

Kickass 431

Chapter 431

Abby

The masquerade continues around me as I slip away from Karl to catch my breath. Normally, I would enjoy the music, the food, the laughter, and the drinks. But right now, I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed.

Everything is reminding me of the arrangement I've gotten myself involved in, and it doesn't help any that people keep staring at me and asking questions about my relationship with Karl.

"Is it true, Abby? You're our Luna again?"

"When are you getting married?"

"Are you really having a family together?"

I keep trying to answer the questions as vaguely and as cordially as I can, but it's all too much. I need a moment to collect my thoughts, to escape the prying eyes and probing questions.

As discreetly as I can, I slip away from the crowd, making my way through the mansion until I find myself in a quiet hallway. Leaning against the wall, I take a deep breath and shut my eyes to give myself a chance to relax just a little bit before returning to the party.

But all the while, my mind races with doubts and uncertainties about what I've just agreed to with Karl.

The bet we've just made hangs over me like a dark cloud, and I can't help but wonder if I've made a grave mistake. What if I do catch feelings for him again? What if I'm the one who says "I love you" first? Will I have to move back here, away from the city, away from the life I've built for myself?

Oh, hell, what am I even thinking?

How do I even know I'll catch feelings for him? This wasn't part of the plan; the plan was to fake a relationship, help Karl win the election, save the restaurant and maybe—just maybe—get pregnant.

Falling for him was never in the cards, and yet here I am, lamenting over it.

Lost in my thoughts, I reach out for my wolf, seeking solace in her presence.

"What have I done?" I ask mentally, taking care not to accidentally speak out loud. "What did I just get myself into?"

My wolf's presence is warm and reassuring in my mind, her voice gentle and comforting. "Abby, everything will work out for the best," she says. "Trust in your instincts, and trust in Karl. This bet is just a playful challenge, nothing more."

I let out a soft sigh, trying to find the strength to believe in my wolf's words. But deep down, I can't help but worry about the what-ifs, about the possibility of rekindling a love that caused me so much pain all those years ago.

But then, as I wrestle with my thoughts, I suddenly become aware of hushed voices coming from around the corner of the hallway.

"What a joke," a woman's voice says. "They'll never get out of this."

With my curiosity piqued, I lean a little closer to listen. The voices are unfamiliar, and their conversation seems anything but ordinary.

"No one will believe Karl's announcement about the food poisoning," a male voice says in response, his tone filled with certainty. "It's a distraction for now, but it won't matter."

"You're right," the female voice responds. "Abby will end up in prison one way or another. This little plan of theirs won't save her from that."

My heart clenches at the mention of my name, and a cold shiver runs down my spine. Suddenly, I think I have a pretty good idea as to what they're referring to: the Alpha gathering. The food poisoning disaster.

Are they working for the Alpha who might be behind all of this?

I quickly take out my phone and discreetly hit the record button on the camera. Even if I can't get their faces, at least I can record their voices. This could be useful in this case. I just hope that whatever they're saying is serious, and it's not all just an elaborate hoax.

The man continues speaking, oblivious to my presence. "Alpha won't let himself be caught. He's already lawyered up; now we just need to move forward with the plan, and then everything will happen the way it's supposed to."

"And the Luna's children," the woman continues, "they'll be dead by the end of the week, just as we discussed?"

The man chuckles.

"Of course," he says.

My heart nearly stops at those chilling words. Luna's children? Whose children are they talking about, and why are they in danger? Panic courses through me, and I press my phone closer to the corner, desperate to capture every detail of this sinister conversation.

But then, the voices stop.

"Wait," the woman says, her voice sounding concerned. "I don't think we're alone."

My breath catches in my throat as I hear footsteps headed my way. I need to hide, and I need to hide quickly. Thinking on my feet, I quickly duck into a nearby alcove behind a large potted plant, my breath held as the voices draw closer. I can't let them see me eavesdropping, not when I have the potential key to unraveling this dangerous scheme.

I see two figures come into view then; a man and a woman, just as I suspected. I don't recognize either of them behind their masks, but I make sure to keep my phone angled to face them from where I'm hidden just in case.

"You're imagining things again, my love," the man says with a chuckle as he loops his arm around the woman's slender shoulders, not noticing me in the slightest. "There's no one here."

But the woman isn't so easily convinced. Her discerning gaze sweeps over the hallway, and it feels as though my heart stops. Her eyes stop on the potted plant, and she lets out a small hmph as she shrugs away from the man's grip and begins to walk over to where I'm hidden.

"Come on out," the woman says, her eyes searching within the dark alcove. "Come out, come out, wherever you are..."

I swallow, shrinking a little further into the shadowy alcove. Just a few more steps and she'll find me.

Chapter 432

Abby

I'm still standing in the hallway, breathless and reeling from what I just heard. I feel as though I somehow managed to be in just the wrong place at the wrong time, and I nearly paid the price for it.

Or perhaps it was the right place at the right time, because now I'm standing here with potentially valuable information that might not only help me win the case against this Alpha, but it may also save lives, if I heard those two strangers correctly.

