“There has to be something you can do,” I insist. “He’s your brother, Karl. All those years ago, when his family took you in...”

My voice trails off before I can finish my thought. We both know what I'm referring to.

Years ago, when Karl was just a child, Ethan's family took him in. Karl was an orphan with no memory of his real family, but it didn't matter. From that day forward, Ethan's family was Karl's family. There were three brothers including Karl and Ethan, and it was a happy family.

Until, that is, a strange illness wiped all of them out. The doctors say it was genetic, which was why Karl was spared. Ethan barely made it out alive; if it weren't for his wolf putting him into a coma at the last moment, he wouldn't have survived.

"I doubt it," Karl says, breaking my train of thought. "Gianna has been sowing the seeds of manipulation while Ethan was in his coma for years now. She knew exactly what she was doing. And now that she's also Ethan's campaign manager, she's got him wrapped around her little finger."

"Surely we can help him see the truth," I say. "If we show him the emails, the proof—"

But Karl shakes his head. "Abby, I've tried," he says. "Trust me, I've tried. He just won't see logic here. He's lovestruck and manipulated. I don't think he's going to see the light anytime soon—or maybe even ever."

Looking at Karl, seeing him like this, makes my heart break. I feel a pang of guilt, knowing that my presence at the dinner may have only added fuel to the fire. "Karl, I'm so sorry," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the sounds of the cars on the street.

Karl's eyes widen in surprise. Without a word, he steps closer, holding me gently by both shoulders. He places his hand under my chin and tilts my face up, making me look at him. "Abby, how is this your fault?" he murmurs, his eyes searching my face.

I shake my head, unable to meet his gaze for more than a brief moment. "I knew I shouldn't have come out for dinner tonight," I explain. "My presence ruined everything. Maybe none of this would have happened if I had refused to come. Hell, maybe I should have just stayed in the city."

Karl rushes to reassure me, his grip on my shoulders firm but gentle. "None of this is your fault, Abby," he says firmly. "This was bound to happen sooner or later. I've been trying my best to give my brother the benefit of the doubt, but clearly, there's just no point. It's a losing battle."

I continue to look down at the ground, guilt still gnawing at me. "But Ethan does deserve the benefit of the doubt," I insist. "Karl, he was in a coma for years, lost his entire family except for you, and meanwhile Gianna had all that time to sink her claws in."

Karl considers my words for a moment, his gaze unwavering. Then, he sighs and pulls me into a warm hug. His chin rests on the top of my head, and I lean closer, inhaling his sweet scent. My wolf stirs ever so slightly, comforted by his presence.

"You're far too sweet for your own good, Abby," he murmurs.

We stand there on the street, wrapped in each other's arms, finding solace in the midst of chaos. Eventually, Karl breaks the embrace but keeps a firm hold on my hand.

"Come on," he says, nodding his head toward the car. "Let's go."

I nod, grateful for his presence, and we make our way to the car in silence. Karl opens the door for me and gestures for me to get in.

"Thanks," I murmur as I slide into my seat. Karl merely nods, carefully closing the door behind me before he circles around to the driver's side. I allow myself to look at him, really look at him, during that brief moment.

He looks so handsome, every bit the Alpha he deserves to be. And for a moment, I allow myself to picture us together, an unshakable team that can overcome any challenge.

But we're not. We never were, not really. When we were married, we had too many differences in opinion, too much holding us apart.

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Abby

The car ride stretches on in silence, punctuated only by the sound of the car engine humming and the soft sound of classical music coming through the radio.

I have to contain a chuckle; some things never change. Karl was always the type to put on piano music and go for a drive when he was angry, and now, that's exactly what he's doing. But I don't mind. I lean my head back on the head rest and close my eyes, letting myself get lost in the soft notes.

The ride continues like this for a while, and at one point, I almost doze off. But the memories of what happened at dinner continue to haunt me. Gianna's words were so pointed, so full of venom, and they cut deep. It breaks my heart that there are still people, particularly within my circle, who still think I'm a cheater.

With a sigh, I open my eyes to see that we're still nowhere near the mansion.

I clear my throat, finally deciding to break the silence. "Karl," I venture cautiously, "can you tell me where we're going now?"

He glances at me briefly, and there's a small smile playing on his lips. It's a bit surprising after how tense he just was, and it makes me wonder what he's up to. "We're almost there," he replies cryptically before returning his attention to the winding road.

I furrow my brow, my curiosity thoroughly piqued. I decide not to pry and just continue to watch the passing scenery while silently trying to decipher our destination. It's too dark now to see much, though, aside from tall trees on either side of the road. It would be eerie if it weren't for the fact that I'm with Karl.

Thankfully, it isn't long before Karl pulls into a familiar spot—an overlook on a hill that offers a breathtaking view of the town below. It's a place we used to escape to back when we were married, our own secret little sanctuary where we could come to hide from the demands and expectations of our hectic lives.

"Oh my god," I say with a gasp as he pulls in. "I forgot about this place."

Karl chuckles. "That's why I didn't want to tell you," he says. "I wanted it to be a surprise. Should we get out?"

I nod excitedly, even though I know it's cold out. "Yes, let's."

