

Kickass 451

Chapter 451

But Karl isn't the only one who has changed. A few years ago, I would have spilled everything to my friends and I wouldn't have done a quarter of the damage control that I do now. I think part of the reason why Chloe is the way she is with me is because I set that precedent of telling her every little detail of my personal life from the very beginning.

And while I value being open with my friends, I'm older and more reserved now. I've realized that I don't need to be an open book all of the time. It's okay to keep some things to myself and not feel bad about it.

I guess we both have done a lot of growing up, huh?

Then, much to my surprise, Karl leans in and plants a gentle kiss on my forehead. The gesture is tender, so unlike the fiery passion we've shared in more private moments recently. It's a side of Karl I'm still getting used to, a side that makes my heart flutter in a way I thought it had forgotten how to.

"Thank you, Karl," I whisper, my eyes meeting his. There's a softness in his gaze that I haven't seen in a long time, a vulnerability that he rarely shows. It makes him seem more human, more real.

He steps back, giving me space, but the warmth of his touch lingers. "I just want you to be comfortable with all of this," he says, his voice sincere. "I know it's a lot to process, and I'm here for you, in any way you need."

I nod, feeling a sense of gratitude wash over me. Karl's support means more to me than I can express. The complexities of our relationship, the arrangement we've made, it's all uncharted—and terrifying—territory for me. But knowing that he's here, that he's willing to stand by me through it all, gives me a sense of courage I didn't know I had.

Karl and I fall into another comfortable silence as we sip our wine in the quiet kitchen. My glass is almost empty, and I can feel the effects of the alcohol beginning to set in, making my mind fuzzy around the edges. The alcohol loosens my tongue, too.

“Do you ever think about what this could become?” I ask suddenly, the question slipping out before I can stop it. “Us, I mean.”

Karl’s expression shifts, a hint of surprise flickering across his features. “What are you saying?” he asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know,” I admit, my cheeks flushing red. “Nevermind. I’m just tipsy.”

But Karl doesn’t relent. He levels me with a stern and serious gaze, causing my heart to skip again. “I’ve been trying not to think too far ahead lately,” he admits. “But I’d be lying if I said the thought hadn’t crossed my mind.”

I feel a flutter in my chest, a mix of hope and apprehension. “And?” I prompt, needing to hear more.

“And...” he pauses, choosing his words carefully. “And I think there’s potential for something more. Something real.”

The honesty in his voice catches me off guard. The possibility of ‘something real’ with Karl is both terrifying and exhilarating. It’s a future I hadn’t allowed myself to consider, not seriously anyway.

“What about you?” Karl asks then, taking another sip of his wine. “What do you think of it?”

I flush an even deeper shade of red, and out of instinct, I quickly knock back the remainder of my wine and set the glass in the sink. I feel raw and vulnerable, and I’m suddenly regretting bringing it up at all—because I’m worried that I just opened Pandora’s box.

Chapter 452

Abby

The morning sun filters through the large windows of the mansion’s kitchen, casting a warm, golden glow over the array of ingredients that’s waiting for us.

I'm standing at the counter island, a chopping board and a pile of fresh vegetables in front of me. The familiar scents of garlic and herbs fill the air, mingling with the sound of sizzling pans and the occasional burst of laughter from my team.

"Merde, John," Anton exclaims, throwing his hands up in the air. "Two weeks, and you have forgotten how to make a roux!"

John chuckles, a deep and gravelly sound. "Oh, hush, Anton," he teases. "You know I make the best macaroni and cheese you've ever tasted. You've said so yourself."

Anton grimaces. "No, no," he says, "I said that your macaroni and cheese is the best I have tasted, but that is only because it's the only macaroni and cheese I have ever tasted. I would never willingly sully my palate with something so... fatty and unrefined."

Anton's words lead to a chorus of laughter from myself and the rest of the team. It's a comforting cacophony, a reminder of why I love cooking—it's not just about the food, but the people and the moments we share.

And god, how much I missed cooking with my team.

As I keep chopping the vegetables, I glance around at the well-oiled machine that is my staff.

