

## **Kickass 421**

### Chapter 421

Abby

Karl's arm loops around my waist, and he draws me closer, his touch sending a pleasant shiver down my spine.

"Stay by my side tonight," he says. "That's all I ask; don't leave me."

My heart skips a beat, and a rosy blush tints my cheeks. After our romp in the snow, I can't say no right now. My wolf probably wouldn't let me, anyway. "I will," I say quietly. "Just for tonight."

Karl smiles softly and then begins leading me through the throng of people. The air in here feels thicker now after being out in the cold woods, but it isn't an entirely unwelcome change.

The memory of our exhilarating romp in the woods still lingers in my thoughts, leaving me with a heady mix of emotions. I can still feel his body tangled with mine, can still feel the sensation of his lips, cold from the winter air, against my skin. Out there, it was like a different world.

Out there, our breaths mixed in the air above us, our soft moans filling the silent woods.

"Karl," I had murmured as his thick cock had worked its way into me, filling me to the brim. I can still hear the sounds of his soft grunts above me. I can still feel his hands on my throat, his fingers brushing my snow swept hair out of the way so he could kiss me as he moved on top of me.

And once again, I'm reminded of how things were before, back when things were good. Back when our passion for each other was unparalleled and when we couldn't keep our hands off of each other.

I know that, if we get back together, it will be like that once again.

I steal a glance at Karl as we navigate the lively masquerade party, wondering what it would be like if I allowed myself to fully embrace this connection between us. Could I picture myself living in this grand house, indulging in the comforts of his love and support?

The notion of him funding a new restaurant for me here teases my imagination as well, whispering promises of a shared future. Part of me almost wants to accept. It could be a new beginning—the second new beginning I’ve experienced, rather.

And yet, guilt tugs at the edges of my conscience.

My restaurant in the city, despite the recent food poisoning scandal, has been flourishing. I hold firm to my belief that the true culprit will be exposed, and my business will reclaim its former glory.

I can’t abandon my loyal patrons and dedicated employees who rely on me, especially not during their time of need.

No, I can’t come back here. There’s no more room for ‘new beginnings’; and beside, this wouldn’t be a new beginning. It would be going back to the way things were before, back to the old version of Abby.

And I don’t have the time for the old version of Abby. She’s gone now, a ghost. And if this can’t work with the new version of both of us, then I’m not sure if I want to give it a chance at all, despite how glorious it felt to be with Karl in the snow.

Karl, observant as ever, almost seems to somehow detect my distant thoughts. He’s always been too intuitive for his own good; or maybe I just have a face that can’t hide any emotion, no matter how hard I try.

Chapter 422

But as we’re sipping quietly, a sudden growl rumbles from my stomach. My eyes widen, and I place my hand over my belly, shooting Karl an apologetic look.

“Hungry?” Karl asks with a laugh.

I can’t help but blush a bit. “I haven’t eaten since breakfast,” I admit quietly. “And after earlier...”

“Say no more.” Karl grins and takes my hand, leading me away. I sip my champagne some more as I follow him, just grateful for the feeling of the alcohol and the way it makes my mind fuzzy around the edges, causing my racing thoughts to start to go quiet for once.

Finally, after weaving through the thick crowd, we make our way to the hors d’oeuvres table. It seems as though the food has been popular tonight, because many of the plates are beginning to go empty.

Thankfully, Karl and I carefully prepared two rounds of everything earlier, which means that there will be enough food to last the whole night; but I’m just glad to see everyone enjoying my food after the Alpha party debacle.

“Enjoy the fruits of your labor,” Karl says, handing me a plate. “You were the one who made all of this delicious food happen.”

“Yeah,” I say, already loading my plate with food, “and you helped.”

Karl shrugs. “I was there for... moral support,” he says.

“No, Karl,” I say with a laugh. “You were a huge help. A real sous chef.”

Karl opens his mouth to say something, but before he can, his eyes widen slightly. “Act natural,” he says quietly. And before I can ask what the hell he’s talking about, I hear it.

“Hello, Karl. Abby.”

It’s Ethan. I turn around to see Ethan and Gianna standing there, both dressed with their masks covering their faces. My eyes flit over to Karl, who’s the perfect picture of poise.

“Ethan, Gianna,” he says. “I hope you’re enjoying the party.”

Ethan nods. "I know I didn't receive an invitation, but everyone has been talking about this party," he says. "We had to see what it was all about."

As Ethan speaks, Gianna is silent, but her eyes speak volumes behind her mask. Her gaze flickers down to the hem of my dress, which is still slightly damp from rolling around in the woods with Karl. She gives me a smirk, as if she knows what I've been up to tonight. And I can feel her judging me.