As I step out of the car, a gust of cold wind cuts through me, and I shiver in my dress. The panoramic view of the town twinkling with lights beneath the night sky is as enchanting as ever, though, and I wrap my arms around my shoulders as we approach the lookout railing.

"It's beautiful," I murmur as I look down at the scene that lies below me. The town is bright with twinkling lights; everyone is decorating for the holidays, and it's turned the scenery into a vibrant landscape of different colors.

"I still come here a lot, you know," Karl says, sticking his hands in his trouser pockets. "When I need to think."

I take a glance over at Karl, taking in his stoic appearance. His hair is ruffled ever so slightly by the breeze. But I shiver again as another wind blows through, and suddenly I wish I had brought a jacket instead of a simple cardigan.

Karl, noticing my discomfort, takes off his jacket without a word. Before I can protest, he turns toward me and drapes it around my shoulders. The warmth and scent of his jacket envelop me, offering some solace from the winter chill.

"You sure?" I murmur, meeting his gaze.

He simply nods. Then, still without a word, he puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close so we can look at the view together.

I stiffen for a brief moment, shocked by the gesture. But then I finally lean my head against Karl's shoulder, gazing out at the town. The tension from earlier begins to ebb away, replaced by a sense of tranquility that only this place can provide.

“You know, I really was so happy to see you and Ethan reunited,” I say softly, my voice carrying a hint of sadness in it. “But now, seeing you and your last surviving brother at odds breaks my heart. Letting Gianna drive a wedge between you two—it’s like we’re giving her exactly what she wants.”

Karl sighs, his arm still wrapped around me. “I know, Abby,” he murmurs. “Believe me, I never wanted this rift to happen.”

There’s another long silence as we look out at the landscape below us. The town looks so tiny from here, making all of our silly little lives and drama feel so insignificant. It seems as though Karl feels the same way, too, judging from what he says next.

“I’ll try to talk to him,” he says with a hint of determination in his voice. “Tomorrow, I’ll see if I can work this out with him. No one else; just me and Ethan.”

I look up at him and see that his brown eyes are filled with determination. That alone gives me hope. “I think you can do it,” I say gently. “You and Ethan always had the strongest bond. Don’t let it go to waste.”

Karl’s gaze softens as he meets my eyes. “I just want to say...” He pauses, licking his lips, and it’s at that moment that I can see his eyes flicker down to my own lips. “...Thank you for being here, Abby. I’m glad to have you by my side during times like this.”

My eyes widen slightly as I look up at Karl, taken aback by his candor. “Karl—”

But he cuts me off with a shake of his head, and reaches up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

And then, in that quiet moment under the vast expanse of the night sky, Karl leans down and kisses me. His lips are soft and gentle, and the kiss lingers for what feels like a beautiful eternity. The sensation of it sends a pleasant shiver down my spine and makes me feel warm at the same time.

With our lips still locked, I turn toward him and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer and deepening the kiss. My wolf stirs inside of me, pressuring me to take it even further, and for a moment I almost do.

Karl

The sun has barely made its morning ascent into the sky by the time I'm pulling into Ethan's gravel driveway.

The tudor-style facades of his mansion catch the golden early morning sunlight, and it's actually quite beautiful. A row of four stained glass windows on the front of the house, each depicting the same tree in a different season, absorb the golden sun and seem to glow with color.

One thing is for sure: Ethan has always had good taste when it comes to his home. I just wish he had the same good taste when it comes to women.

I can't help but let a sigh out as I pull up the driveway. Maybe it's a bit earlier than it should be, but after what happened at dinner last night, I felt as though I couldn't wait.

I've driven to his house as my very first task of the day, hoping to catch him before he's too wrapped up in his own duties. My goal is simple: talk to my brother, reason with him, and try to make him see the truth about Gianna.

As I walk up to Ethan's front door, my mind whirls with memories of what Abby said last night. She was right; I shouldn't place the blame entirely on my brother. He was in a coma for years and lost his entire biological family to the same disease that put him in the coma, and Gianna had all that time to sink her claws in.

There's no telling exactly what she said to him while he was in the coma, and there's certainly no telling what sort of lies she's whispering into his ear now. I'm certain that it was her idea when he offered to take over as Alpha, and I wouldn't be one bit surprised if she isn't spinning all sorts of webs of deceit now that she's his 'election manager'.

It just pisses me off. Whatever Gianna wants from me, she should have brought it up with me—not my sick brother. But it's too late now, and all I can do at this point is hope beyond hope that he'll see some sense.

Either way, I'm not sure how he'll react to what I have to say, but it needs to be said. I raise my hand to knock on the door, but before my knuckles can make contact with the wood, the door swings open.

And there she stands: Gianna, with that smug fucking smile plastered on her face as if she's been waiting for me.

"So she's living with him now?" my wolf, just as angry as I am, hissed inside of my head. "What a little leech."

"Ah, Karl," Gianna purrs, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "What a surprise to see you this morning after your stunt last night. Are you here to see Ethan?"

I nod, my jaw clenched. I need to keep calm, to show restraint. Reacting like I did last night, no matter how much Gianna irks me, won't help anything. "Yes, Gianna," I manage. "I need to talk to him. Is he here?"