John and Anton, as always, are manning the stoves with practiced ease. They move almost in a mirror image of each other; it's funny to see how close they've become, like brothers as they work. They banter relentlessly, but their dishes always turn out perfectly, with just the right blend of seasoning and the perfect texture.

Meanwhile, Ethan, Daisy, Leah, and Chloe are spread out across the kitchen, each absorbed in their own tasks. Ethan is meticulously chopping onions, Daisy is stirring a pot of what will soon become a rich and hearty stew, Leah is whisking a dressing for the salad, and Chloe, ever the perfectionist, is arranging the freshly baked bread on various platters.

She doesn't see me looking, and I don't keep my gaze on her for long. We've hardly spoken this morning.

“Abby, how’s the veggie prep coming along?” John calls out, his voice rising above the clatter of pots and pans. He pulls me out of my reverie, and I return to my work.

“Just about done,” I reply, my knife slicing through a carrot with a satisfying crunch.

“I must say,” Anton chimes in then, “this kitchen is a dream to work in. Your taste is impeccable, Abby. Perhaps you and Karl should team up again as husband and wife, and decorate my kitchen next.”

“Oh, Anton,” Daisy chides, clicking her tongue. “Watch what you say!”

Anton’s words, although coming from a good place, make my heart clench a little. I glance up at Chloe, who just so happens to look up at me at the same time. She’s still mad at me, and we both quickly look away.

Chapter 453

Volunteers are everywhere, some painting walls, others laying bricks, and many more engaged in various tasks like carrying beams or giving orders. It’s inspiring to see that so many people have showed up today, and I can’t help but wonder if their Alpha’s presence had something to do with it.

In fact, I soon see the cameras gathering, and my suspicions are confirmed. They’re already snapping sly photos of me and Karl, no doubt for their blogs or newspapers or magazines. I can practically see the headlines now: “Alpha Karl and Luna Abby back together, serving their community”.

I just hope that the headlines don’t have anything to do with food poisoning or scandals.

We quickly find our designated spot and start setting up our tent. The air is filled with the sounds of hammers and drills, mingled with the laughter and chatter of volunteers.

As I start laying out the food with my team and getting to work on the grills, however, I feel something; like eyes on me.

I glance up, and my eyes inadvertently find Karl. He's across the field, working with a group of volunteers on the library's new structure. He's in his element, laughing and joking with the others, and yet every so often, his gaze drifts over to our tent... and lands directly on me.

Our eyes meet, and for a moment, time seems to stand still. His look is full of something I can't quite decipher—pride, perhaps, or maybe something deeper. I feel a blush creeping up into my cheeks, and I quickly look away, focusing back on my cooking.

"Abby, the sauce!" Daisy calls out, snapping me out of my daze.

"Right, on it," I say, quickly turning my attention to the simmering pot on the portable stove. The sauce was on the verge of burning, but Daisy snapped me out of it just in time. I turn the heat down, and give it a taste. It needs just a little more seasoning, and then it'll taste perfect over the chicken breasts we've prepared.

As the day progresses, the smells of our cooking fill the air, drawing people over. We serve up hearty portions of stew, fresh salads, and warm bread, the smiles and thank-yous from the volunteers fueling our spirits. It's hard work, but it's also incredibly satisfying.

During a brief lull, I step out of the tent, wiping my hands on my apron.

I look over at the building project and see Karl lifting a heavy beam, his muscles flexing under the strain.

I swallow as I watch him, feeling that heat rise through my body again. Lately, maybe because of my wolf's return, I've felt undeniably attracted to him. No matter how hard I try to push it away, I keep thinking about what we did in the woods on the night of the party, when my dress got wet in the snow and I didn't have a care in the world. I hate to admit it, but I want to feel that again.

"You could, you know," my wolf teases, her voice low and husky. "Behind the shed over there—"

"Don't you dare," I retort inwardly, my eyes still fixed on Karl and his gleaming muscles. "Don't do this to me right now."

Karl

As I lift another beam into place, a bead of sweat trickles down my forehead, but my attention is elsewhere. Across the field, Abby is in her element, orchestrating the kitchen with a natural ease.

There's an undeniable rhythm to her movements, and I find myself watching her probably more than I should. I try to focus on my task, reminding myself I'm here for the approval ratings, not personal indulgences, but that's easier said than done.

