

## **His Kickass 41**

### Chapter 41

Abby

Pushing the restaurant's door open, I'm immediately enveloped by the scent of fresh bread and brewing coffee.

The day beckons, promising a hustle that I'm both dreading and anticipating. Each wooden table is adorned with a fresh bunch of flowers, the gentle hum of the morning preparations playing softly in the background.

"Morning, Abby!" Jake, my ever-efficient waiter, calls out, balancing a tray of fresh pastries on his palm.

His smile reaches his eyes, but there's an underlying tension behind his gaze. Word travels fast, and I'm sure the staff knows about the disaster that was last night.

From behind the bar, Chloe shoots me a sheepish grin. I narrow my eyes at her, knowing that she likely blabbed to someone, but I can't stay mad at her.

"Hey, Jake," I reply, forcing brightness into my voice, trying to shake off the remnants of sleep and the emotional hangover.

Daisy joins Jake, her apron already smudged with the morning's work. "Need a coffee?" she asks, a knowing glint in her eyes.

"Wouldn't say no to that," I respond with a weary chuckle.

She swiftly moves to the espresso machine, her hands practiced and sure, and within moments I'm cradling a warm cup of comfort. The aroma alone gives me the pick-me-up I desperately need.

"Thanks, Daisy. Oh, and get a new apron from the back before customers start coming, alright?"

“Sure thing, boss!”

The warmth of my office is a welcome reprieve from the bustling chaos of the restaurant. I step inside, immediately relishing the sense of solitude it offers.

My small haven is dimly lit, decorated with tasteful artwork and an impressive array of certificates that vouch for my culinary skills. Yet, right now, they feel like mere props to a play that’s become all too real.

Sliding the door shut, I exhale a long, deep sigh. My feet carry me to the plush leather chair behind my oak desk. As I sink into it, every muscle in my body seems to let go of the tension it’s been holding onto. My temples throb, a painful reminder of the tears and restless tossing of the

Yet, there's a silver lining to my gloomy clouds. My restaurant. My

Sunday mornings are special here. The windows filter in a golden hue, casting warm patches of light onto the wooden floors. The melodious chatter of customers combines with the clink of cutlery, creating an ambiance that’s both lively

Sunday means brunch, an occasion that fills the restaurant with both families and lone diners seeking solace in our famous blueberry pancakes or a hearty

Opening a drawer, I retrieve a stack of paperwork—invoices, supplier orders, and the like. This is the mundane part of the job that no one ever romanticizes, but there’s a comfort in the routine of it. Each paper I sign, every number I check, it’s all a testament to the world I’ve built brick by brick, dish by

A soft knock interrupts my thoughts. My gaze flickers up to find Karl’s familiar face peeking through the slightly ajar door. A touch of annoyance bubbles up; I was in no mood for interruptions. And after last night, I don’t want to look him in the eyes, no matter how beautiful and chocolatey they

But then I see the takeout coffee cup in his hand. “Can I come in?” he

Sighing, I gesture towards the chair opposite me. “Do you need

With a slight smile, he places the coffee on my desk. "Thought you might

I glance at my almost full coffee mug, then back at him, a teasing smirk playing on my lips. "Seems I'm all set,

Karl's eyes hold a twinkle, a silent acknowledgment of our shared moment in my apartment

"Just wanted to check on you after last night," he says. "I'm...

A tinge of embarrassment floods my cheeks. I don't want to talk about it. Hell, I don't even want to think

Still, there's something unexpectedly sweet in Karl's gesture. His concern feels genuine, a stark contrast to the pitying glances others have been throwing my way since I got here.

"I'm good, Karl," I lie, managing a faint smile. "Just another bump in the road. We all have those, right?"

He nods, the seriousness in his gaze softening. "True. But if you ever need to talk or... well, even just rant, I'm here."

That elicits a soft chuckle from me. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

Karl hesitates for a moment, as if weighing his words. "Look, about Adam..."

I raise a hand, cutting him off. "Let's not, okay? I appreciate the concern, but I'd rather focus on today. We've got a brunch crowd to wow."

His lips curl into a knowing smile. "Alright, boss lady. Let's get to it."

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Ethan enters the kitchen, his face drawn and pale. "Abby, we've got a problem. John's down with a fever."

My heart sinks. John being out on what promises to be one of our busiest days of the week is a nightmare. "Is he okay?"

Ethan shrugs, chewing his lips. "I think so, but he didn't look good. Said he's been throwing up all morning; food poisoning or something. He'll probably be out for a few days at least."

Jake, one of my other line cooks, overhears, his face mirroring my concern. "What're we gonna do? We're fully booked tonight."

I take a deep breath. "We adapt. That's all we can do."

My mind races, trying to figure out a solution. That's when I spot Karl in the corner, working away at the dishwasher. He's caught up in his task, but he's the only other pair of hands I can think of.

"Karl!"