She scoffs. "Perhaps he'll consider speaking with you," she says. "But don't hold your breath."

She steps aside to let me in, but her eyes never leave mine. As I enter the house, I can feel her gaze lingering on me, as if she's trying to size me up, to figure me out. It sends a shiver down my spine, but I push the discomfort aside.

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His eyes narrow, and he stands. He looks much taller now that he's recovered, and he no longer needs his cane. "Whatever you need to say, you can say it in front of my mate."

I sigh, straightening my jacket. "Alright, fine," I say curtly. "Gianna is manipulating you. She's a liar and a cheater, and she'll be your downfall."

Gianna's eyes flash with anger, but she remains silent, letting me speak.

Ethan's eyes narrow even further, and he takes a step closer to me. "We've been over this, brother," he says. "You've got it all twisted."



I take a step closer to him as well, lowering my voice to a tone that's barely above a growl. "Ethan, you've only heard her side of the story," I insist. "And you're refusing to hear what really happened. The 'cheating'? Gianna orchestrated all of that. She only ever wanted to become the Luna, and now she's using you for that goal."

Ethan frowns deeply, the lines in his face turning just a shade darker with the expression. "I believe you're mistaken, Karl," he hisses. "I know my own mate. She would never do that."

I can't believe how blind he's being, how easily he's taking her side. "Ethan, you have to believe me. She's not who she appears to be. I know her better than anyone, and I've seen the lengths she'll go to for power. You'd really side with her so willingly over your own brother?"

Gianna finally speaks up, her voice icy. "Karl, you're just bitter because things are rocky between you and Abby. You're trying to ruin our relationship out of jealousy," she says. "And besides..." She scoffs. "You're not Ethan's real brother."

I turn to face her, my anger bubbling up. "No one asked you," I hiss. "And you don't know the first damn thing about Abby, nor do you know the first thing about our family."

Ethan steps between us, his face flushed with anger. "That's enough, Karl," he says, his voice cold. "I won't forgive you so easily for trying to ruin my relationship. Leave. Now."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. My own brother, choosing Gianna over me. It's like he's under some sort of spell, and I can't break through to him.

Without another word, I turn on my heel and storm out, ignoring Gianna's triumphant smirk boring into the side of my head. It's a chilling feeling, and it confirms my worst fears—that my own brother, the man who I've looked up to for years, is being blindly manipulated by a woman he barely knows.

I walk away from Ethan's house, my anger and frustration simmering beneath the surface. Once I'm back in my car, the first thing I do is pull out my phone and dial Sarah with a new resolve in my mind.

"Sarah, we need to schedule the volunteering you suggested," I say as I drive away, leaving no room for preamble. "I want to boost my approval ratings as soon as possible."

## Chapter 385

Abby

The morning after the fated dinner, I find myself wandering through the house, my steps aimless as I try to occupy my mind and distract myself from the events of last night.

The tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife, and I can't help but replay the argument between Karl and his brother, Ethan, over and over again in my mind.

It's bizarre to me how easily Ethan is swayed by Gianna, but it only makes it more clear just how deep her treachery runs. I keep wondering just how much of this she had planned; was this what she planned from the beginning, or was manipulating Ethan a plan B for her?

I'm leaning toward the latter right now, but I wouldn't be surprised if this was what she had planned all along. It's obvious that all she ever had on her mind was becoming the Luna, although whether she intended on becoming Karl's Luna or his brother's Luna is still up for debate.

Either way, I can't help but feel a bit like an unwilling participant in all of this. All I ever wanted was happiness and peace in my life, and yet it seems as though someone always needs to throw a wrench into things.

My marriage with Karl was ruined, my restaurant might get shut down, and the Alpha gathering was a disaster—and all of it, every last bit of it, has always been pinned on me. Will it ever get to the point where I don't have to keep proving my innocence to everyone, or is this just my fate?

As I meander down the winding hallways, however, something catches my eye; the door to Karl's office is open, and he's not inside. Actually, he's been out all morning, which is strange. It's still very early, and I would normally expect to find him sitting behind his desk. But when I step into the doorway, his office is empty and the only light is that of the morning sun peeking through the half-closed blinds.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I decide to snoop around—well, not really snoop, but rather check it out.

He's changed the office a bit since I lived here, transforming it from a more modern look to something a bit more vintage. He switched out the glass-top desk for mahogany, and now bookshelves line the once-bare walls. I like it, though. It suits him better; it's more adult.

But as I look around, I can't help but notice something else. There's a small picture sitting on his desk. It's laying down flat, as though he pulled it out of somewhere and was looking at it, and forgot to put it away.

I can't resist the temptation to take a closer look, and when I do, my eyes widen slightly. It's a photo of Karl and me, taken back when we were married.

I still remember when we took that picture; it was during a weekend getaway to a cabin in the woods with Marcus and his wife. Karl and I are both smiling, wrapped in warm blankets, and the happiness in our eyes is undeniable.

I pick up the photo, feeling a rush of emotions as I look at it. It's been a long time since I've seen this picture, and it reminds me of a time when Karl and I were happy together, before everything fell apart.