For a moment, I almost expect Karl to tell his brother and Gianna to leave. But to my astonishment, Karl handles the situation with remarkable grace and composure. His welcoming words, devoid of resentment or hostility, take me by surprise.

"No need for an invitation," he assures them, a warm smile on his lips. "This is a gathering for the entire pack. Please, enjoy the party. And the food."

"Who prepared the food?" Gianna asks, eyeing the plate of hors d'oeuvres in my hand.

"Abby, of course," Karl proudly announces.

As Karl speaks, Gianna's face drains of color. There's a long silence between us; then, she hurriedly ushers Ethan away without another word.

"What was that about?" I whisper, turning to face Karl. "They just ran off."

Karl's smile has faded now that they're gone, but he shakes his head. "Ignore them," he murmurs. "They're not worth it."

Chapter 423

Abby

My mask is laying on the floor, staring up at me in an almost mocking fashion. All around me, people are murmuring my name.

"Abby?"

“Is that really her?”

“What is she doing here?”

This wasn't what I planned. I can't be seen here, not so soon after the Alpha party debacle. And if people find out that I was the mystery woman dancing with the Alpha, then they'll just start to jump to conclusions more than they already have.

I quickly stoop down, my heart pounding in my chest as I gather the broken pieces of my plate and mask from the floor. I figure that maybe, if I just keep my head down, people will move on and ignore me.

I keep my head down, avoiding the curious and judgmental stares of the pack members. This is the last thing I need right now. I wanted to keep a low profile, enjoy the party, and forget about the mess I left behind in the city.

But then Karl is beside me, his hands helping me pick up the scattered fragments. Before I can whisper a warning to him to keep his distance, the room starts buzzing with hushed whispers, and I can feel the weight of countless eyes on the both of us.

“Abby,” Karl says softly, concern etched on his face as he helps me collect the pieces. “Are you—”

“You shouldn't be here,” I hiss under my breath, shooting him a worried glance. “People will think...”

Karl seems to understand the implications now, but it's already too late.

Now that people see the two of us together, their murmurs are growing in intensity, their curiosity bubbling to the surface. Despite the sound of the soft music notes still playing, the people around us are hushed and taken aback, and the feeling is spreading across the room.

“Alpha Karl and Abby?”

“The Luna and the Alpha back together?”

“Just as we suspected.”

“It’s about time.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment as my gaze meets Karl’s. I manage to slip my mask back on, but it’s too late. It’s like putting a band-aid over a gaping wound. One of the servants comes over to help with the mess, and I slowly stand on two shaky legs, looking around at the sea of faces all around us.

I’m met with a mixture of shock and elation. The murmurs are growing in volume. Nearby, a woman claps her hands together, giving both Karl and me an excited look through her mask.

“Oh, how exciting!” she exclaims, and I recognize that voice immediately despite the mask; it’s one of the gossips that I ran into the other day, Susan. “The Alpha and the Luna are back together, just like I thought!”

Her raised voice catches more attention, and the murmurs turn into lively chatter. The crowd seems to press around us, moving close to get a better look. I exchange a worried glance with Karl; his eyes are ever so slightly narrowed, and his hands are clenching and unclenching at his sides. I can tell he’s thinking. I want to reach out to him, but I know I shouldn’t. It’ll just make matters worse.

“Oh, this is so lovely!” another voice calls out just as loudly as Susan. “This is so wonderful! Are you two getting married soon?”

“What a surprise!”

“I never expected that this masquerade would turn into an engagement party!”

With one last glance at Karl, who is at just as much of a loss for words as I am, I pick up my skirt and turn to leave. I begin to scurry away, thinking to myself that an escape to a private room might be the best plan of action right now, but the crowd doesn’t part for me.

And not everyone shares the same enthusiasm about Karl and me.

Angry murmurs rise from the crowd, fueled by memories of the Alpha gathering debacle and the food poisoning scandal that followed.

“The Alpha is getting back with her?” one voice calls out, just as loudly as the others. “The fraud who ruined the Alpha gathering and got all of those poor people sick?”

“This is a disaster! Our Alpha shouldn’t be mingling with a criminal!”

“How much do you want to bet that she and her little restaurant will get off scot-free thanks to Alpha Karl’s help?”

“Abby is a loser! She has no right being our Luna after what she did!”

Their voices cut deep, and I still can’t get out. Hot tears begin to prick at the backs of my eyes. No matter where I turn, the crowd just seems to close in even more, suffocating me with a combination of excitement and scrutiny.

And then, finally, Karl’s voice cuts through the mounting tension. “Silence!” he booms, his voice echoing across the room.

The room instantly falls completely and utterly silent. I swallow, turning slowly to face him; he’s standing in the center of the clearing now, his mask in his hands, his eyes stern as he addresses the crowd.