His head jerks up, eyes scanning the kitchen before settling on me. "Something

"I need you in the kitchen," I state, my tone allowing no room

Karl looks around, as if hoping to find an escape

"Assisting," I clarify. "You can chop,

He nods slowly, almost warily. "Sure, but are you sure

"Desperate times," I reply with a

Karl takes a deep breath, adjusting the bandana he's started wearing when doing his tasks. He's really starting to look the role of a kitchen worker. I won't admit it, but it's an attractive look

"Alright then," he says. "Just..."

As the brunch rush hits, I find myself surprised by Karl's skills. While he's no seasoned chef, he has a keen sense of order and follows my directions to a T. I'm both impressed by his abilities and his agreeableness. Surprisingly, he manages to stay calm throughout the entire lunch rush, without once getting pissed at me for barking

"We need two Cobb salads and a minestrone!" I call

"On it," Karl responds, deftly slicing through the veggies and assembling

Every so often, our eyes meet. The familiar tension is there, but it's overshadowed by the urgency of the task at hand. It's a silent dance, punctuated by the rhythmic chop of knives and the sizzle of the

Chapter 42

Abby

Just as I'm leaning forward to make sense of the strange spark in the back of the oven, something ignites.

I jump back with a yelp just as the heat nearly consumes me.

My heart races as the orange flames dance menacingly from the oven, cutting off the symphony of our dinner rush with its threatening roar. The scent of burnt food mingles with a more acrid, electrical smell. An electrical fire.

Panic courses through me.

"Fire! Fire in the oven!" I shout, reaching for the nearby fire extinguisher.

My fingers barely grasp the cool metal before I feel the searing heat engulf my arm. A sharp pain lances through me, and I draw back with a sharp hiss, dropping the fire extinguisher.

My arm pulses with intense pain, the skin red and already blistering.

“Abby!” Karl’s voice cuts through the chaos, and before I know it, he’s beside me, effortlessly wielding the extinguisher to smother the flames. Within moments, the roaring fire is reduced to a smoky whisper, but the damage is done.

I cradle my burnt arm, biting back the tears that threaten to spill. The pain is overwhelming. My vision blurs, and my legs feel weak. The world tilts.

“Abby, look at me,” Karl urges, his voice lined with concern. His deep brown eyes are inches away, full of worry.

“I... I’m okay,” I manage, although the quiver in my voice betrays me. The pain isn’t subsiding, and a nauseating mix of fear and shock swirls

“You’re not okay,” he insists. “We need to get you to the

The bustling sounds of the restaurant seem distant. Whispers and murmurs of concern ripple around us, but all I can focus on is Karl’s steady

“No, the restaurant...” I begin, my thoughts fragmented. The reality of the situation hasn’t fully

Karl, taking charge, nods to Jake. “Handle things here. I’ll take Abby to

Without waiting for a response, Karl gently scoops me up, his arms cradling me close. The scent of his cologne, mixed with the aromas of the kitchen, is oddly comforting. My head rests against his chest as he carries me out to his car. The cool evening air is a sharp contrast to the heat inside, and I can’t help but

Inside the car, he places me gently on the passenger seat, buckling me in. "Just hang in there, Abby. We'll be

I nod weakly, my gaze drifting to my burnt arm. The pain is unbearable, but having Karl beside me is a

As he starts the car, I feel his fingers intertwining with mine. It's a simple gesture, but in this moment of vulnerability, it means

"You're gonna be okay," he murmurs, shooting me a quick glance before focusing back on the

"Thank you, Karl," I manage, my voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know what I would've done if you weren't there."

He squeezes my hand, his thumb tracing comforting circles on my skin. "You don't have to thank me, Abby. I just did what anyone would have."

But at this moment, I know that's not true. In my pain-induced state, I almost feel as though everything about Karl's return to me has been nothing but one thing after another. Like he returned at just the right time, when I needed him the most. But it's silly; I'm just delirious from the pain of the burn on my arm.

His grip tightens, and I feel the reassuring rhythm of his pulse against my fingers. The city lights blur past us, but inside the car, time seems to slow.

"How bad is it?" I ask, my voice tremulous.

He glances over, the soft streetlights illuminating the concern etched on his features. "It's not for me to say. The doctors will take care of you, though."

We lapse into a comfortable silence. The hum of the engine, combined with the pain, lulls me into a half-conscious state. The world outside becomes a hazy, unfocused panorama.

But through it all, the warmth of Karl's hand is a constant, grounding me. Even in the throes of pain, I can't help but appreciate the intimacy of the moment. Our shared experiences in the kitchen, the dance of dishes and ingredients, have fostered a connection I never anticipated.

I feel him glance over at me from time to time, ensuring I'm still conscious. Each time our eyes meet, there's a depth of emotion that's hard to define.

It feels like mere moments before the car comes to a halt. The glaring lights of the hospital loom ahead, and the gravity of the situation hits me full force.