My fingers trace the edges of the frame as I continue to stare at the image, lost in memories.

Just as I'm lost in thought, the door to the office creaks, and I jump, nearly dropping the photo. Karl steps inside, his expression a mixture of surprise and curiosity as he sees me holding the picture.

"Abby," he says, his voice soft, "I didn't expect to see you in here."

I quickly set the photo back down on his desk, feeling a flush of embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Karl. I didn't mean to intrude. I was just... wandering around."

He walks over to his desk and picks up the photo, his fingers brushing against the glass. "I took this out last night," he admits, his gaze fixed on the picture. "I've kept it in my desk drawer all this time."

I look at him, surprised by his confession. "Why?" I ask, unable to hide the curiosity in my voice.

Karl finally tears his gaze away from the photo and meets my eyes. “To remember,” he says simply. “To remember the good times, the moments when things were a little bit easier. It’s a reminder that keeps me going when things get rough.”

His words hang in the air, and I can see the vulnerability in his eyes. It’s a side of Karl that I don’t get to see very often, and it softens my heart. Despite our differences and the pain we’ve caused each other, there’s still a connection between us, a shared history that can’t be erased.

“I’m sorry for walking into your office like this,” I say, my voice hardly more than a whisper. “I didn’t mean to invade your privacy.”

Karl shakes his head, a faint smile on his lips. “It’s fine, Abby. I meant what I said when I told you that my home—our home—is always open to you. And that includes all of it.”

I nod, feeling a strange sense of relief. When we were married, Karl was always pretty secretive about his office. Maybe things really have changed. Maybe he’s growing up.

Karl breaks the silence, his voice taking on a more practical tone. “Abby, I wanted to ask if you’d like to join me for volunteering today.”

I blink in surprise at his unexpected suggestion. “Volunteering? You?”

Karl chuckles, a hint of amusement in his eyes. “Yes, me,” he replies. “Don’t look so surprised.”

I can’t help it; I’m taken aback by his willingness to volunteer, something that he never showed any interest in when we were married. But then, I realize that people change, and maybe he’s trying to make amends in his own way.

Chapter 386

Abby

After watching Karl leave, I feel like I’m still in a state of shock.

Karl was never the type to volunteer back when we were married. I can actually remember one specific instance when I volunteered for an event and asked Karl to come along.

His response was anything but enthusiastic. He flat out refused, claiming that volunteering was “below his pay grade” as an Alpha. He argued that he had more important things to do, like attending meetings and dealing with important paperwork.

But now, it seems as if Karl’s stance on volunteering has done a complete 180. It’s a little fishy if you ask me. I can’t help but wonder if he has some ulterior motives for this sudden change or if he’s genuinely evolving as a person.

As I’m lost in thought wandering downstairs to the kitchen, I suddenly run into Marcus. He’s carrying a box and seems to be on his way out of the house.

“Hey, Abby,” he says as he passes. “Need anything?”

I greet him with a slight smile. “No,” I reply, “But... what’s going on with Karl? Why is he volunteering all of a sudden?”

Marcus raises an eyebrow, as if he’s surprised by my question. “You haven’t heard?” he asks.

I shake my head, genuinely clueless. “No, I haven’t. What’s the deal?”

Marcus lets out a sigh, as if he’s about to reveal some big secret—and maybe even confirm my suspicions. “It’s all about the election,” he says. “Karl’s approval ratings took a dip, and he’s doing this volunteering thing to boost them up before the election is announced.”

I can;t help but feel a pang of disappointment. “That’s it?” I ask incredulously. “He’s doing it for his own gain?”

Marcus nods, his expression solemn. “Yeah, it’s a political move,” he admits. “He wants to show the pack that he’s involved in the community and cares about their needs.”

I can't hide my annoyance. I guess I knew all along, but it still stings a bit. "But volunteering should be about genuinely wanting to help others, not just for the sake of your own image," I say. "It feels so... insincere."

Marcus shrugs, as if he's resigned to the situation. "The world of politics is a beast unto itself, Abby. Sometimes you have to play by the rules, even if you don't like them."

As Marcus walks away, leaving me to think about the situation, I can't deny the disappointment I feel.

But, there's nothing I can do about it now. Karl has made up his mind, and he's got an election to win. I won't get in the way of that. And so, with a soft sigh, I make my way to the kitchen where Elsie is already standing by the counter. She's got the standing mixer running with a huge lump of dough inside—this week's bread.

"Morning," I say as I approach. "Let me help."

As I help Elsie with the bread, though, my mind is still racing from the conversation I had with Marcus. I'm kneading the dough with my hands, but my movements are absent-minded, and I must have a faraway look on my face because Elsie finally breaks the silence.

"You look like you're miles away from here," Elsie observes, her eyes focused on her own task of peeling potatoes. "Is something bothering you?"

I pause for a moment, unsure if it's even worth bringing up. But Elsie is my friend, and I can't deny the need to vent just a little. "Yeah, Elsie," I finally admit with a sigh. "I am a bit bothered. It's about Karl."

Elsie nods understandingly. "I figured as much," she says. "Did something happen on your double date last night?"