Abby looks gorgeous all of the time, but she's even more stunning when she's in her element. The pull between us is undeniable, too, and I can feel my wolf tugging at me whenever I look at her.

I can't help but wonder if her wolf is pulling at her, too.

But then my mind wanders back to what happened late last night in the kitchen. She had asked what I thought would happen between us over a glass of wine, and I had answered as honestly as I could despite the storm of emotions raging inside of me.

I had told her what I secretly hoped, what I secretly wanted. Although, I guess it hasn't exactly been a secret all this time.

And yet, when I had asked her the same question, she had blanched and practically fled from the room under the pretense of being tired and tipsy. It hurt a little, I won't lie. Of course I want this relationship to be real and more than just a facade. Of course I don't want to sleep with her casually.

But it's rarely that simple, is it? Especially when you factor in the part where I divorced her and broke her heart once.

"Hey, Alpha Karl, need a hand with that?" a volunteer, a burly man with a friendly face, asks as he approaches, breaking me out of my deep train of thought.

"Thanks, Mike," I respond, grateful for the distraction. Together, we lift the heavy beam into its slot. The structure of the new library is taking shape, piece by piece.

Mike wipes his brow and looks over at the cooking tent. "The food smells good over there. That's Abby, right? Your Luna?"

"Yeah, that's her," I reply, following his gaze. "She's incredible in the kitchen. Have you tried the food?"

Mike shakes his head. "No, but I can't wait to try what they've whipped up. Heard a lot about her cooking."

"Hopefully only good things," I tease.

The burly volunteer chuckles. "Well, I won't lie, I heard about what happened at the Alpha party," he says. "But I also heard your speech the other night at the masquerade. And no one got sick from the food then, so... I hope it all works out for her."

His words make me smile. "Thanks, man," I say, shaking his hand. "Support like yours is important. We're hoping her restaurant gets to reopen and whoever actually poisoned the food gets the justice they deserve."

Just then, the lunch bell rings, cutting our conversation short. We make our way over to the tent where Abby and her team are serving food. The aroma is inviting, and my stomach rumbles in response. Volunteers queue up, chatting and laughing, the atmosphere light and cheerful.

I grab a plate, loading it with a generous helping of stew and a piece of crusty bread. However, just as I'm about to take my first bite, a voice rings out from behind me.

"Hope this doesn't end like last time," a volunteer jokes, nudging his friend. "Remember the Alpha party? I can't afford to get sick."

The tent falls into a sudden silence. My wolf bristles inside of me, and I stiffen, ready to defend Abby against the onslaught of accusations that might come. But before I can speak, she steps forward, her laughter breaking the tension.

“Oh, don’t worry. Everything here is perfectly safe. We run a tight ship in our kitchen,” Abby says, her voice clear and steady. “In fact, let me show you how we do things. You’ll be impressed.”

The volunteer looks surprised but interested. “Sure,” he says. “I’d like that.”

Others chime in, curious. Abby leads them on an impromptu tour. I hang back, watching her effortlessly handle the situation with a grace that I don’t think any of us expected; even her staff shoots me looks of surprise. She points out the various stations, explaining the processes and protocols they follow.

“So, as you can see, everything is meticulously prepared and cooked to just the right internal temperatures,” Abby concludes, setting down the special thermometer that she was just using to show that the internal temperature of one of the kitchen breasts is a perfect 165 degrees Fahrenheit. “We take great pride in our cleanliness and quality.”

The volunteer who made the joke looks genuinely apologetic by now, but also appreciative for the tour. “I didn’t mean anything by it, really,” he says. “It’s just, you know, after what happened...”

Abby waves him off, still smiling. “It’s okay, I get it. But rest assured, you’re in safe hands.”

As the group disperses, I approach Abby. “Handled that like a pro,” I say, admiration in my voice.

She shrugs, a playful glint in her eyes. “Comes with the territory. You learn to roll with the punches.”

I nod, taking a bite of the stew. It’s delicious, and I tell her so.

“You were going to say something to him, weren’t you?” she asks, eyeing me knowingly.