Either way, I need to send this video to Officer Martinez, and I need to send it quickly. If it's true that the lives of children are hanging in the balance, and that those children may be killed this week, then I need to do everything I can to prevent that.

With shaking hands, I pull my phone back out and begin typing out an email to Officer Martinez with the video attached. The email is short and sweet:

“Officer Martinez,” it reads, “I just overheard this conversation at a party. You might want to take a look. It sounds very serious.”

But then, just as I’m about to hit send, I hear the soft creaking of the floorboards behind me. Startled, I glance over my shoulder expecting to see that the couple from before have returned. My instincts kick in, and my mind automatically begins searching for an escape, or even a weapon. Hell, I’ll shift if I need to.

But then I relax, if only ever so slightly. It’s not the couple; it’s Gianna who is standing there in the middle of the hallway, her brows furrowed in a frown.

Panic courses through me as I quickly hit send and put my phone away. I guess she didn’t run away from the party like I thought she did.

“Oh, hey, Gianna,” I say, trying to sound casual despite the anxiety gnawing at my insides. “Do you need something?”

I almost cringe at my own words. Gianna was the one who created this mess tonight, and I should be yelling at her to leave. But I don’t. I can’t bring myself to stoop to her level, no matter how angry she makes me. I won’t let her win in that regard.

Gianna’s expression is mostly unreadable with a hint of hatred, just as it always is. Her mask still obscures the upper half of her face, and the shadows of the dimly lit hallway just add to her creepy appearance.

“Is it true?” she growls. “You and Karl?”

I shift uncomfortably in my spot, my eyes flickering back toward the party where Karl, who’s standing a short distance away from the bar, is engrossed in a conversation with someone else. I take a deep breath before answering Gianna.

“Yes,” I admit reluctantly, remembering my agreement with Karl. “Karl and I are together again.”

Gianna is silent for several long moments. I can see her jaw clenching and unclenching in the dim light, her hands curled up into fists at her sides. She finally scoffs, her disbelief evident in the curl of her lip.

“Well, that won’t last long,” she retorts dismissively, her words cutting through the air like a knife.

I watch incredulously as she walks away, her shoulder slamming into mine as she brushes past without another word. The force of the impact steals my breath away, nearly leaving me gasping for air. I suppose I shouldn’t have expected any less from Gianna, but it still blows me away.

It seems as though, despite the fact that she’s got Karl’s brother in a trance, she’s still angry over me and Karl.

At the same time, though, I can’t help but wonder if she’s somehow involved in the mysterious plan I overheard earlier. Could she be connected to the strange couple and the Alpha they were discussing? It’s a troubling thought, and it only adds to my growing list of concerns.

But right now, there’s nothing more I can do. Officer Martinez has the video, and that’s all that matters.

I just hope that she can do something before those kids get hurt.

...

Hours later, after the party has come to an end, I make my way back to my room, feeling emotionally drained. The events of the night have left me in a state of turmoil, and I can’t shake the unease that has settled deep inside of me.

As I ascend the staircase, I hear footsteps behind me. I turn, my heart skipping a beat as I see Karl approaching. We stop on the stairs, standing close together in the dimly lit hallway.

“Abby,” Karl begins, his voice soft and tinged with sincerity. “I had a good night, despite everything. I can’t stop thinking about the time we spent in the woods.”

My gaze meets his, and I'm momentarily transported back to that secret rendezvous of ours. The very thought of it makes my cheeks flush red.

But the memory is tainted by the events of tonight, and I can't push aside my feelings of anger and betrayal.

Before I can say anything, Karl takes a step forward and reaches for me, his fingers brushing against my cheek. "Would you like to spend the night together?" he murmurs, his voice low and husky in my ear.

His offer is tempting, and his touch sends a shiver down my spine. I shudder a bit at the thought of being under the covers with him tonight, and I almost say yes.

But I can't let go of my anger. Not yet.

With a sigh, I swat his hand away, my gesture a little rougher than I actually intended. "Karl," I say, my voice trembling with frustration, "I'm tired, and I don't feel up to being with you right now, not after what you did."

Karl's brow furrows, his expression a mix of confusion and hurt. "I thought we worked it all out," he says, his voice tinged with disappointment. "I thought we came to an agreement. That we came to an... understanding."

Chapter 433

Abby

Surprisingly, despite the turmoil of the evening, I find myself falling asleep almost as soon as my head hits the pillow.

However, it's short-lived. Or at least, that's how it feels; it hardly feels as though I've been asleep for more than five minutes when I'm suddenly awoken by the sound of my phone ringing loudly on the bedside table.

I groan, cracking my eyes open against the morning sunlight that's shining through the window. The entire room is bathed in the warm amber glow of the sun, but I wish it wasn't. I could have slept for longer.

With a sigh, I fumble on the bedside table for my phone and slide to answer it without even looking at the caller ID.

"Hello?"

"Abby, it's Officer Martinez," a familiar voice says on the other end. "I'm sorry it's early. I hope I didn't wake you."