I take a deep breath, trying to put my thoughts into words. "I mean, there was a whole thing with that, I say with a sigh, "but it's not just that... I guess I thought Karl was changing. But now, I find out he's volunteering for purely political reasons, to boost his approval ratings for the election. It feels so disingenuous."

Elsie continues kneading and shaping the dough into neat loaves and nods thoughtfully. "Abby, I understand how you feel," she says gently. "But sometimes, people change in ways that may not be immediately obvious. Karl has come a long way over the years, especially in the past few months."

I look at her, curious. "How can you tell?"

"You remember how mean he used to be as a boss," she says. "He would yell at the servants and staff, and it wasn't always a pleasant environment to work in. But lately, he's been treating everyone fairly. He doesn't yell anymore, and he listens to our concerns. He's trying to be a better leader."

I can't help but sigh a little. Elsie is right; I've been able to see the differences firsthand. Karl's temper has dwindled, and he's a much better listener now.

"But is that really enough?" I ask.

Elsie chuckles. "Maybe it's not enough," she says. "But nobody is perfect. We all have our flaws and our moments of selfishness. But it's important to acknowledge when someone is trying to improve, don't you think?"

I nod, starting to realize that she might be onto something. I recall the cook-off; it wasn't something he had to do, but he did it because he knew it meant a lot to me.

He even spent months working in my restaurant when I was short-staffed. None of that was for political gain; it was because he genuinely wanted to help me.

I feel a twinge of guilt for sitting here and judging him now. Maybe I should give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, people change, and I've seen Karl change in many ways since our divorce.

"Yeah, I guess you're right, Elsie," I concede with a small smile. "I guess I should cut him some slack. After all, I'm far from perfect myself."

Chapter 387

Abby

After a while of walking to town through the thin blanket of snow that has settled over the landscape from last night, I arrive at the food drive, wearing my disguise—a baseball hat, sunglasses, and a blue surgical mask.

Actually, it's more so that the sound of the food and clothing drive reaches me before I actually reach it; it's clear to me that the community center is bustling with people, and I can hear the sounds of voices, music, and vehicles.

Up ahead, there are two lines: one filled with cars, which are pulling up to a station where workers are handing bags of clothes and boxes of food through the windows, and one where the patrons are lined up on foot.

I adjust my mask on my face and stand up on my tiptoes to see if I can spot Karl, but that's easier said than done.

Despite Karl's height, the parking lot is filled to the brim and I can barely make out the bright orange shirts of the workers. Honestly, it's surprising. I didn't expect there to be this many people here.

"Hey," a voice says, causing me to turn. "You here for the drive, or are you here to work?"

I spin around to see a young man, maybe in his late teens, looking at me. He's got one of the orange t-shirts that say "staff" on the front worn on his thin frame, and he's holding a clipboard in his hands.

"I'm here to work, actually," I say.

The boy nods and hands me my own orange t-shirt from a box that he's got next to his feet. "Just find a spot wherever," he says. "Job's simple: everyone gets one box of food and one box of clothes. The clothes are labeled 'kids' and 'adults', so as long as you can read, you'll be fine."

I offer him a smile as I take the t-shirt and slip it on over my head. It's about three sizes too big for me, so it goes on easily over my disguise.



As I make my way through the crowd, I finally spot Karl. He's in the thick of it, working tirelessly to help those in need.

My heart warms at the sight of him, so different from the man I used to know, the Alpha who once claimed that volunteering was 'below his pay grade.'

Suddenly, I realize that I can't stay mad at him as I watch him interact with an elderly woman. He's got a warm smile on his face, and she's laughing at something he's saying. The woman then walks away, and Karl turns away to sort through a box.

I come up behind him and tap him on the shoulder. He turns, and after squinting his eyes at me for a moment, his expression changes to a mixture of surprise and excitement when he realizes that it's me.

"Abby," he says, a hint of disbelief in his voice. "I thought you weren't gonna come."

I tilt my head and give him a playful grin even though he can't see it. "Changed my mind," I reply, my voice muffled by the mask.

Karl chuckles and shakes his head. "You really are something, you know that?"

I lower my sunglasses just enough for him to see my raised eyebrow. "Is that a compliment or an insult?"

He laughs again. "Definitely a compliment," he says. "But Abby, if you help me here, people might start thinking you're the Luna again, and it could be a hassle, just like you said."

"Don't worry, I've got my disguise on," I say, tapping my baseball hat. "I learned a thing or two from someone who used to go incognito all the time for me."

Karl raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. "Oh, did you now? Well, in that case, what's your fake name for today, Miss Incognito?"

I give it a moment of thought, then offer a playful suggestion. "How about... Jane?"

Karl chuckles. "Very creative, Jane Doe," he says. "Nice to meet you."

With that, Karl shows me the ropes. Just like the kid at the front of the parking lot said, it's obscenely simple: there are boxes of food and bags of clothes, each one clearly labeled. All I need to do is pay attention to who's next in line, and give them the appropriate clothes.

"Unfortunately, they don't really get a say on the clothes," Karl says as he explains it to me. "But they can always re-donate stuff they don't want. Oh, and if someone is looking for baby stuff, direct them over there."

