

## Kickass 441

### Chapter 441

Or will Gianna's claws sink into the very earth we stand on?

...

I'm sitting in the living room. The sun has long since gone down, and I'm curled up beneath a blanket with a good book. After my date with Elsie earlier, I feel lighter—but I also feel heavier, because I keep thinking about all of the possibilities, all of the what-ifs.

As I try to focus on my book, though, I hear someone coming. I look up from the pages and see Karl walking in, a mischievous grin on his face. His sudden appearance catches me off guard.

"You're grinning from ear to ear. What's going on?" I ask, closing the book and setting it aside.

Karl takes a seat across from me, his eyes fixed on mine. "I've got a proposition for you," he says, his voice filled with excitement.

I arch an eyebrow, intrigued by his enthusiasm. "Okay, I'm listening. What's this proposition of yours?"

"So I was talking to Sarah earlier," he says, "and I'm going to be working on a library building project in town."

"Okay," I say. "That sounds interesting."

"But that's not all," Karl explains. "I had an idea when she mentioned it to me. Something that might help your restaurant staff, just as you said you wanted to do."

I furrow my brow. "Go on."

Karl takes a deep breath before he continues. "What if we brought your staff here? The event needs a caterer for the workers. It'll be a weeklong project."

My eyes widen in surprise at his suggestion. It's not at all what I expected to hear. "Wait, you want to bring my restaurant staff here? For a whole week?"

Karl nods eagerly. "Yes! We can have them provide food for the workers, and I'll pay them well for their services. It'll give them a job and create great press for your restaurant, Abby."

I'm taken aback by the idea. On one hand, I miss running my restaurant and being in the kitchen. The thought of being at the forefront of a food operation again is enticing. On the other hand, it means facing Chloe and Leah and confessing everything.

It's going to be complicated and maybe even a little embarrassing, to say the least.

"Karl, this is a crazy idea," I say, shaking my head. "I mean, I miss running my restaurant, but bringing my staff here for a week?"

"Abby, you have to trust me on this," he says softly. "I've thought it through, and I believe it's a win-win situation. Your staff gets to make some money, and your restaurant gets positive publicity. You'll be in charge, running the show, just like old times."

I can't deny the appeal of being back in control of my restaurant, even if it's just for a week. And the idea of my staff benefiting from it is heartwarming. But there's still a part of me that's skeptical, that wonders if Karl's motives are solely driven by the need to boost his approval ratings.

"Karl, are you doing all of this just for your approval ratings?"

Karl's gaze softens. "Abby, I won't deny that my approval ratings matter to me," he admits. "But I also want to make things right, for both of us. I promised I would come up with something to help you and your staff, didn't I?"

"You've changed," I murmur.

Karl chuckles. "I try," he says. "And by the way, before you ask: I'll talk to Chloe and Leah."

My eyebrows raise. "Really? You'll do that?"

"Abby, of course," Karl says. "A deal is a deal. You wanted me to confess to Chloe and Leah, and so I will. Besides, I want to."

Karl's words take me by surprise. I guess I never expected him to actually follow through with the stipulations of our agreement, and yet here he is, making promises before I even have the chance to ask.

"Well?" Karl asks, quirking an eyebrow. "What do you say?"

I nod, already too intrigued by this idea to say no. "Let's go for it," I say.

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Abby

There's no time to waste; I need to write this email to my staff so I can invite them to come for this catering event. However, as I sit down at the kitchen island with my laptop in front of me, I can't help but feel my heart pound as I begin typing out the invitation.

I'll admit that this was a brilliant idea on Karl's part. This could be great, not just for the community, but for my staff. I feel bad leaving them out of work while the Alpha party debacle is under investigation, but this will be a great chance for them to earn some money.

And besides, I'm looking forward to seeing them. I miss my staff; they're not just my staff, but my friends. It'll be nice to have them all together, assuming they even accept. I guess I'm getting ahead of myself, though.