I sit up in bed, instantly alert. The events of last night begin to flood back in: the arrangement with Karl, the bet, the announcement, but even more importantly, the information I gathered in the hallway... And the recording I sent to Officer Martinez.

"Officer Martinez," I say, my voice still rough from sleep, "I'm so glad you called. I take it you got my—"

"Yes," she interrupts, her voice carrying a sense of urgency. "I've seen the recording you sent me last night. You did well by recording that conversation. We're adding it to the case."

Relief washes over me at her words. "And the children?" I ask, my heart pounding. "Will they be safe?"

Officer Martinez sighs. "I'm not entirely sure which children the couple was referring to," she says. "But we're doing our best. Unfortunately that's all I can say right now."

Her words, while a slight comfort, make my stomach sink a little. "Is there anything I can do to help?" I ask.

"I wish there were," Officer Martinez says. "But as it turns out, the Alpha who may have poisoned the Alpha party lawyered up almost immediately, and so did his Beta, Alexander Black. This could be a long and complicated case."

I frown, my worry returning. My poor restaurant is still hanging in the balance, at risk of closure due to the incident. But if it turns out that this Alpha did intentionally frame me and poison the food, then what about me? What about my restaurant?

“My restaurant is still under investigation by the health department,” I press. “It could close down unless we do something. I hate to ask, but can you help me at all?”

There’s a pause on the other end before Officer Martinez speaks again. “I’ve already spoken to the health department,” she says. “The investigation has been halted so that we can do our own investigation. Unfortunately, that’s all I can do. I hope that’s enough.”

I let out a soft sigh of relief. “That’s more than enough, Officer,” I say quietly. “Thank you.”

Officer Martinez pauses, but then her tone turns even more serious. “Abby,” she says, lowering her voice, “I want you to be careful. Any public knowledge of your tips to the police could put you in danger, especially if those who framed you are already aware of your involvement.”

I nod, even though I know Officer Martinez can’t see me. “I’ll be cautious,” I say. “I promise.”

“You must be more than cautious, Abby,” she presses. “Do you have protection?”

Her words give me pause, and it causes my heart to pound in my chest. I knew I had been framed, but I never expected it to go this far. Am I really in that much danger that I might actually need... protection?

“I’m... I’m fine,” I say, looking around me at the sunlight streaming into my room. “I’m in a safe place.”

“Good,” Officer Martinez says, sounding a little relieved. “Take care, Abby. We’ll be in touch soon.”

“Thank you again, Officer Martinez. Goodbye.”

I hang up the phone and let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. It's a bit of a relief to know that the police are taking action on this matter, but the feeling of danger still lingers in the back of my mind. Just like Officer Martinez said, I need to be cautious and vigilant.

But as I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and meet my own gaze in the full-length mirror, my thoughts from the last few days enter my mind. Being in a safe place, surrounded by people who could protect me if the need arises, is one thing.

But being able to protect myself is a whole other thing.

After what happened in the blizzard, I know now that I'm not as strong as I used to be. I was never a good fighter, but I was always in shape. Maybe now, it's not only time for me to get back into shape, but it's also time to get some proper training in the realm of fighting.

After all, I never know when I might need to defend myself, right?

Standing, I steal another glance at myself in the mirror. One day of working out doesn't make much of a difference, if any at all. No, this could take a while.

But right now, it seems as though I've got all the time in the world. If what Officer Martinez said was true, this case could take a while. Maybe I'll be stuck here in this mansion with Karl for longer than I anticipated.

And with everything going on, maybe I should use this time to my advantage.

Chapter 434

Abby

The crisp morning air stings my cheeks as Karl and I look at each other. I hate the fact that the sight of his muscular body, glistening in the morning sun, makes my face feel hot; but at least I can blame it on the cold.

“Um... Sure,” I finally say, agreeing to run with him. I don’t really want to see him right now after what happened at the party, but at the same time, I do. The emotions roiling inside of me are confusing, to say the least, and I hate myself for it.

“Cool.”

Karl, shirtless and seemingly unaffected by the cold this morning, leads the way. His lean muscles flex with each stride, and his breath forms clouds in the chilly air. We run side by side, the rhythm of our footsteps echoing in the quiet morning.

For a little while, neither of us speaks. The scenery passes by—lots of empty fields, towering trees, and the occasional cottage. It seems as though everyone has decorated for the holidays already, and the quaint little houses are adorned with garlands and colorful lights.

I can see someone’s Christmas tree through their window as we jog past one house, and for a moment, I can’t help but think about my poor little apartment back in the city, dark and empty and devoid of any festive decorations.

But the holidays aren’t the only thing on my mind.

I keep thinking back to my deal with Karl, and the promises he made—particularly the promise regarding my infertility. He mentioned some special treatments, some doctor who might be able to help me. I hate to say it, but I’m intrigued.

Having a child has always been a dream of mine, and I hope that the dream won’t be crushed yet again, which is why I’m hesitant to let Karl get my hopes up.

“Hey, Karl?” I finally muster up the courage to break the silence.

“Hm?” Karl asks, glancing at me. He seems completely unfazed by our run; he’s barely even out of breath.