“No need to gossip,” he says, his tone measured and clear. “Return to the party, everyone. Please, enjoy the good food, drinks, and music.”

I let out a soft sigh of relief, thankful for Karl’s Alpha demeanor. But the damage has already been done; and then, to make it worse, another voice calls out from the crowd. I can’t see the face, but I recognize that voice in a heartbeat.

It's Gianna.

"You mean the food that Abby prepared?"

The room somehow seems to fall even more silent, and I can feel every pair of eyes on me. Panic surges inside of me, and I swallow hard, my hands trembling as I clench them into fists at my sides.

Chapter 424

Abby

An arm loops around my waist, pulling me close as Karl's scent envelops me. I bury my face in his chest to protect myself against the scrutiny, and as tears stream down my face, I wonder how I'll ever be able to recover from this.

But then Karl's voice reverberates through the room, a commanding presence that silences the chaos around us. It's the voice of an Alpha, and every pair of eyes turns to him in an instant, obedient to his command.

"Everyone, ENOUGH!"

The room falls into an immediate hush once more. The chaos stops, and people freeze in their tracks, their voices falling silent. Everyone turns to look at us, and as I lift my gaze to look up at Karl, I can see what feels like millions of eyes staring at me.

Karl then shifts his attention to me, his strong arms still holding me close. His warm breath brushes my ear as he whispers, "I'm going to fix everything, Abby. Trust me."

I swallow as I look up at him. The determination in his gaze and the softness in his voice are a reassurance, but I'm not sure if it's enough.

The damage has already been done; people think I'm a fraud, a criminal, a good-for-nothing phony chef who intentionally poisoned the Alpha party and now intentionally poisoned this masquerade. I'm not sure if there's anything that Karl could possibly do to fix this mess.



Maybe I should have just stayed at home in the city after all.

Then, Karl turns his attention to the gathered pack members, his voice clear and unwavering as he speaks.

“I have an announcement,” he says, his voice clear and even. “And you all will listen instead of acting like a bunch of sheep, running around and falling victim to mass hysteria.”

A murmur makes its way through the crowd at his words. People seem to be intrigued, and maybe even a little embarrassed by their actions just now.

“The food here is perfectly safe to eat,” he continues. “And what happened at the Alpha party is under investigation. It appears that someone intentionally poisoned the food, and Abby was wrongfully framed.”

As Karl speaks, I feel a surge of gratitude and admiration for his unwavering support, but my relief is short-lived. Murmurs ripple through the crowd, and a feeling of skepticism fills the room.

“Is he just trying to save face?”

“What if he’s involved in this too?”

“They should share more details if they want us to believe them.”

I feel myself cringe at their words—of course they don’t believe him. How could they? It feels as though the entire world thinks that I poisoned the Alpha party, and it’s been two weeks of media hell. The doubt has not only taken root, but it has grown into an enormous oak tree.

But then, Karl’s hand moves over his heart. My eyes widen ever so slightly as I look at him, wondering what he’s doing.

“On my Alpha Honor,” he says, “you can trust me.”

The room falls silent once more, but only for a moment before the doubt continues growing louder and more persistent.

Chapter 425

Karl doesn't falter. Instead, he doubles down, his actions taking a surprising turn. Releasing his grip on my waist, he strides over to a discarded plate that's sitting on a table, where a bread roll lays untouched.

"Karl, what are you doing?" I hiss, following him.

But Karl doesn't respond. Instead, he grabs the bread roll and takes a big bite out of it, his hand still firmly over his heart as he chews and swallows. The room ripples with another wave of nervous murmurs, and I can feel my face turn a bright shade of beet red.

"If I get sick from this," he finally declares once he's swallowed, his voice carrying through the room, "then everyone will know. And if I fall ill, I will reveal the truth, no matter what it is. My Alpha honor is at stake."

A hush falls over the crowd, and the atmosphere becomes charged with the weight of Karl's words. The solemnity of making a pledge on his Alpha Honor is not taken lightly among the pack members.

My heart races faster than ever. "Karl, you don't have to do this," I whisper, reaching out to grab his arm. "You don't have to."

But he just gives me a subtle wink, a glint of confidence in his eyes. He then addresses the crowd once more, reaffirming his belief in me.

"Abby is an amazing chef. She would never make people sick, especially not on purpose. None of this was her fault."

I feel frozen to my spot, utterly shocked by Karl's unwavering support. I'm not sure whether I should be flattered or worried—maybe both.

The murmurs continue, but this time, they're filled with uncertainty. Saying something on one's Alpha Honor is no laughing matter, and everyone present knows the gravity of Karl's promise.

But then Karl speaks again. It seems as though this isn't over. "And on that matter," he says, "I have another announcement tonight."