With a determined click of the send button, the invitation is on its way, and there's no turning back now. I know that Chloe, at the very least, will be perturbed, but it's too late now. I close my laptop and head up to my room, hoping that this will turn out in the way that Karl and I hoped.

But I can't deny that I'm still a bit taken aback by Karl's eager willingness to speak with Chloe and Leah, just as he promised. I hate to say it, but I didn't fully expect him to actually go through with that stipulation of our agreement, and it makes me wonder...

Maybe this arrangement of ours won't end in flames like I initially thought?

But again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

I step into my bedroom and toss my phone down on the bed. As I'm getting ready for my shower, though, my phone starts dinging. I'm sure the responses are rolling in, and I can't wait to see what everyone says.

Crossing the room, I pick up my phone and open my email app. Daisy, always quick with her replies, is the first to accept the invitation with enthusiasm. "Sounds like a great opportunity, Abby! Count me in!" she writes.

Ethan's response comes next, a simple "I'm in," without much elaboration. I can't help but wonder what's going through his mind right now, but I don't dwell on it for long. What matters is that he's coming, and I'm glad to have him.

A few moments later, John, ever the practical one, writes, "I'll be there, Abby. Let me know what you need me to do."

And then, finally, there's Anton's reply: short and sweet. "I can't say no! See you soon!"

As I read through their acceptances, I feel a mix of relief and apprehension. It's good to know that my staff is willing to participate, but I can't shake the feeling that this event will be a challenge on many levels. Karl promised he'd handle the rest, though, so I decide to let him handle it for once.

But just as I'm about to head for the shower, my phone starts buzzing. I turn slowly, feeling my heart sink as I see an incoming FaceTime call from none other than Chloe and Leah. Their names flash on my screen, a reminder of the tension that might arise from this whole ordeal.

I still don't know how they'll take it when Karl and I tell them what's going on. I just hope they're supportive.

I let out a quiet curse under my breath as I accept the call. The video call connects, and the screen splits into two, revealing Leah and Chloe's concerned faces staring back at me.

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Chloe doesn't mince words. Her tone is a bit harsh, although not necessarily in a mean way. I can tell she's concerned, which I of course expected.

I hesitate for a moment, my mind racing for an explanation that won't cause even more concern. "I'm staying with Karl," I finally admit. "I needed to leave the city."

Leah's brow furrows. "Why?" she asks. "Is everything okay?"

I let out a sigh, realizing that there's no point in hiding the truth any longer. "The restaurant case escalated," I admit. "The detective working the case said that I should probably go somewhere that's a bit safer. Away from the press and angry citizens, you know?"

Chloe's eyes widen in shock, and Leah's expression mirrors her surprise. "So you're staying with Karl?" Chloe exclaims. "Why didn't you tell us? You could have stayed with one of us, not with him."

I bite my lip, feeling their disappointment emanating through the screen. "I didn't know how to tell you," I confess. "I thought it would only be for a few days, but now it might be longer."

"Well, as long as you're safe," Leah says slowly, even though I can tell she's restraining some of her concern.

But Chloe's frustration is evident. "Abby, have you been sleeping with him this whole time?"

Her words tumble out like an avalanche, and I can tell that it perturbs even Leah. Chloe has never been one to mince words, but it still hurts sometimes. I can tell that this is going to be no small feat to make

Chloe understand why Karl and I are doing what we're doing. I can't even begin to imagine what she'll think when we announce our fake relationship.

My cheeks burn with embarrassment, and I clear my throat nervously. "Look, it's not like that," I lie, even though I know I shouldn't. The truth is that Karl and I are sleeping together, casually, but I just can't bring myself to admit it. I keep telling myself that it's just because it's personal, but I don't think that's the only reason.

Leah's voice is more measured as she chimes in, which is a welcome relief. "Abby," she says, "we're just worried about you, that's all. You have to be careful. Karl has his own agenda, and we don't want you getting hurt, you know?"