I swallow, my own breaths coming out in short bursts. I haven't had the chance to run very much over the past few years, so my body isn't quite used to this. "I need to know more about this doctor you've been speaking to."

He glances at me, his deep brown eyes looking like golden pools of honey in the bright morning sun, made even more bright as it reflects off of the brilliant white snow. "I thought you might say that," he says, keeping pace effortlessly. "I've been talking to Dr. Armitage."

I raise an eyebrow. "Dr. Armitage?" I ask. "I've never heard of him."

Karl chuckles, and it's a warm, familiar sound that admittedly makes me blush a bit. I quickly look away so he can't tell. "I'm going to be honest with you, Abby," Karl says. "He's... not your typical doctor, for lack of a better word. Some might even call him a bit of a quack."

I frown. A quack doctor? That's not exactly reassuring. "What kind of treatments does he offer?" I ask, hoping for some sort of clarification.

Karl takes a moment to gather his thoughts. "He specializes in alternative medicine and unconventional treatments. He believes in the power of the natural world and ancient remedies."

My skepticism must be evident on my face when I turn to level him with a stern gaze. It's unlike Karl to believe in homeopathic medicine. He needs hard facts and science if he's going to believe anything. "So, what makes you think he can help me?" I ask. "Why do you, of all people, believe in these... ancient remedies of his?"

He smiles, and there's a glint of hope in his eyes. "Because, Abby, he's shown me solid proof that his methods have worked for others. People who were told they had no hope left."

I'm torn between hope and doubt. The possibility of curing my infertility is a tantalizing prospect, but I've been disappointed so many times before. I'm skeptical, to say the least. I don't need to be putting myself through who knows what kind of treatments just to be told the same thing I've always been told. And a few anecdotal pieces of evidence will hardly change my mind.

“But why hasn’t he gone public with his findings if they’re so miraculous?” I ask. “Forgive me, Karl, but this sounds a bit suspicious, don’t you think?”

Karl slows down a bit, allowing me to catch up. I didn’t realize it, but being out of breath and trying to talk has made me lag behind. “He’s been cautious,” Karl says. “He’s faced a lot of backlash from the medical community. They see him as a maverick, a renegade. But he’s dedicated to helping those who have been overlooked by conventional medicine.”

We continue our run down a familiar trail that leads around a nearby patch of woods. The quiet forest around us is shrouded in a serene stillness, and I take in the scent of pine needles and the sound of birds singing in the distance. The beauty of the natural world contrasts sharply with the uncertainty of my own in this moment, though, which is jarring.

“Karl,” I finally say after some time, “I want to believe, but I’ve been through so much already. I hope you don’t blame me for being skeptical.”

He slows down a little more, but his gaze is still fixed on the path ahead of us. “I understand your concern,” he says softly. “I really do, and if you don’t want to try it, then you don’t have to. But I’ve seen the testimonials, met the people whose lives have been transformed by Dr. Armitage’s methods. I believe he might have the cure you’ve been searching for. A way for you to heal your body and have the baby you want. Naturally.”

We finish our run in silence, and the sun has risen higher in the sky, casting a warm glow over the landscape that begins to warm the earth and cause the snow to begin to melt.

As we slow to a walk once we reach the driveway, I can’t help but feel a glimmer of hope.

Chapter 435

Abby

Karl and I are in the kitchen after our run, making breakfast. The smell of sizzling bacon and fresh coffee fills the air, and after that run, I can’t deny the fact that I’m starving.

I glance over at Karl, who is engrossed in flipping pancakes on the stove. At least he’s wearing a shirt by now, but his biceps bulge against the sleeves and his chest muscles pop beneath the white fabric. It’s

hard not to be attracted to him, but at the same time, I wish I wasn't. I'm still upset after everything that happened.

I can't seem to stop thinking about how he suddenly announced a 'relationship' and an intent to have a family with me at the holiday party this weekend without ever discussing it with me first. Sure, his reasons for doing it like that wound up making a modicum of sense in the end, but it still hurt.

Honestly, the whole ordeal left me feeling blindsided and confused. I hate feeling like a pawn in this, and I hate myself even more for being so attracted to the man who started all of it. But I decide to keep it to myself, sipping my coffee to try and calm my frayed nerves.

However, Karl's most recent transgressions aren't the only thing on my mind right now. I keep thinking about that strange couple from the party, the ones who seemed to be talking about some sort of conspiracy involving children.

Officer Martinez was adamant that the police are going to do their best to handle it, but it still nags at me. The idea of children being in danger fills me with a whole host of emotions—rage, frustration, and fear included.

I must have been zoning out pretty hard, because I'm suddenly pulled back to reality by the clatter of a plate in front of me and Karl's voice cutting through my thoughts.

"Earth to Abby." Karl's voice breaks through my reverie, followed by the scent of pancakes and bacon right under my nose. "You good?"

I jump a little as I'm pulled back to reality, realizing I've been staring intently—and completely unintentionally, or at least, that's what I tell myself—at his bicep muscles for who knows how long. Heat rushes to my cheeks as I sheepishly thank him for breakfast and quickly avert my gaze.