My heart skips a beat, and I look at him with wide eyes, wondering what he's about to reveal.

"Your suspicions were true," he continues, and the crowd seems to close in, their curiosity piqued. I have a sinking feeling about where this is headed, and it terrifies me.

Karl's voice carries across the room as he makes a shocking announcement. "Abby and I are back together, and I intend to make her my wife again. In fact, we plan on starting a family soon."

The room falls into an astonished silence, and my breath catches in my throat. How could he announce something so untrue and unexpected? Not only that we're back together, but also planning to start a family?

Karl turns to me, his hand seeking mine, and I can feel the eyes of the entire pack on us. He looks at me with a glint in his eyes, one that I can't quite decipher this time. But then it happens; the situation takes an even worse turn.

He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me close; and before I can stop him, he's kissing me. The crowd murmurs with excitement, but all I can hear is the beating of my own heart...

And Karl's voice in my mind.

"I'll explain everything later."

Chapter 426

Abby

I bolt away from the party and up the stairs, my heart pounding in my chest. Tears stream down my cheeks as I fumble to find my room key.

I need to get away from that party, away from the chaos, away from Karl's shocking announcement. Finally, I find the key and jam it into the lock, twisting it with shaking hands until the door clicks shut behind me. I lean back against the door, taking shuddering breaths, my mind reeling from what has just happened.

It feels like a surreal nightmare, but I know it's all too real no matter how much I wish I could just wake up and find out that none of this ever happened.

I want to go back to this morning, redo everything; hell, right now I want to go back to months ago, back to when Karl first walked into my restaurant. I want to go back and send him away and tell him to never speak to me again.

I stumble to my bed and throw myself onto it, burying my face in the pillow as sobs wrack my body.

How could Karl make an announcement like that, especially in front of everyone?

It's a lie, a cruel twist of the knife in my already wounded heart. The idea of us being together again and starting a family, especially when I know I probably can't have kids, feels like a cruel joke.

Amidst my despair, my wolf's comforting presence whispers in my mind. "Karl must have had a reason for doing this, Abby," she says gently. "He always has a reason, doesn't he?"

I sniffle and wipe away my tears with the back of my hand. "I don't doubt that he had a reason," I murmur out loud under my breath, "but he should have talked to me first, gotten my point of view, my permission, before blatantly announcing it to everyone in our pack. Now, if I pull out of this, I'll just seem like the bad guy once again, and everyone will hate me."

"That's not true, Abby. They won't hate you."

I let out a bitter laugh. “You think so? First, they thought I was a cheater, then a washed-up ex-Luna turning myself into a servant by running a restaurant, and now they believe I’m the fraud who poisoned everyone at the Alpha gathering. If I tell them I’m not with Karl, they’ll see me as a no-good floozy who took advantage of him for his help and then dumped him.”

“They won’t think that,” my wolf says, but I can hear the uncertainty in her voice.

“Listen,” I mutter, “I’m well aware of the fickle nature of people, and I know how this will end. I’m trapped, and it’s all Karl’s fault. I mean, how could he do this to me? I thought he changed, that he was becoming better, not just a cold Alpha who only thinks about himself.”

My wolf falls silent. I can still feel her comforting presence, but I know that she’s run out of things to say. That’s because it’s true; Karl has used me, taken advantage of me, and for what? After everything we’ve been through together, he would do this?

As I continue to cry into my pillow, my thoughts drift back to earlier tonight, when Karl and I were alone in the forest.

It was a moment of vulnerability, of opening up to each other. I allowed myself to set aside my inhibitions for a little while because I thought that maybe, just maybe, things would work themselves out.

I let myself be weak. I let him comfort me with his words and with his body. I let him ruin my dress on the snowy ground when now I know I shouldn’t have done any of it.

And now, it feels like he took advantage of my feelings for his own gain. He must be using me to look good for the election, I’m sure of it.

I should have stayed home, in the city; I should have let this all blow over and I never should have spoken to him again.

But no. I’m a fool who really thought that he had changed. I let my broken heart get the best of me. I let him use me.

I'm not sure how long I lay there, sobbing into my pillow. My makeup must be a mess and my hair is likely a wreck. But at some point, I hear a knock on my door. I have a feeling I know who it is.

"Go away!" I call out, my voice choked with tears. "Leave me alone!"

There's a silence, and I think that he must have gone away.

But then I hear the sound of a key in the lock, and the door swings open. Karl steps into the room, the skeleton key to the house in his hand, and his expression is a mix of concern and determination.

"Abby, we need to talk," he says. "Please."

I bolt upright, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. "Get out," I growl, my eyes flashing with anger. Even my wolf is furious inside of me, lending me her strength and fury for a split second.

"Abby—"

"I said, get out!"