I appreciate their concern, even if it's mixed with a healthy dose of skepticism. "I know," I say, my voice softening. "I'll explain everything, but for now, I could really use your support. Do you guys wanna come, or...?"

Leah nods, her expression more understanding. "Even though I don't officially work for the restaurant, I'd love to come and visit, help you out if you need it," she says. "Besides I took this week off of work, so it'll be nice to get out of the city."

I can't help but smile at Leah's willingness to lend a hand. "Thank you, Leah," I murmur. "That means a lot. But don't feel bad if you change your mind."

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Abby

I can't wait for the next morning to come. The excitement bubbles up inside of me as I lie in bed, anticipating the arrival of my restaurant staff and friends. I know it's only been a couple of weeks, but it feels like it's been far too long since I've seen them, and I can't wait to hug each one of them and welcome them to the mansion.

I just hope that Chloe and Leah don't get too upset when Karl and I tell them about our little... arrangement.

Still, despite my trepidation, as the sun breaks through the curtains, I practically leap out of bed and hurriedly get dressed in comfortable jeans and a cozy sweater. I want to be outside to greet them when they arrive, which should be soon.

After a quick breakfast, it's almost time for them to arrive; they should be here any minute, so I head outside. And, lo and behold, I can already see the cars pulling into the driveway.

The first car belongs to John. Aside from John, Anton steps out as well. Behind them pulls in another car, Ethan and Daisy. I can already see another car—Leah's car—driving down the road, and although it makes my heart pound, I'm still utterly excited to see my friends.

"You guys came," I say as I approach the group that has already gathered. I pull each of them into a hug. "How was the drive?"

"It's so scenic out here," Daisy says as she looks around. "The drive was beautiful."

Anton, always the joker, chuckles and chimes in, "Abby, you didn't mention you were staying at a palace."

I can't help but blush a bit at their shocked reactions. "Surprise," I say with a sheepish grin. "Welcome to, um... Karl's place." I decide to keep the mention of this actually being my home at one point in time, too, and no one seems to notice my hesitation.

Just then, Karl himself appears at the door, a warm smile on his face. "Welcome, everyone," he says, extending his hand to Anton, who shakes it with a bewildered expression.

John furrows his brow. "Karl, why didn't you ever mention that you're an Alpha?" he asks.

For a moment, I half expect the air to fill with tension. But thankfully, it doesn't. Karl just chuckles and shrugs. "I was trying to keep my Alpha life separate while helping Abby at the restaurant, but yes, I am an Alpha," he admits.

Just then, Chloe and Leah pull into the driveway. They both climb out of Leah's car, and I meet them halfway to give them both a hug. "It's so nice to see you guys," I say softly as I hug them both tightly. "I missed you."

"We missed you, too," Leah says gently.

I pull apart from the hug and turn to Chloe next. She hugs me tightly and warmly, but I know she's still a bit upset. It's hard to tell if she's upset about Karl and me or if she's more upset that I didn't tell her sooner. Either way, now that everyone is here, it's time for the tour.

I can feel Chloe's eyes on me, her judgment palpable as we join the rest of the group. I try not to let it bother me, but it does sting just a little. I hope she will put this behind her and not be too upset for much longer. But Chloe isn't stupid; I know she'll see reason.

Karl leads us all inside the mansion, and I watch as my friends' eyes widen in amazement at the space around them. Everyone except for Chloe and Leah, who have both been here many times before, is absolutely shocked. Karl shows them to their respective rooms, and they are all shocked by the number of guest rooms available.

Once everyone has settled in, we gather in the mansion's spacious conference room, where Karl usually holds his meetings, for a meeting of our own to discuss our plans and the menu for the event. I want it to be a collaborative effort, and I know my staff has plenty of great ideas.

"We need to focus on dishes that can be prepared in bulk for the workers," I say, jotting down notes on a pad in front of me. "I was thinking things like pasta, chicken breast, small desserts..."

"How about sandwiches and small sides, too?" Ethan chimes in. "Fingerling potatoes, cole slaw, mac and cheese?"