Karl takes a seat across from me and takes a sip of his own coffee. Even though I keep my gaze fixed on my plate, I can still feel him staring at me for a few moments before he finally speaks. "

"You seemed lost in thought just now," he remarks, his eyes searching mine. "Look, if this is about Dr. Armitage—"

“It’s not about him,” I interrupt, maybe a little too harshly. I sigh, setting my coffee mug down. “I was thinking, though,” I admit reluctantly, my voice a little softer now. “There’s a lot on my mind right now.”

He raises an eyebrow, his expression one of genuine concern. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I hesitate for a moment, torn between my desire to confide in him and my lingering frustration. But in the end, I can’t keep the truth from him any longer.

I take a deep breath and begin to recount everything—the strange couple at the party, their ominous conversation, and Officer Martinez’s warning about my safety. Karl listens attentively, his gaze unwavering.

When I finish, there’s a heavy silence between us. It feels as though I can practically see the gears turning in Karl’s head as he processes the information. His jaw tightens, and his brows furrow.

“Abby,” he finally says, his voice low and reassuring, “you’re safe here. I won’t let anything happen to you. I’ll even hire you a bodyguard, if that’s what you want.”

His words offer some comfort, but I can’t shake the feeling of vulnerability. The incident that happened in the blizzard is just proof of how defenseless I am.

“I appreciate that,” I say, “but I can’t always rely on others to protect me all the time. I want to be able to defend myself if the need arises, you know?”

“I understand completely,” Karl says quietly.

I poke at my arm with a sigh, gesturing to my lack of muscle tone. “I’ve grown flabby and weak. I should be ashamed.”

Karl’s eyes soften, and he reaches across the table to gently cover my hand with his own. Even though I’m still mad at him, I can’t seem to bring myself to pull away.

“Abby, you’re not flabby or weak,” he says earnestly. “But I understand your predicament. It’s important for anyone, especially a woman, to know how to defend themselves in this fucked up world.”

I’m taken aback by his understanding and willingness to help. “You really think so?” I ask, surprised.

He nods, his thumb rubbing soothing circles on the back of my hand. “Absolutely,” he replies. “Both with firearms and hand-to-hand combat.”

The mention of firearms makes my heart race. Guns have always frightened me, but I can’t deny that Karl’s offer has a certain appeal. “Firearms?” I ask, a hint of uncertainty in my voice.

Karl leans back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. “Yes,” he says. “I could take you to the shooting range sometime. Teach you how to handle a pistol. It’s an essential skill, especially in this world. And I think after what happened in the blizzard, you might want to consider having multiple ways to defend yourself.”

I chew my lower lip, torn between fear and curiosity. But in the end, I figure that it’s not the worst idea to at least try it out. Karl’s right; it is important to have multiple methods of defense. “Okay,” I say with a nod. “I’ll give it a shot... No pun intended.”

Karl chuckles. “Good,” he says. “I think you’ll find you feel a lot safer with a gun. Especially in the city, too.”

“And the hand-to-hand combat?” I find myself asking next. “What about that?”

Chapter 436

Abby

I wake up early the next morning, determined to start my training with Karl.

As I make my way to the home gym, a mixture of excitement and nerves courses through me. Karl is already there when I walk in, and the sight of him stretching leaves me momentarily breathless.

His shirt clings to his muscular frame, and the way he moves is both graceful and powerful as he stretches. I try not to stare, but I can't help it. He catches my gaze in the mirror, his eyes meeting mine, and a small smirk plays on his lips.

"What are you waiting for?" he asks, his voice low and inviting. "Come on in and start stretching. We've got work to do."

I blink, realizing I've been standing there like a deer caught in headlights. Gathering my composure, I step into the gym and begin to stretch over on a mat.

"So," Karl says as he approaches, "are you ready for your first day of training?"

"Sort of," I say with a slight chuckle. "It's been a while. Honestly, I can't even remember the last time I trained like this."

Karl smirks and sits down beside me. Our knees touch as we stretch alongside each other. "I'll only go a little hard on you," he teases. "Oh, and by the way, you're not gonna stretch your hamstrings properly if you keep doing that."

I frown as I look down at myself. "What's wrong with the way I'm doing it?"

Karl sighs, and without a word, he gets up and puts his hands on me. "It's like this..."

My heart pounds in my chest as his hands guide me, his touch gentle yet firm. I can't help but wonder if he's playing up our attraction to distract me from the fact that he announced a fake relationship at the party without ever discussing it with me.

It's a thought that lingers in the back of my mind as I try to focus on my training, but I also can't deny the fact that I'm horribly, undeniably attracted to him right now.

When we're finished stretching, Karl stands up, placing his hands on his hips.

“Alright, now that that’s done,” he says, “let’s do some warmups before we officially get started.”

I nod, grateful for the chance to shift our focus away from the charged atmosphere that has just unwittingly developed between us. “Sounds good,” I reply, trying to sound more confident than I really feel at the moment.