Before Karl—or even I—can react, I'm bolting to my feet and rushing across the room. I begin to pummel his chest angrily, my teeth bared and my jaw clenched.

"You fucker," I growl as I beat my fists on his chest. "You're an asshole! I can't believe you!"

Karl doesn't flinch, nor does he react with anger or frustration. Instead, he calmly reaches out, pulling me into his arms. My anger begins to turn into a feeling of helplessness, and my hands fall back to my sides.

Chapter 427

Abby

I take a few moments to collect myself, wiping away the last of my tears with the back of my hand. I need to understand what's going on, even if Karl's sudden announcement still stings like a fresh wound, and even if all of this makes me angrier than I've ever been.

Finally, I manage to calm myself the tiniest bit and sink down onto the edge of the bed, my eyes fixed on him.

"Alright," I say, my voice trembling with a mix of anger and frustration. "Tell me all about your grand plan, Karl. And it had better be good because you might have just destroyed all of my trust in you."

Karl sighs and sits down beside me, his shoulders slumped with weariness. He looks at me with a hint of regret in his eyes, and it causes a pang in my chest.

"I know I should have discussed this with you first," he admits, "and I was going to, really. I was going to talk to you about it after the party."

"Oh, were you?" I scoff. "So why did you decide to announce it tonight, right in front of the entire pack?"

Another sigh escapes Karl's lips. I watch as he leans forward with his elbows on his knees, just like he always does when he's thinking deeply. Even when I'm angry with him, I can't help but think how handsome he looks when he's like this, and it just adds to my fury.

"I decided on a whim to announce it tonight, in front of everyone, to protect you from further scrutiny," he finally says.

I raise an incredulous eyebrow. "Protect me?" I hiss. "By trapping me in a fake relationship that I never agreed to?"

Karl runs a hand through his hair, his frustration evident. "Abby, I understand that you're upset, and I don't blame you for feeling that way. Hell, I'd be just as angry as you are if I were in your position. But there are reasons behind what I did."

I open my mouth to respond with some sort of retort, but none comes. Part of me, no matter how small, wants to hear him out even though a much larger part of me wants to send him away, go home to the city, and never speak to him again.

“Go on,” I murmur, even though every fiber of my being is screaming at me not to listen.

“I need to show that I have plans for a family if I want to win this election,” he says quietly.

I scoff, my anger flaring up again. “And how the hell does this benefit me? All it’s done is trap me in a fake relationship that I never asked for. If I pull out, I’ll be the one who has to take the fall, as usual. Everyone always disproportionately looks down on me because I’m a woman, and my reputation is already in the dirt.”

Karl turns toward me then, taking my hand in his. I pull away out of instinct, recoiling at his touch despite the fact that there’s a shred of my being, the same shred that let him make love to me in the snow earlier, that wants to lean into him and hear him out.

“Abby, I know how hard it is, and I’m truly sorry,” he murmurs. “But this could also save your restaurant. This wasn’t something I just came up with out of nowhere. It’s been on my mind for a while; the only whim is how I announced it tonight.”

“Tell me how this bullshit could save my restaurant,” I growl in response.

He sighs. “With the support of the pack and the appearance of a stable relationship,” he explains, “we can face this together. We can make that Alpha lose in the case. We’ll present ourselves as a united front. We’ll support each other, vouch for each other if we need to. Whoever plotted all of this won’t stand a chance, so long as we stand together.”

I scoff again and fold my arms across my chest. “Is that it?”

“No, that’s not it,” he says, shaking my head. “Abby, I think I can give you the baby you’ve always wanted.”



I'm taken aback, my head reeling at his words. "A baby?" I whisper, my voice trembling. "What are you saying?"

"I've been looking into experimental treatments," he says softly, his brown eyes meeting mine. "Abby, there might be a way to restore your dead ovary and help you get pregnant."

"I never asked for this," I say with a shake of my head. "And I've already told you I don't want IVF."

"It's not IVF," he says. "And I know you didn't ask outright, but I know how badly you've always wanted to be a mom. That's why, in exchange for this deal, I can do my best to give you a baby."

"And what makes you think I'd want to have a baby with you after everything you've done?" I ask, my heart pounding with a mixture of frustration, anger, and confusion.

"I figured you would say that," he says gently. "And Abby, I understand. That's why I only offer to help you restore your ovary, and to help you get pregnant. The baby would be yours; if you wanted to be a single mom, I wouldn't stop you. I'd support you as much as you would allow me, of course, but I won't lay claim to our child unless that's what you would want."

Karl's words give me pause. The idea of having a baby, a baby of my own, fills my heart with joy.