“Maybe,” I admit. “But you clearly didn’t need my help.”

She laughs, and it’s a sound that resonates somewhere deep inside of me, causing my heart to skip a beat. “I can take care of myself, but thanks, Karl,” she says.

Abby

The sun is just beginning to dip below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of pink and orange, as the first day of the library project comes to an end.

My team and I are packing up our tent, the aroma of our day's cooking still lingering in the air. We're all tired, but there's a sense of accomplishment that hangs around us, a satisfaction in a day's hard work.

I know it's going to be a long week since we'll be coming back every day for the rest of the week, but it'll be worth it. It's nice to be with them again, and I'm also glad to give them some actual paid work—even if the money is coming from none other than Karl.

As we're closing up the tent, the event organizers approach us. Their smiles are wide, their gratitude genuine. "Thank you so much for all of your hard work today," one of them, a woman with bright, enthusiastic eyes, says. "The food was amazing, and your team's energy really helped lift everyone's spirits."

Karl, who's been helping with the final touches of packing up even though I'm sure he's utterly exhausted from lifting heavy beams all day, nods and thanks them. "Abby and her team are the best," he says.

The other organizer, an older man with wire-rimmed glasses and a jovial air about him, chuckles. "Well," he says, "too bad you don't have a restaurant here, Abby. I'd certainly be dining under your roof every day."

His words make me blush. "Thank you, both of you," I say.

Once the organizers leave, my team starts discussing plans to go out for drinks. I can see the excitement in their eyes—they deserve a night of relaxation after all of their hard work today. But I'm just too drained, both physically and emotionally. The comfort of a hot bath and my soft bed is calling to me.

"You guys go on without me," I tell them, smiling to soften the blow. "I'm just beat. Have a drink for me, okay?"

They protest at first, but I insist, and eventually, they give in. Waving goodbye, I watch them head off, chatting and laughing, their spirits high. Karl trails along behind him, shooting me a glance over his shoulder.

I can tell he's torn, but Anton and John are insistent on dragging him along, and I think he secretly wants to chat with them. I think they kind of turned into his friends when he was in the city, aside from Chloe.

I start walking back to the mansion alone, the quiet of the evening a welcome reprieve after the busy day. It's peaceful, but my mind is anything but. I keep replaying the day in my head, especially the moment with the food poisoning joke.

I have to admit that I'm proud of how I handled it, but it's just one of many challenges I know I'll face until the truth about the Alpha party is officially proven.

In fact, I'm so lost in thought that I almost don't hear the footsteps behind me. Turning with a start, I see Karl jogging to catch up with me. I'm surprised, to say the least.

"I thought you were going out with the team," I say as he slows to a walk beside me.

He shakes his head, a small smile playing on his lips. "I changed my mind. Didn't want you walking home alone in the dark," he replies.

I can't help but smile a little at that. Despite everything, he's always been a gentleman. "Thanks, Karl," I say, feeling a flutter in my stomach that I try to ignore.

As we walk, the silence between us is comfortable, but it doesn't last long. Karl is curious about earlier today. "What made you take that comment about the food poisoning so well?" he asks, his tone genuinely inquisitive.

I sigh, looking up at the sky, now a deepening blue. I know it was out of character for me to stand up for myself like that. "I've been thinking a lot lately," I admit. "Taking these things so seriously won't help me in the long run, and it won't create a good image for me and my staff. I have to be stronger, you know?"

Karl nods, listening intently. “Makes sense. Well, I’m impressed; you handled it really well.”

We continue walking, the gravel crunching under our feet. Then, out of the blue, Karl asks, “Could you see yourself opening a restaurant here instead of the city? Like what the organizers mentioned?”

I stop in my tracks, turning to face him. “Karl, I haven’t lost the bet, and I never will,” I say with a slight chuckle, although my heart is pounding a little at the mere thought.

For a split second, I see a flicker of something in his eyes—sadness, maybe? But it’s gone as quickly as it appeared. He punches my arm lightly, a playful grin on his face.

“I’m just messing around,” he says. “And for what it’s worth, I never expected you to actually come here. It was just a playful bet, nothing serious.”