"That sounds delicious," Daisy says, already rubbing her stomach with anticipation. "Don't mind me if I steal some."

I can't help but chuckle. "There'll be plenty for everyone," I say.



“What about the setup situation?” John asks next. “Will we be cooking on site, or...?”

“We’ll do as much prep work here as we can, and we’ll also have a tent with a setup at the volunteering location,” I answer.

“Ah,” Anton chimes in. “I cannot wait to cook in this kitchen. It’s such a lovely space.”

“It was designed by the best,” Karl says, glancing at me with a smirk.

That statement hangs in the air for a moment, and I can feel everyone’s curiosity mounting. They all look back and forth between me and Karl before Anton asks, “Who designed it?”

Karl, clearly not sure what to say, shoots me a cautious glance. I clear my throat, feeling a bit sheepish. “I did,” I admit, not meeting their eyes.

The shock in the room is palpable, and I finally look up to see their expressions. Everyone, except for Chloe and Leah, wears expressions of astonishment.

I can’t hide the blush that creeps up my cheeks as I add, “And, um, I also designed a lot of the interior of this house.”

The palpable silence hangs in the room for a moment, and then the questions begin to pour in.

“How is that so?” Daisy asks. “Abby, did you know Karl before or something?”

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Karl

So far, the plans to have Abby’s staff cater for the library building event are going well. Abby was very receptive to the idea, and now her staff is all here.

I'm certain that this event will be great press, not just for the election, but also for Abby and her restaurant. And even though this election is important to me, so is helping Abby.

As the meeting finally comes to an end, though, I can feel my heart beginning to race ever so slightly. It's time to talk to Chloe and Leah.

I did make a promise, after all; and I'm no longer in the business of not keeping my promises. If Abby wants me to talk to her friends, then I'll do exactly that. And I'll do a damn good job of it, too. I'm not about to let Chloe and Leah, especially Chloe, walk out of here with a bad taste in their mouth.

I turn to face Chloe, Leah, and Abby, who exchange wary glances. Abby knows what's coming next, and I know she's a bit embarrassed. Hell, I'm even a little embarrassed too, but I won't show it.

The atmosphere is tense, and I can feel my wolf bristle with unease. Chloe, in particular, shoots me a glare that could cut through steel, and I can't help but inwardly question the state of our supposedly improved relationship.

Putting on a smile, I muster my most diplomatic tone. "Chloe, Leah, could I talk to you two for a minute?"

Chloe's apprehension is palpable, and she shoots me a skeptical look as she folds her arms across her chest. "What could you possibly need to 'talk' to me about?" she retorts.

I have to hold in a sigh. It's clear that Chloe is upset—no, more than upset. Furious. But regardless, I push aside the unease gnawing at me and maintain my composure. "I just want to set the record straight," I say evenly.

Abby steps in, her voice gentle but pleading. "Chloe, please, hear Karl out.:"

Chloe hesitates for a moment before relenting with a reluctant nod. Leah, standing beside her, seems more open to the idea. "Alright, Karl," Chloe concedes, her tone less confrontational. "I guess we can 'talk'."

I lead them to my office, and they take seats in front of my desk. Abby leans against the windowsill, watching from a safe distance as though she expects her friends to explode like dynamite once I tell them everything. And honestly, I don't blame her.

Chloe wastes no time in unleashing her accusations. The second the door is closed, she whirls on me, her tone biting. "So, Karl," she begins, her voice sharp and accusatory, "what is it you wanted to 'talk' about? Because I think I already know what the deal is here."

"Oh?" I ask, exchanging an almost imperceptible glance with Abby. "And what would that be?"

Chloe scoffs. "You two are totally sleeping together," she says. "I can see it all over both of you. And honestly, Karl, I'm appalled that you're doing this to her. After what you put her through—"

"Chloe, please," Abby chimes in, "don't jump to conclusions. Just hear what he has to say."