But at the same time, I'm still too angry. I can't believe that he's preying on my desire to be a mother in order to get what he wants, and it stings more than anything. I stand, pointing at the door. "Get out," I murmur, my voice nearly a growl. "I don't want to discuss this right now."

Chapter 428

Abby

As I watch Karl leave, the door clicking softly shut behind him, I'm left reeling from his proposition.

It's insane; the very thought of the two of us entering into this ridiculous deal should never even cross my mind.

And yet, why is it... tempting?

With a huff, I turn around and throw myself back down onto the bed. I don't want to return to the party tonight—not after the way Karl embarrassed me in front of everyone. It's still too raw, too painful to face everyone. They'll be expecting me to say something, to act in a certain way that somehow seems 'appropriate'.

But I don't even know what I would say or what I would do.

Karl's proposition should make me furious, and it does. I hate what he did. I hate that he didn't consult me before he announced it to everyone, and I especially hate that he has supposedly been researching ways to fix my dead ovary without even telling me first. How long has this been going on?

And yet...

I can't help but think back to those tiny shoes I saw in the shop window, the ones I yearned to buy for a child I never thought I would have. I keep thinking about the night that I cried in my bed, back when I first discovered that my chances of having a baby were slim.

I've suffered from years of depression and despair, thinking that my dream of motherhood would forever remain out of reach.

But then there's Karl, standing at the forefront of possibility.

The idea is tempting—far more tempting than I ever imagined. I've always dreamed of having a little baby of my own, and the idea that there could be a way to heal my body so I can do it on my own is like a dream come true. Single motherhood was never part of my plan, but it's something I would consider.

And yet, I still can't help but wonder: is he being truthful about this experimental treatment to restore my dead ovary, or is he just spinning tales to ensnare me, to make me compliant with his plan?

I turn to my wolf, who has been a constant presence in the back of my mind throughout this ordeal. She hasn't said anything so far since Karl left, but I know she's there, waiting for me to open myself up to her.

"Please tell me what I should do," I murmur into the pillow, my voice muffled. "I'm so lost."

"I can't tell you what to do exactly," my wolf responds softly, "but Abby... You've wanted this forever, haven't you?"

I nod slowly into the pillow before I roll onto my back. My eyes trail along the canopy of the bed, tracing the patterns in the mahogany wood and the sheer fabric.

"I have," I whisper. "I've always wanted a baby. But... Not like this."

My wolf sighs. "I know," she says softly. "It's not what you expected. But you could be a mom, Abby. Even if it's not perfect, doesn't that mean more to you? The idea of finally getting to hold your little one in your arms?"

Her words make me tear up again, just when I thought the tears were subsiding. I let out a soft, choked sob, my chest heaving with the motion.

"Yeah. It does," I manage through the lump in my throat. "I can't deny how tempting it is. God, that bastard has won again, hasn't he?"

"Abby, look at it this way," my wolf says. "It's not a permanent arrangement, and maybe he's right; maybe it could be hugely beneficial to both of you. And maybe it's worth trying, not just for your restaurant's sake, but for your future child."

I take a deep, shaky breath and wipe away my tears, sitting up.

Maybe my wolf is right. Maybe I should at least explore this twisted arrangement. My staff, my restaurant back in the city, they all depend on me. I can't let them down, not after everything we've been through.

Even if I don't get a baby out of this, maybe I can at least rest easy knowing that my restaurant could be saved. My staff deserves their jobs back, and I deserve justice. We can put this Alpha who possibly poisoned the Alpha party behind bars and clear my name.

Then my restaurant will reopen, and my staff will have their livelihoods back.

"I'll hate him by the end of this," I mutter with a wry chuckle.

My wolf chuckles along with me. "I don't think you can ever fully hate him, no matter what," she says. "But I won't blame him if you do."

I finally come to a decision, fueled by a mix of desperation and determination. This plan is crazy, and it's stupid, and it drives me insane, but it's too tempting to ignore.

But the thing is, I can't do this alone. I need my wolf by my side; no strings attached, no disappearing acts, no heartbreak.

"Alright," I whisper to her, my voice hoarse from crying so much. "I'll give it a chance, but only if you promise not to go dormant again. I can't go through this without you."

Her response is immediate and unwavering. "I swear on my existence, Abby. I'll never leave you again, even if you don't get back with Karl at the end of all of this."

"Promise?" I murmur.

"I promise," she says gently. "Whether you decide to stay with Karl or not, I'm staying by your side. Through thick and thin."

That's all the reassurance I need.

With newfound resolve, I slowly stand from the bed and make my way over to the mirror. I take another deep breath, this one steadier than the last, and wipe away the remaining tears. Then, I get to work removing my smudged makeup. It's mostly been ruined, but I don't care. I don't need makeup tonight, and there's no point in wearing my mask anymore, either.