As we resume walking, I can’t help but steal glances at him. I can tell he’s a little down now, despite his efforts to keep the mood light. Maybe I feel the same way. My wolf wants me to say something, to reach out, but I hold back, unsure of what to do or say.

The mansion comes into view, its windows glowing warmly against the darkening sky. I feel a mix of relief and reluctance—relief to be almost home, reluctance for this walk with Karl to end. It’s been a long day, filled with ups and downs, laughter and challenges, and moments like these with Karl that I can’t quite figure out.

We reach the front steps, and I turn to him. “Thanks for walking me back, Karl,” I say, my voice softer than I intend.

Chapter 456

Abby

The next two days of the library project go by without a hitch. Karl, my team, and I get up bright and early each morning, head to the construction site, and get to work. While Karl works on building the library with the other volunteers, my team and I spend our mornings and afternoons preparing and serving food.

It's hard work, but it's also fulfilling; and besides, it's nice to finally spend some time with my friends again. I've been worried about them these past few weeks, but I'm glad to see that everyone is doing well despite what happened with the Alpha party and the restaurant closing down.

On the fourth day, with just one more day to go before the project is over and my team has to go home, the morning goes by just as usual. We get to the site, Karl goes his separate way, and then my team and I get to work setting up the tent.

As we unpack our supplies, I can't help but sidle up to Daisy. She's setting up the folding tables, making sure the surfaces are clean and putting down fresh tablecloths. Something has been on my mind these past few days, and I finally need to talk to her about it.

"Daisy," I say, keeping my voice low so the others can't hear over the sound of John's music playing over the speaker, "can I ask you something?"

"What's up?" she asks, not averting her gaze from the table as she works.

"Are you and Ethan..."

"Dating?" she finishes for me. Her eyes meet mine, and I can see something that looks like excitement mixed with trepidation in her gaze. I nod, and her lips begin to tug into a smirk. "Maybe," she says. "Is that a problem, boss lady?"

I quickly shake my head. "No, not at all," I say. "I'm happy for you guys. I was wondering what happened after the Alpha party."

Ethan, who has apparently been eavesdropping nearby, suddenly appears out of seemingly thin air. "Are you two talking about me?"

I can't help but smirk. "Maybe," I tease, poking him in the shoulder. "So, you and Daisy, huh?"

Ethan's face, usually stoic and reserved, splits into a grin. He says nothing, but instead puts his arm around Daisy's waist, pulling her close. Seeing them like this makes me smile; I couldn't be happier for them.

"That's so sweet! You two make a great pair," I say with a grin so wide it almost reaches my eyes. "I'm happy for you."

As I make my way away from Daisy and Ethan, I can't seem to wipe the smile off of my face. It's nice to see them as a couple, although I have to admit that I figured this would happen weeks ago. And most of all, it's nice to see that my friends are thriving despite everything.

Can I say the same about myself?

Later, amongst the clatter of pans and chatter of my team, Anton brushes past. His elbow nudges me as he passes, and he shoots me a mischievous glance. "I heard we were gossiping earlier," he says with a smirk.

I raise my eyebrow. "Perhaps," I say coyly with a bit of a smirk of my own. "Why? Do you have some gossip to add to the pile?"

Anton nods, and lowers his voice as he looks at me. "Remember how I was going to meet my wife? Well, indeed I did."

I pause, giving him my full attention despite the pan of simmering sauce sitting in front of me. "Oh?" I ask. "How did that go?"

He takes a deep breath, a sense of relief washing over his face. "Better than expected," he says. "We talked about visitations with my daughter. We are... we are starting to be friends again."

Chapter 457

"Get back to work," I tease, nudging him back with a grin.

The morning progresses with a lively buzz after that. There's an influx of new volunteers for the project, which means more food to prepare and more mouths to feed; but I don't mind. It's nice to be back with

my team, doing what we do best. Despite Chloe's coldness, it's a good day. It makes me wish that the week could stretch on forever.

However, throughout the day, I can't help but glance over at Karl. He's immersed in the construction work, his muscles rippling as he lifts heavy beams and drills in screws. It's amazing to think that the library is already almost completed—well, the exterior, at least. Our eyes meet occasionally, a silent communication that sends a tingle down my spine.