"I fail to understand why any of us should listen to anything this guy has to say, Abby," Chloe retorts before turning back to me. "You've hurt Abby before, and now it seems like you're trying to pull her away from the city. How long do you plan on keeping her here, hm? Is all of this really to keep her safe, or is it just another one of your schemes to win her back? To manipulate her?"

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"I know I've broken Abby's heart." I pause, my tone somber and low as I stare down at my lap. "But I thought we had an understanding, Chloe. I don't want to hurt Abby ever again. I thought you knew that."

"Why, then, did she come here to hide from the city and didn't even tell her two best friends?" Chloe retorts.

"Because," Abby says, her voice raising slightly, "I was afraid that you would freak out, just like you're doing right now."

Abby's words are met with abject silence. Chloe and Leah both look at her incredulously; it's clear that they didn't expect her to say that, and neither did I. But I have to admit that I'm proud of her for speaking her mind.

The tension between Chloe and Abby has been palpable for a long time now. I've always appreciated Chloe's candor, but sometimes she can be incredibly overbearing. Not that I can complain, because I've been the overbearing type myself. But I'm working on it.

We've all got something to work on, right?

"Touche," Chloe says quietly, leaning back in her chair. It's clear she's at a loss for words.

Leah shifts uncomfortably in her seat. "I'd like to hear the full story now," she says, always the more reserved one out of the bunch.

I exchange a glance with Abby before taking a deep breath. It's time. "Abby and I are in a fake relationship," I admit, my gaze fixed on Chloe.

Chloe's eyes widen in disbelief, and she shoots Abby a searching look. "Is this true?" she demands.

Abby hesitates for a moment, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. But before Chloe can jump to conclusions, Abby speaks, her voice genuine and resolute. "Yes," she says, her voice unwavering. "It's true. We just decided to do it this weekend."

A heavy silence descends upon the room. Chloe's face is turning a deep shade of red, and it's as if she's not even breathing.

"Listen," I say, "it was all my idea. I'll admit that I announced it at a party this weekend without discussing it with her first, and that's on me." I pause then, turning to look at Abby. "And Abby, if you ever want to pull out, I hope you know that I won't stop you. There's nothing holding you to this. It's your decision."

Another silence falls over the room. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest, and it's as if a bomb is about to explode. Finally, Chloe croaks out, "Are you sure you're okay with something like this, Abby?"

My gaze shifts over to Abby. She's standing there, her fingers curling and uncurling into fists at her sides. For a moment, I almost expect her to say no, that she's not okay with it, and that she wants to go home.

And honestly, I wouldn't blame her. Hell, I wouldn't even stop her. I know what sort of position she's in here, and I know it's not fair. How could I blame her for wanting out?

But she doesn't. Instead, she levels her gaze with her friends, and nods.

"I'm more than okay with it," she says. "In fact, it's a brilliant idea; it's going to be good for both me and Karl, and it'll help us achieve what we want. I'm completely on board with it."

I almost let out a sigh of relief. I know that Abby has been pissed at me ever since the impromptu announcement, but to hear her express her support of this arrangement fills me with ease. It makes me just want to work even harder to ensure that this deal of ours ends in a win-win situation for both of us, even if we don't wind up getting back together in the end.

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Abby

"I support you. I support you all the way, Abby."

Leah's unexpected support leaves me feeling both shocked and relieved. Her willingness to stand by my side and accept this unconventional arrangement fills me with gratitude, especially after the tension that hung heavily in the room moments ago.

Tears begin to well up in my eyes, causing the forms in front of me to blur slightly. But I don't bother blinking them away.

Chloe, however, remains silent despite Leah's vocal support. Her face is a deep shade of red, and she's staring down at her lap, clearly struggling to grapple with the information we've just shared with her.

"Well?" Leah asks, turning to Chloe. "What do you think, Chlo?"

But Chloe doesn't answer right away. She's still silently fuming, her eyes darting back and forth. I can practically hear the gears turning in her head from where I'm currently standing.