As I make my way out of my room and toward the staircase to rejoin the party, Karl's proposition keeps echoing in my mind.

Chapter 429

Abby

"May I have this dance?"

Karl's hand is extended to me, his tall form looking down at me. Others around us are staring, even though I know they're trying not to make it obvious. For a moment, I almost consider turning on my heel and running again, but I know I can't.

"I'm still furious with you," I whisper as I reluctantly take Karl's outstretched hand and let him lead me to the dance floor. The sea of people parts, the partygoers gawking at the two of us. I take a moment to let my eyes scan the crowd, looking for Ethan and Gianna, but I don't see them. Maybe they left amidst all of the chaos.

The chaos that Gianna caused.

"I don't blame you," Karl says quietly, although there's a polite smile plastered on his face. We stop in the middle of the dance floor and begin to move to the soft strains of the string quartet, and although there's a gentle look in his brown eyes, I can't stop being angry with him.

Maybe the anger will subside, but not now. Not for a long time.

Without a word, Karl's arm circles around my waist and draws me closer. I place my hand on his shoulder, letting my other hand delicately sit in his palm as we move. We're the perfect picture of a couple in love, but right now, it feels like anything but that. And yet, as we sway to the music, Karl's eyes search mine, and it's clear to me that he's eager to know if I've made up my mind.

And the truth is that I have.

“Well?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper. “Did you think about it?”

As he speaks, his warm breath washes across my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. Right now, I hate the fact that I feel so weak when I’m this close to him. I know it’s our fated mate bond getting the best of me, and I wish I had more control over it.

Finally, I let out a sigh and decide to speak my thoughts, not bothering to mask my irritation.

“Yes,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “I have thought about it.”

Karl raises an eyebrow, his gaze unwavering. “I’m listening,” he says, his voice soft.

I take a deep breath before continuing, but my voice somehow manages to come out strained nonetheless. “I’ll go along with your little... plan.”

Karl’s brown eyes light up as he looks down at me, and a slow smile begins to twitch at the corners of his lips. I can tell that he’s pleased with himself, and if I’m being honest, seeing his smile makes it just a little bit harder to stay mad at him.

“But I have some conditions of my own,” I say, my voice a bit firmer now.

He nods. “Go on.”

“Three things,” I say, pulling my shoulders back a bit. “First of all, I want you to come back to the city with me and announce our arrangement to my friends—Leah and Chloe, I mean.”

“Really?” He raises an eyebrow and looks genuinely confused. “Why?”

“Because,” I say, my voice exasperated, “I’m tired of covering for the two of us all the damn time. So I want you to be there when I tell Chloe and Leah; and I want you to admit that this was your idea.”

“But what if they don’t like it?” Karl asks.

“Then you’ll just have to face the consequences. They’re my friends, Karl. I’m not covering for you anymore.”

Karl doesn’t immediately respond, and for a moment, I wonder if he’s considering pulling out of this arrangement now. I wouldn’t blame him, if I’m being honest. Chloe, at the very least, can be scary.

But I stand by what I said; they’re my friends, and I’m tired of covering for him. I’m not about to spend the foreseeable future lying to them, and he needs to step up to the plate and tell them himself.

But then, much to my surprise, he nods in agreement, and the small smile that’s tugging at the corners of his lips grows in size just a little bit. “Fair enough,” he concedes. “I can do that. And what’s the second rule?”

His quick agreement takes me by surprise. I want to press on and ask him why he decided to take my condition so easily, but I decide not to.

“Second,” I continue, “I won’t spend the whole time here, and I won’t agree to move here permanently, either. I have a life in the city. If you want this to work, you’ll have to accept that; and in fact, I fully expect you to spend time in the city and continue to help me in my restaurant whenever you can.”

Karl chuckles softly at this one. “You drive a hard bargain, Abby,” he remarks.

“Yeah, well, this is a hard arrangement,” I retort. “This is a big change. I won’t let myself be used for your election.”

Karl looks like he wants to say something—maybe he wants to correct me—but he doesn’t. “Alright,” he says, “I’ll split my time between here and the city. No problem. And the third rule?”

I swallow hard before letting the words tumble out. It's been on my mind, as much as I hate to admit it; and it deserves to be addressed, no matter how embarrassing it may be. "Third," I say, my cheeks flushing slightly and my voice nearly drowned out by the music, "I want to keep... hooking up. Casually."

Karl's smirk widens, and I feel my face grow even hotter under his gaze. "More casual hookups?" he muses, his tone teasing. "You must be enjoying it, then."

I huff in annoyance, my irritation flaring up again. "It's just for practicality," I retort, "so we can both relieve our frustrations. And if what you're saying about these treatments is true..."