Karl demonstrates the first exercise, a set of burpees. He moves with ease, his body a well-oiled machine. “Start with these,” he says. “It’ll get your heart rate up and your muscles warm.”

I follow his lead, but I can’t help but feel self-conscious. I always hated burpees. My movements are stiff and awkward compared to his fluid motions. I can see the hint of a smile on his face as he watches me, and it gives me a pang of annoyance.

“Is something funny?” I ask, trying to hide my irritation.

Karl shakes his head, his smile widening. “Not at all,” he replies. “I’m just impressed with your dedication, that’s all. You’re doing great.”

His praise makes me blush, and I start pushing myself to keep up with the exercises a little bit better. We move on to high knees, and I struggle to lift my knees as high as Karl does. He doesn’t say anything, but his encouraging nods keep me going.

Next, Karl introduces mountain climbers, and I’m relieved that this exercise allows me to catch my breath. As I follow his lead, I notice the way his muscles ripple with each movement. It’s hard not to be distracted by his physique, but I force myself to focus on the task at hand.

Once we finish the warm-up exercises, Karl looks satisfied. “Good job, Abby,” he says. “You’re not nearly as out of shape as you seem to think.”

Thanks to our exertion in combination with his compliments, my earlier annoyance is almost forgotten. “Thanks,” I say. “I guess I’m not totally hopeless after all.”

Karl chuckles, and the sound of it sends a warm jolt down my spine. “You’re far from hopeless,” he says. “You’ve got a lot of potential, and with some more training, you might actually be able to take me on in a fight.”

His words make me blush. “Who’s to say I can’t take you on now?” I tease.

He smirks. “Let’s put that to the test, shall we?”

We take off our shoes and step onto the mat.

Over the next half hour, Karl shows me the basics of hand-to-hand combat, and he’s a tough instructor. He pushes me hard, making me sweat and pushing me to my limits. At times, I get frustrated with myself for not picking up the techniques quickly enough.

“Come on, Abby,” he says, his voice firm. “You’ve got to focus. Keep your guard up.”

I nod. I’m determined to do better, to push myself, to get the movements down. But as we continue, I can’t help but notice the intensity of our close proximity. Our bodies brush against each other, and I become acutely aware of his presence.

My wolf stirs. The tension between us is palpable.

Thanks to my momentary distraction, Karl manages to pin me to the floor. His weight presses down on me, and I struggle to break free. Our faces are inches apart, and I can feel his breath on my skin. My heart races as I realize how vulnerable I am in this position.

“You left yourself wide open,” he says, his voice low and dangerously seductive. “I could kill you right now if I wanted to.”

I stare up at him, breathless, and our eyes lock. The desire in his gaze mirrors my own, and it’s almost unbearable. Our lips are mere inches apart, and I can feel the magnetic pull between us.

Chapter 437

Abby

The training session with Karl leaves me feeling both exhilarated and exhausted. We've both worked up a good sweat by the time we're finished, and as we stand there wiping our foreheads with our towels, I can't help but feel a sense of accomplishment.

It's been a long time since I've pushed myself to train like this, and I'm determined to get better. And hell, maybe I'm not quite as weak as I thought I was.

"Thanks for this, Karl," I say, my voice a little breathless. "I really appreciate your help."

Karl smirks, his chest rising and falling with his own exertion. "You've still got a long way to go, Abby," he replies. "But you're making progress."

I nod, taking a deep breath. "Yeah, well, I might be here for a while anyway, as long as this restaurant case is still open. Officer Martinez told me it's probably best if I stay out of the city for the time being."

Karl's expression changes, and for a moment, I can't quite read it. But then he seems almost... pleased, his eyes softening. "Well, you know you're always welcome here," he says. "And besides... I like having you around. But I guess you already knew that."

I blush at his words and quickly look away. "I don't mind staying here either," I admit. "But it's just not fair that my poor restaurant staff is suffering because of this whole thing. I wish there was something I could do to make it up to them, you know?"

Karl furrows his brow, deep in thought. He seems to be mulling something over, and I can't help but wonder what exactly is going on inside his head. After a moment, though, he finally speaks.

"You know, Abby," he says slowly, "there might be something you can do to help your staff."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "What do you mean?"

Karl sighs, grabbing his bag off of the floor. "I have a meeting to attend right now," he says. "But when I get back, I might have a proposal for you. Something that might just solve your problem."

I'm taken aback by his cryptic response. "A proposal? What kind of proposal?"

Karl smirks, his lips curving into a mischievous smile. "Not sure yet," he says, already walking backwards toward the door as he taps the side of his head. "I can feel it cooking, though."

With that, he turns and walks away, leaving me standing there feeling both curious and a little confused. I watch him go, wondering what he has in mind and how it might help my restaurant staff.

...

I sigh as I make my way back to my room. The training session with Karl has left me feeling a mixture of confusing emotions, and I keep replaying the events in my head. The way our bodies brushed against each other, the intensity of our close proximity, and the undeniable attraction between us—all of it is impossible to ignore.