“Leah,” I murmur, “what made you want to support us? I know it’s crazy, and I hope you know you’re not obligated to agree with this scheme.”

Leah’s eyes meet mine, and her response is unwavering. “Abby, you’re my friend,” she says gently and earnestly. “I trust your judgment, and if you believe this is the right path, then who am I to judge? As your friend, it’s important for me to be there for you, not at odds with you, you know?”

A warmth spreads through me at her words, and I can’t help but close the distance between us, enveloping Leah in a tight hug. “Thank you, Leah,” I whisper gratefully. “Your support means the world to me.”

Leah smiles, rubbing my back, and pulls away after a few moments. “What kind of a friend would I be if I didn’t trust you?” she asks, glancing over at Chloe. It’s a warning glance, as if she’s silently telling Chloe to put her reservations aside and stand with her friends. “That’s what friends are for, after all.”

Now, only Chloe remains, and her silence is a stark contrast to Leah’s willing acceptance. Her anger is palpable, and I can sense the storm brewing inside of her.

Part of me wonders if I’ll potentially lose a friend today, after months of tension between the two of us. Hell, I almost lost her barely more than a month ago, when she stormed out of the restaurant. I had thought we had all made up, that we were on the same page, but it feels as though Chloe is as distrusting as ever.

I can’t blame her entirely, but it’s also difficult to see her reasoning right now. And if she really does refuse to be supportive, then I’m not sure how much more of this I could possibly handle.

Of course it would hurt to lose her, but so would losing my restaurant, losing my livelihood, or being infertile forever. If I have to make a choice, then I’ll need to really consider everything here.

I just hope that the choice won’t need to be made.

Finally, she breaks her silence, her voice seething with frustration.

“Karl, you’ve only ever broken Abby’s heart,” she begins, her tone low and accusing. “How can you expect us to believe that this won’t end in disaster? And how in the hell does this fake relationship benefit both of you?”

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Karl takes a deep breath, his gaze flickering to me for the briefest of moments, before he begins. “I have an election coming up, and having a family will significantly boost my approval ratings,” he explains. “On the other hand, as you know, Abby is currently facing allegations regarding her restaurant and the Alpha party food poisoning incident.”

“And how the hell will a fake relationship help her?” Chloe interjects, shooting me a concerned look.

“By presenting ourselves as a united front, not only will she be physically safer,” Karl explains unwaveringly, “but I can also stand by her side and help her through it. The court might be more likely to believe her story if she has a powerful Alpha supporting her.”

“Chloe, there are layers to what happened at the Alpha party that the police are still trying to uncover,” I add. “It’s a dangerous situation. It seems very likely that I was framed by someone who wishes to bring harm to a Luna’s children. If whoever orchestrated this finds out I’ve been talking to the police, I could be in danger.”

Chloe’s brows furrow as she tries to process everything we’ve just told her. It’s clear that she softened a bit at the mention of my safety, but her skepticism still lingers, and she crosses her arms defensively.

“I guess that’s all well and good,” she says, “but it still feels fishy. Abby is only doing this for her restaurant, isn’t she? Is there some other catch to sweeten the deal?”

I exchange a quick glance with Karl. He left out a crucial part of our arrangement to protect our privacy, and I appreciate that, but I know it’s time to come clean—about one thing, at least. I don’t need to mention our more... personal arrangement, but if I actually do wind up having a baby someday, they’ll obviously find out.

And I can’t hide something so significant from my best friends. I want them to be there every step of the way through the treatments, the ups and the downs, the potential outcomes.

I want them to be there if the treatments work and I finally get to have the baby I've always wanted, and I also want them to be there if the treatments don't work.

With a deep breath, I finally speak up, having made up my mind. "Chloe, you're right," I admit. "There is something more to it."

Chloe's eyes flash. "I knew it," she mutters. "You two are totally sleeping together. After everything he did, Abby, you're going to hook up with him?"