"It's all true," he says, his voice taking on a somewhat firmer tone, although it's still barely more than a whisper. "I've done my research, Abby. And I think it could work."

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. "I'm sure you understand what I'm getting at here."

"Of course," he says quietly. "We'll try for that baby, Abby. Don't you worry."

Chapter 430

Abby

It was a warm spring day, and the cherry blossoms were in full bloom, casting a soft, pink hue over the entire park.

Karl and I had been dating for three months now, and our wedding was fast approaching. Our marriage was arranged, and we were fated mates, but neither of us had uttered those three little words yet.

But lately, I had been thinking about it more and more.

I wanted to tell Karl that I loved him, but the fear of rejection always held me back. What if he didn't feel the same way yet? What if I scared him off? These thoughts haunted me, but today, as we strolled through the park hand in hand, I couldn't help but feel that the time was right.



We found a quiet spot under a canopy of cherry blossoms and spread out a picnic blanket. The scent of the delicate pink flowers filled the air, and the soft rustling of leaves added to the serenity of the moment. We shared a box of pastries, our fingers brushing as we reached for the same one.

And then Karl looked at me with those deep brown eyes of his, and I felt my heart race.

I could see the love and affection in his gaze, but he still hadn't said the words I wanted to hear so badly. But I knew that today was the day; I knew that, even if he didn't say it, I needed to tell him how I really felt.

I took a deep breath and finally mustered up the courage to speak. "Karl," I began, my voice soft but determined, "there's something I've been wanting to—"

But before I could finish, Karl suddenly turned to face me, his cheeks flushed red. "I love you, Abby," he suddenly said.

My eyes widened, and I blinked incredulously, taken completely aback.

Here I was, about to tell Karl that I loved him, and yet he had said it first.

"You're joking," I murmured, pulling my hand back.

Karl's eyes flashed with a combination of shock and regret, and he quickly looked away. "I'm sorry," he said, sounding more embarrassed than I had ever heard him. "I shouldn't have said that. It's too soon, and—"

"No, Karl," I said, a slight chuckle escaping my lips, "I'm just in shock because... I was about to say it first."

Slowly, Karl turned back to look at me. Now, his face had shifted from hurt and embarrassment to excitement and wonder. "Really?" he asked. "You were gonna say it?"

I nodded, laughing again. “Yes!” I exclaimed. “I was about to say it. It’s like you read my mind.”

The two of us laughed in unison, taken aback by our mishap. “Is it true?” Karl finally asked, his hand reaching out to cup my face. “You really love me, Abby?”

I wiped away a tear that had escaped down my cheek and nodded, my heart overflowing with love for this boy who I had only just met, but who I knew that I would spend the rest of my life with—or so I thought at the time.

“Yes,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I love you, Karl.”

He leaned in, and our lips met in a sweet, gentle kiss under the cherry blossoms. His lips were warm and sweet, and a little sticky from the cookies we had shared.

I never stopped thinking about that kiss. Not once.

...

The final notes of the music echo through the room as the dance comes to an end. I’m left wondering what this ‘bet’ is that Karl wants to propose, and something about it is creating a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Of course he would never accept my conditions without even more conditions of his own. I always have to get the short end of the stick, don’t I?

“So, what’s the bet?” I ask, my voice somehow steady despite the racing feeling in my chest.

Karl looks at me with an amused glint in his eyes, his lips curving into a knowing smile.

“It’s simple,” he says, his voice so low that it’s barely above a whisper to keep anyone else from hearing our conversation. “Once you catch feelings for me again—and you will—then I want to marry you again.”

I can feel the blood drain from my face, and I take a step back, creating some distance between us. "Marry you again?" I stammer, unable to hide my shock. "So soon? That's not a good idea, Karl."

Karl simply shrugs, his nonchalant demeanor infuriating in this moment. "Those are the stipulations of my bet, just as you've set yours. Fair is fair, isn't it?"

I narrow my eyes at him, my mind racing for an alternative. Right now, I can't fathom the idea of marrying him again, not after all that's happened between us. There has to be another way to settle this bet. Something less... severe.

But then I have an idea.

"Actually," I say, my determination returning, "I have a counterproposal. Something that will be a bit more fair for both of us; level the playing field, you know?"

Karl raises an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "Go on."

I take a deep breath, steeling myself over the absolutely insanity I'm about to suggest. I can't believe I'm doing this, but in a strange, twisted way, I'm also... excited.

"How about this," I say. "Whoever says 'I love you' first will have to move to the other's location. If I say it first, I'll move back here, and if you say it first, you'll move to the city."

Karl considers my proposal for a moment, his gaze locked on mine. There's a flicker of something in his eyes—maybe uncertainty, or maybe just curiosity. But then he smirks, that infuriatingly confident smirk of his.