As he speaks, he points over to the front door of the community center, where there's a booth just for baby things: clothes, toys, blankets, formula, anything like that. I make a mental note to remember that, and return to my task at hand.

The day flies by faster than I realize, what with how many people are coming and going. However, I can't help but notice how Karl interacts with the recipients.

He's not just handing out food; he's actually taking the time to chat with them, ask about their families, and offer a kind word or two. It seems as though he really cares, and I hope that's really the case and it's not just for publicity.

At one point, after a family of three passes by and thanks Alpha Karl for his contributions, there's a lull in activity.

I glance over at Karl, nudging him with my elbow to get his attention. "You've surprised me today," I say.

He looks at me, a hint of shock in his eyes. "Oh? Have I?"

I nod. "Yeah, you have. You never would've done something like this in the past. And you've got a way with people, I'll give you that."

Chapter 388

Abby

Our feet are sore as we make our way down the quaint market street, but my entire body feels loose and relaxed after the full day of hard work.

It seems as though the first snow yesterday has led everyone to get into the holiday spirit, and the stores are all bursting with people excitedly doing their gift shopping. The storefronts are all festively decorated with vibrant green wreaths and bright red ribbons, and people in equally festive outfits are standing on street corners ringing donation bells.

“I should do some gift shopping while I’m here,” I say, holding my warm cup of hot apple cider between my hands as we walk.

I stop and peer into a chocolate shop window, looking at all of the tantalizing sweets on display. There’s a couple with a little toddler inside, and the toddler is excitedly pointing his tiny little finger at a chocolate rabbit in the case.

“That actually reminds me,” Karl says, following my gaze, “I haven’t even thought about what I’ll be getting for people this year. I was thinking I should treat the staff at home to something nice.”

As he speaks, it reminds me of what Elsie had said earlier. It’s yet another reminder that maybe, just maybe, Karl has changed from the gruff and cold Alpha I used to know into someone who’s a bit warmer and more open.

Karl and I continue walking side by side, weaving our way through the crowds. I steal a quick glance at him as we walk, his profile illuminated by the warm glow of the street lamps.

He looks content, relaxed even, which is a rare sight for the Alpha I used to know. I find myself wanting to break the comfortable silence that has settled between us.

“So, why did you change your mind, Karl?” I finally ask, my voice soft but curious.

He turns to look at me, his expression thoughtful. "Change my mind about what?" he replies, feigning innocence.

I raise an eyebrow, knowing he's just playing coy. "About volunteering," I say, not letting him off the hook so easily. "I thought it was 'below your pay grade', wasn't it?"

Karl lets out a sigh. "I know I said that all those years ago," he says quietly. "And honestly, the only reason why I volunteered today was for publicity before the election."

I wait patiently for him to continue, knowing that he likely had a change of heart throughout the day.

He takes a sip of his cider before continuing. "But today, I think I realized that it was actually kind of... fun," he admits. "Helping people, making a difference in their lives, even if it's in a small way. It felt... fulfilling, to say the least."

"It's not just about approval ratings or good press," I say. "It's about making a difference and connecting with your community. And it seems like you realized that today."

He nods. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Who told you, by the way? About the approval ratings?"

I can't help but smirk. "Marcus."

"Always Marcus," Karl says, rolling his eyes although I can tell there's no real heat in it.

We continue our walk, passing by shops filled with holiday shoppers searching for the perfect gifts. As we approach a cute boutique with a display of baby clothes in the window, though, it makes my heart ache just a little.

I stop in my tracks, my gaze fixed on a tiny pair of shoes in the window. They're a bright red color, perfect for winter. And they're, so, so unbelievably small. I'm instantly transported back to the Alpha gathering, when I saw those two adorable kids.

In a way, I'm glad that Karl and I never had kids together because of the divorce, but I do still wish we had. Finding out that I might not be able to have kids of my own was so heartbreaking.

Karl notices my change in demeanor and turns to me with concern in his eyes. "Abby, is something wrong?"

I sigh, my gaze still fixed on the baby clothes. "It's just that," I start, my voice wavering slightly, "seeing those baby clothes reminds me of the Alpha gathering and all those adorable kids."

Karl's expression softens, and he places a comforting hand on my shoulder. "I can tell it's been on your mind," he says gently.

I nod, a lump forming in my throat. "Karl, what if... what if I really can never have kids of my own?" I finally admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

For a while, Karl says nothing. We just stare into the shop window, our faint reflections staring back at us. I'm not sure which we're really looking at: the shoes, or the two of us standing side-by-side.

"Do you ever wish we had kids?" he suddenly asks, the words coming out so fast it seems as though he didn't intend to say them.

I'm a bit taken aback by his sudden candor. My lip quivers a bit, and suddenly, I'm glad for the mask covering half of my face. But my sunglasses have been off for a while now, and now I can see my eyes in my reflection, and I can see how sad I look beneath my facade of strength.

"I..." I stammer, unsure of what to say.

Karl suddenly shakes his head. "That was rude of me," he says, turning away. "I shouldn't have said that."

He turns to continue walking, but without really meaning to, my hand involuntarily shoots out and grabs his wrist. He pauses and turns back to look at me.