I swallow, exchanging another brief glance with Karl. His eyes are wide, and it's clear that he wasn't expecting me to bring any of this up. But it's too late now.

"It's not that," I say. "Karl is helping me find treatment to address my... infertility."

Chloe and Leah's eyes widen in shock. They exchange incredulous glances, and Leah steps forward, giving me a cautious look. "Really, Abby?" she says gently. "Is that true?"

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Abby

Chloe and Leah stare at me incredulously after what I just told them. Their expressions are a blend of surprise and concern, and I can't blame them; I did, after all, just inform them that I plan on trying to have a baby.

"But Abby," Chloe says, standing and pointing incredulously at Karl, "how the hell is he supposed to help you heal your infertility?"

I meet Karl's gaze once more, finding his shock mirroring my own. The truth has tumbled out, raw and unfiltered, and there's no retracting it now.

"Karl has been speaking to a doctor," I say. "A doctor who might have some experimental treatments that could help me have a baby."



But Chloe just shakes her head, her face a mask of frustration. She runs both of her hands over her hair; it's a gesture of hers that's a telltale sign of anger and confusion.

"Abby, you need to listen to what you're saying right now," she says quietly. "Experimental treatments? A baby? Who would the father even be, hm? Would you be a single mom? Would Karl help you? What if the treatments don't work and your heart just gets broken all over again? What then, Abby?"

Chloe's barrage of questions hits home, but only because I've asked myself these questions relentlessly over the past few days. She's not wrong; this could end very badly. The possibilities are endless. But at the same time, it's something that I've decided to go through with on my own, without Karl's influence. The risks might be great, but so might be the rewards. I want to try to have a baby the natural way.

And if there are treatments for my body that could heal my infertility so I can achieve that, then I'm willing to try them.

"Look, I know it sounds utterly nuts," I say softly, taking another step forward. "But again, Chloe, I'm an adult; and this is the decision I've made. I want to try to have a baby. I know the risks, and I'm willing to take them."

As I speak, my gaze shifts over to Leah. Her eyes are lit up with what looks like hope, and there's a soft smile tugging at the corners of her lips. She's always understood the depth of my longing for a family, and has always stood by me through the highs and lows. Despite whatever reservations she may have, I know that she'll stand with me.

But Chloe is different.

She's never been quick to trust anyone, and she's more emotional than Leah. She has never been the type to mince words, even when it makes other people uncomfortable or downright angry. I often admire that about her, but sometimes, it can be a bit much. Even now, her eyes drill into me, sharp and probing.

It's as if she's trying to dissect the layers of my revelation, to find what lies are hiding beneath the surface. I can tell that she doesn't believe the entire story; it's possible she can even tell that Karl and I are, indeed, sleeping together, and that he would even be the father of the baby if these experimental treatments wind up working.

But right now, I can't confirm nor deny that. I think I'm entitled to have a little privacy, too, aren't I?

"Well I, for one, think that's amazing," Leah breathes out, her voice tinged with genuine happiness. She steps closer, wrapping me in a hug that feels like a safe haven. "I know how badly you've always wanted to be a mom. If this is what you really want, then I'm here for you."

Chloe, however, hesitates. Her steps are measured, her hug restrained, but it's a hug nonetheless. When she pulls away, her eyes are still narrowed.

"You know I'm here for you, too, right?" she says, a forced lightness in her voice. "Especially if you're braving the path of single motherhood."

Her embrace is comforting, familiar. And yet the words she whispers next send a shiver down my spine. "Just be careful not to make a choice you'll regret. Okay?"

I pull back slightly, searching Chloe's face for a hint of her real thoughts. She's normally an open book to me, but right now, she's closed off and reserved. I can tell that she's trying to hide her worry, but it's not completely masked.

The room suddenly feels too small, the walls inching closer. Leah, the eternal optimist, tries to shift the mood. "How about we celebrate this news?" she suggests, her voice bright. "Dinner tonight, with the whole team?"

"Sounds perfect," I reply, grateful for the change in topic. "There's a nice place in town we could all go to."