Eventually, the sun begins to dip below the horizon, marking the end of the fourth day. My team and I are packing up when I look up to see a local news photographer, a young man with a camera slung over his shoulder, approaching the tent with Karl.

"Abby," Karl says as they approach, "this photographer works for the local newspaper. He wants to get a picture of us."

"Yes," the photographer says with a smile. "We'd like a picture of our Alpha Karl and Luna Abby for our front page. We're writing a piece on community spirit."

I nod, though a bit reluctantly, then an idea strikes me as I glance around at the other volunteers and my staff. "Could we include everyone?" I ask. "It is a team effort, after all."

Karl's gaze softens, a hint of admiration in his eyes. "I like that idea," he says.

We gather everyone in front of the nearly-finished library for the photo. The photographer directs us to get closer. Karl's arm slides around my waist, pulling me gently against him. The warmth of his touch sends a flush to my cheeks, and my heart flutters uncontrollably.

"Perfect! Hold that smile," the photographer calls out as he snaps several pictures.

Once the photo session ends, the day winds down. With the tent closed up and our feet sore from a hard day's work, we turn to head home. The chatter of my friends fills my ears as we walk, but I'm lost in my own little world, walking alongside Leah. Chloe is walking up ahead, her arms folded across her chest.

“She’ll come around,” Leah whispers, wrapping her arm around my shoulder. “Don’t worry.”

I let out a soft sigh. “I hope you’re right,” I answer; and it’s the truth. I hate being at odds with my friend, especially over a man. But at the end of the day, I can’t make all of my decisions based off of what Chloe wants. I made my decision to stay in this arrangement with Karl, and I think I have the right to hold my ground.

Suddenly, as we’re meandering down a side street, Ethan stops and points to the sign for the local pub up ahead. “Drinks, anyone?” he asks, turning to look at the rest of the group. “I think we’ve all got reason to celebrate, don’t we?”

The rest of the group chimes in eagerly—even John, who no longer drinks due to his past with alcoholism, but he’s never one to turn down a cold soda and a good talk with friends. Even Karl agrees; and then everyone’s eyes shift to me.

I hesitate at first, aware of the tension with Chloe. “I dunno, guys,” I mutter, scratching my head. “I’m pretty tired—”

“Boo!” Daisy chimes in, cupping her hands around her mouth.

Chapter 458

Abby

The pub, with its warm, amber lighting and the gentle hum of conversation, feels like a haven after the long day of work. Outside, it’s nearly frigid, but it’s as warm as can be in here thanks to the flickering fire in the fireplace. I can already picture a tall glass of beer in my hand to ward away the cold that has seeped into my bones.

I hate to admit it because of Chloe’s cold shoulder, but I’m glad I came. It brings me back to the days when Karl and I were married, and we would head to the local pub for a drink and a game of billiards on a Friday night.

Even though it’s been over three years, everything looks exactly the same; even the pictures on the walls, Polaroids of various patrons in funny outfits, are still hanging exactly where they were before. It’s comforting, in an unexpected sort of way.

We gather around a large, worn wooden table in the corner and take our seats. The sound of classic rock music playing over the speakers combined with the sound of other patrons chatting and clinking their glasses fill my ears, and I can't help but let out a soft sigh of contentment.

"I haven't been here in ages," I say, leaning closer to Leah and Chloe as we settle in. "It feels like forever."

"Remember when the three of us won that trivia tournament?" Leah chimes in. "That table of guys was so pissed that they lost to a bunch of girls. It was hilarious."

I let out a soft chuckle, but Chloe doesn't utter a word. She's scowling, her arms folded across her chest. I want to say something to her, but I'm not sure if it's a good idea. Maybe it's best to just let her fume for a while until she's ready to talk.

A few minutes later, eight pints of beer are laid out in front of us. Raising my glass, I catch everyone's attention.

"I just want to say thank you, all of you, for being here," I begin as I look around at all of my friends. "And... I know it's been tough lately with the restaurant closing, and I'm sorry for the stress it has caused all of you."