Chapter 438

I hesitate, unable to come up with an immediate response. The truth is, there's more to it than just physical attraction. Of course there's a connection between Karl and me; we were once married, after all.

But admitting it, even to myself, feels like a betrayal of all the anger and resentment I've held onto over the years.

"I know there's a connection," I finally say, my voice resigned. "There's no denying that. Sometimes, I even miss the way things used to be when we were married. But he hurt me, and I'm still pissed about it. About everything. And I'm not sure how easily I'll be able to look past all of that."

My wolf seems to understand, and she falls silent. I take a deep breath and shake my head, as if trying to dispel the thoughts of Karl's hot body. God, I feel like I'm in heat. I can't let myself get distracted by thoughts of Karl right now. I have a lot on my plate, and I need to focus on the restaurant case and my staff.

With that in mind, I head to the shower, hoping that the hot water will help wash away the lingering tension from the training session. As the water cascades over me, I try to clear my mind and prepare for the day ahead.

After my shower, I quickly get dressed and head down to the kitchen to make breakfast. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon greets me, and I can't help but feel a sense of comfort as I start to cook my meal.

But as I'm flipping pancakes in the skillet, I hear footsteps behind me. I almost expect it to see Karl, but instead I turn to see Elsie standing there, a mischievous glint in her eye. I groan inwardly, knowing that she's about to bring up the party from the other night.

"Morning, sunshine," she says, her voice filled with a mischief that can't be ignored. "So is it true, then?"

"Is what true?" I ask nonchalantly, even though I know exactly what she's referring to.

"The announcement," she says. "Are you and Karl actually back together? And trying for a baby, no less?"

My face flushes with embarrassment, and I can feel my heart rate spike. I put on a forced smile and reply, "It's all a little complicated right now, Elsie. I hope you don't mind if I don't talk about that right now."

Elsie just gives me a knowing look, her eyebrows raised in amusement. She doesn't say anything else, but the smirk on her face says it all. She knows there's more to the story, and she's not going to let me off the hook that easily.

I sigh and turn my attention back to the pancakes, hoping that Elsie will drop the subject. She's a dear friend, but I just don't know if I want to talk about it right now. It's been on my mind 24/7 since it happened, and I need a reprieve.

No, I need a distraction.

“Hey,” I say, tossing my pancake onto a plate and turning to face Elsie. “What are you up to today?”

She shrugs. “I’m off at noon,” she says. “Why?”

Chapter 439

Karl

As I walk into the conference room, Sarah, my election manager, is already there, poring over some documents spread out on the table. I’m still dressed in my workout clothes from my earlier training session with Abby, but I know Sarah won’t mind.

It’s an informal meeting, and I think she’s become accustomed to meeting me under even worse conditions. If I’m being honest, I’m not even sure if she ever notices what I’m wearing at all.

“Karl,” she says, looking up as I enter, “you’re here just in time. We’ve got a lot to discuss.”

I take a seat across from her, leaning back in my chair. Sarah isn’t one to mince words, and I like that about her, but I know what she’s going to say.

She wasn’t expecting me to make that little announcement at the masquerade, and I can only imagine what that whole debacle did to my approval ratings. I know I should have not only told her but also Abby, and I know they’re both pissed at me, but I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Call it... damage control.

All thanks to my brother and his evil girlfriend. I blame most of this on no one but them, although certain people may disagree with that sentiment.

“I assume we’re talking about the masquerade?” I ask, leveling Sarah with a cautious glint in my eyes.

Sarah nods, and her expression is one of nothing but concern. I can feel my heart sinking already just from looking at her; I wonder if the results are even worse. Maybe that little display at the party threw a

wrench into things. And with the election announcement date so close, I'm not sure what else could be possibly done to remedy the damage.

"Lay it on me," I say, gesturing for her to continue.

She sighs, taking off her glasses and setting them down on the stack of papers in front of her. "The event this weekend certainly did make a splash," she says with a slightly wry chuckle. "But believe it or not, your approval ratings did increase."

"So that's a good thing," I say, raising my eyebrows. "I guess that's better than I thought."

But Sarah shakes her head, and I can feel my heart sink again. "Don't start celebrating so soon. They didn't increase as much as we projected," she says. "Some people were a bit... put off by the drama."

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "Dammit," I mutter. "I knew the drama might have overshadowed the positive aspects of the evening. But what can we do about it now? The election is so close."

Sarah leans forward, her eyes locked onto mine. "We can capitalize on it," she says firmly. "We have another opportunity to boost your image and approval ratings, and it involves a public project that's been in the works for a while."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued by whatever she's got up her sleeve. "What project are you talking about?" I ask.

She smiles, and it's clear she's been waiting for this moment. "The new library project in town," she says. "It's a major undertaking, and it has already garnered a lot of attention. We can use it to show the community that you're not just all about throwing money at problems, but are rather willing to put in real labor and effort."

I'm taken aback by the suggestion. A new library? I've heard about the project, hell, I've even funded it; but I never expected to be involved in anything more than providing financial support. The idea of rolling up my sleeves and getting my hands dirty is, well, unexpected.