“It wasn’t rude,” I find myself saying. I drop my hand back to my side and avert my gaze to the ground so I don’t have to look into his brown eyes. “I, um... I guess I do wish we did, sometimes,” I murmur. “But... With the divorce...”

Chapter 389

Abby

“Shall we?” Karl asks, nodding his head toward the sidewalk.

I nod, and follow him away from the shop, away from the little shoes that warm my heart and break it at the same time. Our feet continue to carry us along the bustling streets of the holiday market, the scent of hot apple cider still wafting through the air.

The sight of those adorable little shoes in the shop window and the sad implications behind them still lingers in the back of my head, but I try to focus instead on the festive atmosphere and the taste of the hot apple cider on my tongue.

Karl must sense my quiet contemplation because he nudges me gently with his elbow as we walk. “Hey, you seem lost in thought. Something on your mind?”

I offer a small smile, appreciating his concern but not wanting to share my true thoughts: thoughts that maybe, just maybe, I do wish we could have had a baby together, even to this day. “I’m fine,” I say, holding up my cup of hot apple cider. “Just enjoying the walk.”

Karl’s gaze softens, and I can tell that he knows I’m lying. But he doesn’t press the issue any further, and we continue walking in silence.

I return his gaze, and we continue walking until we stumble upon a charming Christmas shop. Its large display window is filled with an array of sparkling ornaments and twinkling lights. I smile a bit beneath my mask as we pass by, looking at all of the little kids running around excitedly.

Karl’s eyes light up with excitement too, and he tugs gently at my arm. “Abby, come on. Let’s go inside.”

As we step inside, the soft sound of holiday music fills the air. There must be a candle burning nearby, because everything smells like peppermint and cinnamon.

“This place is new,” Karl says as we walk around and look at all of the ornaments.

I nod. “I’ve noticed that there are a lot of new shops around here. The town seems to be bustling more than usual.”

In response, Karl lets out a slight chuckle and runs his hand through his hair. “Yeah,” he admits, “that’s true. I was finally able to allocate some funding to tourism in this town. It’s been really helpful.”

We continue browsing, looking at all of the decorations and trinkets. At one point, someone stops Karl—an older man and woman—and the man shakes his hand. I’m standing a little ways away, so I can’t hear what’s said, but the man seems to be applauding Karl.

It definitely seems that, despite Karl’s approval ratings supposedly taking a dip, people still like him. As they should; he’s a good Alpha, albeit a little misguided sometimes.

As we round a corner, we stumble upon a scene that brings a smile to both of our faces. A small area has been set up with a cozy armchair, a backdrop of a snowy winter wonderland, and, of course, Santa Claus himself.

A line of excited children and their parents snakes around, waiting for their turn to sit on Santa’s lap and share their Christmas wishes. Karl chuckles as he watches the adorable spectacle. “Look at those kids. They’re so excited to meet Santa.”

I follow his gaze, a chuckle escaping my lips. “Well... most of them,” I say, pointing to a little boy who’s currently bawling his eyes out on Santa’s lap while his mother tries to take a picture.

Suddenly, Karl gets a mischievous glint in his eye, and he turns to me with a sly grin. “Abby, how about we join in on the fun? Let’s take a picture with Santa.”

I blink in surprise, not expecting his suggestion. “Are you serious?” I ask with a laugh. “This is for kids!”

He nods, his grin only widening. “Aww, c’mon,” he presses. “It’s not just for kids. And besides, it’ll be fun.”

It’s shocking for Karl of all people to suggest something like this, but I can’t deny his enthusiasm. “Alright,” I finally agree with a chuckle. “But I’m keeping my Jane Doe disguise on.”

“Deal,” Karl says with a laugh of his own. “Let’s get in line.”

We join the queue of excited children and their families, blending in with the crowd as best we can. Even though I’m wearing a facade of adultlike indifference, I can’t help but feel a sense of childlike excitement building up inside of me as we inch closer to Santa’s chair.

Finally, it’s our turn, and we step up to Santa Claus, who greets us with a hearty laugh. “Ho, ho, ho! Well, look who we have here. It’s Alpha Karl and...?” Santa’s eyes fall on me, and he gives me a quizzical look.

“This is my elf,” Karl says, eliciting a punch in the arm from me. He smirks and rubs the spot where I punched him before he turns back to the man playing as Santa. “Jane the Elf.”

Santa smirks beneath his own fake beard. “Well then,” he says, “have you two been naughty or nice this year?”

Karl and I exchange amused glances, and I reply with a grin, “We’ve been mostly nice, Santa.”

Santa chuckles warmly and motions for us to sit on his lap. I take a seat, and Karl stands beside me, slinging his arm around my shoulder playfully.

As we pose for the photo, I can’t help but smile beneath my mask. It’s times like this that reminds me that Karl and I did share some good times together, and maybe we can create even more.

After the photo is taken, we receive a small printout of our picture with Santa. I glance at it, unable to contain my laughter at the sight of myself in my disguise, sitting on Santa’s lap like a big kid.