Daisy, without skipping a beat, is the first to respond. "Abby, don't be like that," she says. "We're all here for you, no matter what. We're your team, through thick and thin."

Ethan, usually quiet, adds, "Yeah, Abby. We know you're doing everything you can. We believe in you. That restaurant is going to reopen, and we'll all be there to see it."

Their words are a relief, although I just hope they're right. "Thank you," I say, raising my glass a little higher. "It means the world to me."

We all clink our glasses together—even Chloe joins in—and the night unfolds with an easy rhythm, laughter and stories flowing freely. I find myself momentarily lost in the camaraderie, the worries about the restaurant and our collective future momentarily forgotten.

Feeling a bit tipsy, I excuse myself to the bar for another drink. The bartender, a middle-aged man with a friendly face, greets me with a knowing smile as I slide onto a chair and order another pint.

“So, I hear you’re the Luna again?” he asks. “It’s Abby, right?”

Chapter 459

He grins widely, oblivious to my lie. “Well, it’s great to hear,” he says. “A lot of people are happy about it. And, you know, it’s nice to see our Alpha smiling again. He’s seemed different since you came back.”

The bartender’s words give me pause. I peek over my shoulder at Karl, who is deep in conversation with John and Anton, his laughter genuine and carefree. They’re playing a rather animated game of darts, most of which are winding up in the wall instead of on the board.

I find it hard to believe that his newfound happiness is really because of me, though. Even though my wolf surges ever so slightly when I look at him, it’s as if I can’t convince myself that Karl might actually be happier thanks to me.

Taking my drink, I return to the table, where the atmosphere has shifted slightly. Chloe, still distant, sits beside Leah, who’s currently trying to engage her in conversation. After a moment of hesitation, I slide into the seat next to them, the weight of Chloe’s coldness heavy in the air.

“Hey, guys,” I say softly. “Did I miss anything?”

“I was just trying to explain to Chloe why this new guy she’s been talking to is a loser,” Leah says with a laugh.

“And I’m listening.” Chloe’s voice is cold, devoid of her usual mirth. I know it’s not Leah who’s upsetting her, though; Chloe has never been one to take it badly when either of us make fun of her for her choices on Tinder. Hell, she’ll even agree with us pretty much all of the time.

No. This is because of me. I swallow, glancing down at my drink as my mind races with things to say.

But then Leah, sensing the tension, wraps an arm around each of us. "Come on, you two. We're here to have a good time. Life is short; let's not waste it being mad at each other."

Chloe lets out a sigh and finally meets my gaze. I lift my glass, my voice soft but earnest. "Chloe, I'm sorry," I say gently. "I know you're mad at me, and I don't blame you. But... I just want my friend back."

Tears brim in Chloe's eyes. She stares at my glass for a moment, her lip quivering, and shifts uncomfortably in her chair. For that moment, I almost wonder if she'll get up and leave.

But she doesn't. Instead, she lets out a soft sigh and clinks her glass with mine. "I don't want to be mad at each other either," she whispers, the wall between us finally starting to crumble. "I love you, Abby."

"I love you too, Chlo," I say softly. "And you too, Leah."

We lean into a group hug, the relief and love palpable in the air. The laughter and chatter around us seem to resume as though everything has somehow fallen silent, and for a moment, everything feels right.

As the night progresses, my head starts to spin slightly from the alcohol. I find myself thinking back on what the bartender said earlier, and that's when it happens: I catch Karl's gaze from across the room, a look that's deep and unreadable.

Then, after a moment, he stands and walks away, disappearing into the crowd.

Chapter 460

Abby

After wandering down a narrow, dimly lit hallway in search of Karl, I push out into an equally narrow alley. The cold night air bites at my skin, but I can hardly feel it thanks to the beer in my belly. Furrowing my brow, I look around; and then I spot him.

I find him standing alone in the alley, a cigarette lit between his fingers. He's leaning against the stone wall of the pub, and the dim light from a nearby streetlamp casts shadows across his face, revealing a contemplative expression.

“Go to him,” my wolf says. I’m not entirely sure why she’s so insistent tonight, but I don’t resist. Maybe it’s just the alcohol, or maybe I secretly want to be closer to him, too.