"I guess I see your point," I say slowly, still processing the idea. "But I already volunteered last week."

Sarah leans back, and I can tell she's trying not to roll her eyes at me. "Karl, you can't just volunteer once and expect people to love everything about you," she says.

I frown. "I'm not expecting everyone to—"

"That's neither here nor there," Sarah interrupts, waving her hand dismissively. "What I'm saying is this: you need to start showing some real elbow grease around town. You've gotta get your hands dirty, appeal to the everyday person. I know you've done it before, and you can do it again."

As she speaks, realization dawns on me. When I helped Abby with her restaurant and the subsequent cook-off, that was all done with a different goal in mind: the goal of winning Abby back. I guess I didn't look at things like that as opportunities to keep my position as Alpha.

"Alright," I say. "Go on."

Sarah takes a deep breath and puts her glasses back on. She pores over the paper in front of her for a moment, which is covered in numbers and handwritten notes. "Judging by my calculations," she says, "if you do this week long project, you'll—"

"A week?"

"Yes, Karl," she says exasperatedly. "A week. Now as I was saying, by the end of this project, your approval ratings could finally get you back on track. Just in time for the election announcement, too."

"And what about my brother?" I ask. "What if he volunteers, too? His approval ratings could just raise steadily above mine."

"Ethan is gliding along on his sickness to garner sympathy," Sarah says. "And the fact that he's the pack's rightful Alpha by blood. He won't volunteer. And besides, you've got Abby."

Abby. Her name alone brings a rush of mixed emotions.

“What does she have to do with this?” I ask.

Sarah sighs again. I can tell that I’m driving her insane with my relentless questions, and she must think I’m a moron. “Abby is beloved by many,” she says. “And lots of people are intrigued by your relationship. If you work together on this project, your approval ratings will raise even faster than normally projected.”

“But I can’t ask her to volunteer on something like this for an entire week,” I say. “She needs to rest. And with the issue of her restaurant—”

Chapter 440

Abby

Elsie and I make our way to the local cafe, the bell above the door jingling as we enter. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods instantly fills my senses, and the sound of soft jazz music plays over the speakers.

We order our usual coffee and find a corner booth to settle in. The chatter of other patrons fills the air, and it’s comforting to be surrounded by the familiar hum of small-town life. Elsie and I made a promise to each other to come out, just the two of us, without men on the mind.

I’m still a bit pissed at Karl after everything that happened, and I don’t want to talk about the announcement at the party, either. I just want to enjoy some coffee with my friend.

“So, Elsie,” I begin, taking a sip of my coffee, “what’s been on your mind lately?”

Elsie leans back in her chair, stirring her coffee. “You know, Abby,” she says, “I’ve actually been thinking about going back to college. I don’t know, is that crazy?”

I can’t hide my surprise, and I nearly spill my coffee in the process. “College? No, that’s not crazy at all, Elsie! What were you thinking of studying?”

A bright smile spreads across her face, and her enthusiasm is contagious. "I've always wanted to be a vet tech," she says. "I love animals, and I want to help sick animals whenever I can."

Elsie's words make me smile. I've always known that Elsie had a soft spot for animals, and it makes me happy to see my friend potentially pursuing something that makes her happy. "Oh, Elsie, I'm so happy for you," I say.

"So you think I should do it?" she asks.

I nod. "Of course I do," I respond. "Where are you thinking of going?"

Elsie's eyes sparkle, and she takes a sip of her coffee. "I've been looking into local community colleges just to start," she says. "I want to stay here, close to my mom; and if I'm being honest, I don't want to leave this town. I love it too much here."

"Community college is a great option," I say. "Plus, it's cheaper. And I'd be lying if I said I don't want you to stay somewhere close so that we can still hang out."

"That's also been on my mind," Elsie says with a smirk. "But I know you don't want to talk about it, so I won't bother you. Although, I do have to ask: are you going to be around more often, then?"

As she speaks, I can feel my heart begin to pound in my chest. I will be staying here at least until my restaurant can safely reopen, but what happens after that is still up in the air for the most part. "I... I'll likely be splitting my time between here and the city," I finally say. "But, Elsie, about me and Karl—"

Elsie clicks her tongue and shakes her head. "Abby, I thought we weren't gonna talk about it," she teases. "And besides, I've got a pretty good idea as to what's going on. You don't need to explain."

I can't help but let out a soft sigh of relief. "Thanks, Elsie."

We continue chatting and sipping our coffees, but the longer I sit here, the more the thought floats through my head: I do love it here. I miss the feeling of living in a smaller town. I miss the sense of community, and although I never thought I would say this, I sort of miss recognizing most people I see.

Even now, I can recognize many of the other cafe patrons: an elderly couple who has been coming here for years, a local writer who always sits in the corner with her laptop, a group of ladies who meet up every week. I even recognize the barista as a high school student who has been here since she was sixteen, although she must be almost twenty by now.

She makes the best cappuccinos, too.

Elsie, however, noticing the way I'm looking around, follows my gaze. "Everything okay?" she asks.