Karl, seeing my laughter, snatches the photo from my hands as we walk away and snorts. "This one will go down in the history books," he says. "I've never taken a picture with Santa and Jane Doe all at once."

I playfully roll my eyes as I slip my mask down momentarily to take the last sip of my apple cider, which has almost gone cold. I toss the cardboard cup into a trash can as we stroll out of the Christmas shop.

Chapter 390

Abby

It's been a couple more days since Karl and I spent that surprisingly enjoyable day at the food drive and the subsequent stroll through the holiday market.

The memories of our time together linger in my mind, a mix of warmth and nostalgia. I'm grateful for the brief moments of connection, but a part of me wonders how long this charade can continue.

Today, I'm sitting in my bedroom. I just had lunch, and I've retreated to my room for some privacy. Some of the staff here are still giving me strange looks and referring to me as "Luna" despite my attempts to explain the situation, but I've given up at this point.

Besides, I figure that I'll likely be heading home soon and that there's no point in trying to change their minds. I haven't heard from Officer Martinez yet, but I have a good feeling; although, I've been too scared to look into the news yet, so I'm not sure how the press situation is back in the city.

But then, just as I'm getting engrossed in a book, my phone buzzes on the bedside table. Startled, I reach for it and see Chloe's name flashing on the screen.

I take a deep breath, considering whether or not to answer. She's definitely going to ask where I am, and I'm not so sure if I want to tell her that I'm hiding in my ex-husband's house.

I hesitate for a moment before swiping to answer the call. "Hey, Chloe," I say, trying to sound as cheerful as possible.

“Abby!” Chloe’s voice sounds a little concerned. “I haven’t heard from you. How’s everything going over there? The news is still crazy.”

“I’m fine,” I say as nonchalantly as possible. “I’m just laying low, not going out... I haven’t looked at the news.”

There’s a brief pause on the other end of the line. “That’s probably a good call,” she says, seemingly buying my excuse. “Things are still a little crazy. I thought about coming over—”

“No!” I say, maybe a little more quickly than I should. I clear my throat, trying to steady my voice. “I mean... It’s just not a good idea, Chloe,” I say. “It’s best if I just stay inside and don’t take any visitors. But really, I’m fine.”

Chloe, seemingly oblivious to my implications, simply sighs. “Yeah, I feel you,” she says.

With that, the two of us launch into a discussion about everything. I’ve been curious about what’s going on with the staff from the restaurant, but am relieved to find out that everyone is fine, just as they were before.

It’s a relief, although if my restaurant winds up opening again, I’m sure I’ll be losing a good chunk of my front-of-house staff. Not that I blame them. I’m just glad that people seem to be finding other work.

Still, it’s difficult for me to believe that it’s only been a little under three weeks since everything happened. It feels like months.

“So, Abby,” Chloe says, her tone shifting to a more serious note, “have you thought about what’s next? I mean, with everything going on...”

I pause, my heart sinking a little. I can’t confide in Chloe about Karl’s involvement in my life right now, and besides, I don’t even know what my next steps are. “I’m... just taking it one step at a time,” I reply evasively. “No concrete plans yet. But I’ll figure it out.”

Chloe lets out a sympathetic sigh. "I can't even imagine how tough this must be for you," she says. "But remember, you have people who care about you, Abby. You're not alone in this."

"I know," I say, feeling a pang of guilt for not being totally honest with her. "Thanks, Chloe."

"And don't you dare shut yourself out," she says. "Even if we can't see each other, you can still call me. Don't make me worry about you."

I can't help but chuckle. "I guess I haven't been the best communicator," I say.

"No, you haven't," Chloe adds with a chuckle of her own. "But it's okay. We still love you..."

As our conversation continues, I realize how nice it is to hear my friend's voice. Between the stress of what's going on at home, the stress of everything that's also going on here, and Karl being busy most of the day, I feel rather lonely.

It's nice to have Elsie around, but she's busy, too. I feel like a layabout, a bum with nothing better to do than bother people while they're trying to work.

Eventually, we say our goodbyes, and I promise to keep in touch. But as I end the call, a heavy feeling settles in my chest. How much longer can I keep up this charade?

How many more lies will I have to tell in order to protect the strange relationship that's budding between me and my ex-husband?

After ending my call with Chloe, I set my phone down on the bedside table and take a moment to collect my thoughts. I don't think I can focus on my book anymore, so I decide to leave my room and head downstairs.

The cheerful sounds of laughter and the familiar hum of activity reach my ears as I descend the grand staircase. It's then that I notice some of the servants bustling around, carrying boxes of Christmas decorations and stringing lights along the banisters.

A wave of nostalgia washes over me as I step into the living room, where Marcus is helping one of the butlers put up a tall Christmas tree.

Without hesitation, I approach Marcus and the butlers.

“Need a hand?” I ask.

Marcus looks up and shoots me a grin. “We could always use more hands,” he says.

I roll up my sleeves and join in, helping to erect the prickly tree. It’s a real tree—I always refused to settle for fake ones when I lived here, and it’s clear that the tradition has continued—and it smells like sap and pine.

“Feels a bit early for all of this,” I say to Marcus as we get the tree settled into its stand and anchor it to the wall. “It’s only the first of December.”