“Hey,” I murmur as I approach, pulling my sweater closer around my shoulders. “Thought I’d find you out here.”

Karl looks up, the red ember of his cigarette hanging in the air as he glances at me. “What are you doing out here in the cold?” he asks.

I shrug. “I could ask you the same question. And I could ask why you’re smoking when you know it’s bad for you.”

“Fair enough,” he says with a chuckle before taking another drag of his cigarette.

I join him up against the wall, and we stand there for a few moments, just taking in the night air. Karl doesn’t smoke very often; only ever when he’s thinking deeply, which he must be doing now. It’s a stark contrast from his earlier jovial behavior.

“Something wrong?” I finally ask, breaking the silence.

Karl exhales a cloud of smoke, his gaze distant. “Just thinking,” he replies, his voice carrying a hint of melancholy.

“About...?”

He shrugs. “I see how passionate you are about your restaurant and your staff, and... I feel bad for ever suggesting you start over here.”

Karl’s words take me by surprise. Swallowing, I watch the smoke curl upwards, disappearing into the night sky. “Can I have a drag?” I ask, surprising even myself with the request.

He quirks an eyebrow as he glances over at me. "What ever happened to it being bad for you?" he teases. But I just hold my hand out, and he hands me the cigarette without a word.

I take a deep inhale, feeling the smoke fill my lungs. It's a sharp contrast to the crisp night air. I don't even smoke, but right now, I need something to calm my nerves.

"Why are you feeling bad about it?" I ask, exhaling slowly and watching as the smoke floats up and dissipates in the amber light of the streetlamps. "And why think about all of this now? We're supposed to be having fun tonight."

Karl takes the cigarette back, his eyes meeting mine. Our fingers brush, and it sends a shock through my hand. "I realize your life here is over," he says quietly. "You have a new life, new people in the city. I shouldn't have ever suggested you come back here after everything you've built there," he says, a note of resignation in his voice.

I pause for a moment and look at him. His gaze has turned to the cobblestone ground in front of us. I've always loved the cobblestone streets here, the feeling of stepping back in time. "Karl, you shouldn't feel bad," I find myself whispering. "I do miss it here, sometimes."

He glances at me. "You do?"

"I do," I reply with a nod. "I guess I sort of forgot these past few years, but I've always loved this town. I can't deny the memories here."

Karl's gaze meets mine, a mixture of emotions flickering in the depths of his soft brown eyes. "This place has a lot of memories for both of us," he says, his voice soft. "But I get it. Your life has moved on, and you have new ties in the city."

I take a deep breath, the chilly air filling my lungs. "The city is different, but it's grown on me. There's a vibrancy to it, a pace to life there that I've come to love." I pause, my thoughts drifting to the bustling streets, the diverse people, and the new challenges I've faced there. "I love the city. Just in a different way."

He nods, his expression thoughtful. "I get it," he says. "You've built something important there, Abby. Your restaurant, your team... It's impressive."

I smile, a combination of gratitude and sheepishness welling up inside of me. "Thanks," I say softly. "That means a lot to hear you say it."

We stand in silence for a few more moments, the only sounds being the distant murmur of the pub and the occasional car passing by. Then, Karl speaks up again, his tone hesitant. "I've been thinking... about us, this arrangement, the bet. I don't want you to feel like you have to choose between your life there and... whatever this is between us."

I look up at him, surprised by his admission. "Karl, I..."

He cuts me off, a determined look in his eyes. "I want to waive the bet. It was never about winning or losing. I just... I wanted to be close to you again. But I can't ask you to give up everything you've worked so hard for."

His words hit me like a wave, a mixture of relief and confusion washing over me. "You don't have to do that," I start to say, my voice hardly more than a whisper, but he gently shakes his head.

"No, it's okay. I want you to be happy, Abby," he says. "Wherever that is."

I'm about to respond when he turns away, putting out the butt of his cigarette. "It's cold out here," he says softly, his gaze landing on mine one last time. "We should get back inside."

I nod stiffly, swallowing. "Yeah," I mutter. "You're right. Together, we turn to head back inside. But my wolf roils inside of me, her voice clear and strong in my mind."

"Don't let him walk away."