After Leah and Chloe leave, I turn to Karl. He's standing now, as silent as ever. I can tell that my admission took him by surprise. "I didn't mean to tell them everything," I admit, feeling an unexpected need to apologize. "It just sort of... tumbled out."

Karl shakes his head, a gentle understanding in his eyes. "It's your right to share if that's what you want, Abby," he says. "Just make sure you really are certain about all of this—about the treatment, our deal, all of it. I mean what I said earlier."

A sigh escapes me. “The baby part, I’m sure of. The rest... it’s complicated. But I’m not planning on pulling out now.”

He nods slowly. “Well, like I said, it’s your choice,” he says.

His words are comforting, but they also remind me of the intricate web the two of us are currently weaving. Two lives, connected by a shared goal but tangled up in all of the drama we’ve been through in the past. I can tell he wants the baby, too, which only adds to the complexities.

Thankfully, though, dinner that night feels like a reprieve, with the team laughing and chatting over drinks and delicious meals. It’s a relief to be with them after what feels like an eternity, and since Karl and I announced a “relationship” at the masquerade, I feel like I can relax a bit in public.

However, Chloe is as quiet as ever. She talks and laughs along with the group, but her smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes. It’s clear that she’s thinking, analyzing, weighing the words I had shared earlier.

Chapter 450

Abby

I stand in the dimly lit kitchen, leaning against the counter with a half-empty glass of wine in my hand. The soft hum of the refrigerator is the only sound breaking the silence of the night.

Dinner with the team was lively tonight, filled with laughter and chit-chat, but now the quiet feels heavy, almost suffocating. I can’t stop thinking about what Chloe said earlier about not making a choice I’ll live to regret, and the thought of it has kept me awake. Everyone else has long since gone to bed in their respective rooms, but I slipped out of bed and snuck down to the kitchen for a glass of wine to calm my nerves.

I’m lost in my thoughts when I suddenly hear the sound of footsteps approaching. A moment later, Karl steps into the room. He’s in his pajamas, a loose pair of pants and an oversized hoodie, and his hair is a little messy from tossing and turning. I always thought he was cute when he’s like this.

“Oh, hey,” he says, eyeing my glass of wine. “I didn’t expect to see you in here.”

I nod, taking a sip of my wine. “Couldn’t sleep,” I admit. “I take it you couldn’t, either.”

Karl shakes his head. He walks past me and picks up the bottle of wine sitting next to me, inspecting the bottle for a moment before he grabs a glass out of the cabinet and pours one for himself.

“Cheers,” he says, holding up his glass. I respond with a slight smile and clink my glass against his.

For a few moments, we just stand there in silence as we drink our wine. I think that everything has been such a whirlwind lately that we’re both too exhausted to speak, which I appreciate. But the moment is short-lived.

“Abby, can we talk?” he asks, his voice gentle yet carrying an undercurrent of seriousness. I nod, setting my glass down. The clink of it against the countertop sounds louder than usual in the quiet of the kitchen.

Karl leans against the opposite counter, his eyes searching mine. “Why did you decide to tell Chloe and Leah only part of the truth?” he inquires, his tone not accusatory but genuinely curious.

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of his question. “I didn’t feel right keeping the baby part from them,” I admit, my gaze drifting to the window where the moon casts a soft glow on the garden outside. “They’re my friends, Karl. They deserve to know about something so important in my life, you know?”

Karl nods, a look of understanding flickering through his eyes. “And the other part?” he probes gently, referring to the more... intimate aspect of our arrangement.

I look back at him, my heart skipping a beat as I think about what we promised to each other. Casual sex—only for ‘practicality’, of course. A way to let our frustrations out, and if my treatments work, to fulfill that portion of our deal. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself, but I’m not stupid; I know there’s far more to it than that.

“I appreciate that you didn’t mention that to them,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “I’d like to keep that aspect private, at least for now. I just don’t feel comfortable airing everything about our personal lives.”