As Karl helps me out of the car, the pain intensifies, but I grit my teeth, trying to put on a brave

"You're doing great," he whispers, guiding me through the

The stark white interiors of the emergency room are a stark contrast to the warm, cozy ambiance of my restaurant. Nurses and doctors move about with practiced precision, their voices a blend of efficiency and

Karl's voice, however, cuts through the din. "She needs help. She's burnt

Before I know it, I'm being led to a bed, the clinical environment around me a whirlwind of activity. Karl, ever the protector, stays close, filling out the necessary paperwork and

Though I can tell he's just as shaken up as I am, he's my anchor in this moment. And as the nurses begin their treatment, I clutch his hand, drawing strength

As the nurses bustle about, attending to my burns and ensuring I'm comfortable, a memory tugs at the back of my mind. I chance a glance at Karl, who's watching me with a mix of concern and amusement. Despite the pain, a smirk forms on my

"Hey, remember when we accidentally set our old kitchen on fire?" I ask, my voice laced with

Karl's eyebrows raise momentarily, before a lopsided grin takes over his face. "You mean when you set our old kitchen

A rush of warmth floods my cheeks, and I'm suddenly thankful for the dimmed lights of the ER. "I had hoped you'd forgotten that minor

Chapter 43

Abby

The antiseptic smell of the hospital surrounds me, a cold, clinical scent that seems to hang in the air. I glance down at my arm, now wrapped in white gauze, the skin beneath it red and angry. The pain pulses with every heartbeat, but it's a dull, manageable ache for now.

"Abby, you should be heading home to rest," the doctor's firm voice breaks through my thoughts. He's an older man, silver hair and a gentle, fatherly demeanor. "That burn needs time to heal, and you need time to recover."

"I understand, doctor," I reply, doing my best to sound appreciative. "Thank you."

Karl waits just outside the small cubicle, flipping through a magazine. The fluorescent lights highlight the worry lines on his forehead. He looks up as I emerge, magazine forgotten.

"All set?"

I nod, reaching for my jacket with my uninjured arm. Karl moves quickly to help, his fingers brushing against mine. The touch is unintentional, but it sends a rush of warmth through me.

"Thanks," I murmur, avoiding his gaze.

He just nods, his expression serious. "I'll drive you home."

But as I step into the corridor, the weight of unfinished business pulls at me. "Not home. Back to the restaurant."

He stops in his tracks, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "Are you serious, Abby? After what you've just been through?"

"The night isn't over," I reply firmly, pain making my voice sharper than intended. "The restaurant needs me."

Karl shakes his head, clearly struggling to comprehend my determination. "Let's sit for a moment," he suggests, guiding me towards a set of chairs in the waiting area. It's relatively quiet here, a few people scattered about, absorbed in their own world of worry and

He waits for me to get settled before taking the seat next to me. "Abby, talk to me. Why do you feel the need to go back there tonight? It's just

I turn to face him, biting my lip. "You weren't there when I opened up the

Karl looks away, his face turning a slight shade of red. "No. I

"That restaurant is my heart, Karl," I murmur, my voice soft. "It's a culmination of every dream I've ever had, every challenge I've faced. One disaster isn't going to keep me away. And my employees need

He studies me for a long moment, his brown eyes filled with a mix of admiration and concern. The waiting room's harsh lighting casts shadows on his face, making him look older,

"Abby," he starts, choosing his words carefully. "It's not about your determination or passion. No one doubts that. But sometimes, you need to step back and take care of

The familiar hum of the hospital, the beeping of machines and hushed conversations, provides a backdrop to our conversation. I feel a pang of nostalgia. It reminds me of the times when life was simpler, when our paths were neatly wound around one another. Now, it feels like a tangle, like cords all

“Karl, the restaurant is what keeps me going. When I face challenges, when things get tough, it’s that passion that pulls me through. If I back down now, even for a night, what message am I sending to myself? To

Karl sighs, running a hand through his hair. “It’s just that... when I saw that fire, when I saw you get hurt... It scared the hell out of

Karl’s kind words send a pang through my chest. Without thinking, I reach out, placing a reassuring hand on his. “I know. And I’m grateful for your concern, truly. But the best way you can support me now is

He’s silent for a moment, absorbing my words. The muffled sounds of footsteps and distant conversations surround us. Finally, he looks up, a determined glint in his eyes. “Fine, but on one condition.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Which is?”

“I’m going with you. If you’re going back to that restaurant, I’m staying by your side.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “Deal.”

As we leave the hospital, the night air greets us, a stark contrast to the sterile environment inside. The city is alive, lights glittering in the distance, the gentle hum of traffic a constant companion.

Karl’s car is parked nearby, and he holds the door open for me, ever the gentleman. “You sure about this?” he asks, one last time.

“Absolutely,” I reply with newfound determination.

The drive back to the restaurant is filled with comfortable silence, the kind that comes with shared history. The cityscape outside the window blurs into a cascade of lights and shadows, each building and street corner holding a memory.

As the familiar outline of my restaurant comes into view, I feel a mixture of anxiety and excitement. It's still bustling, a testament to my team's dedication.

Karl parks out front, his gaze fixed on the entrance. "Ready?"

"Always," I reply with a smirk.

Inside, the atmosphere is electric. Servers move with purpose, the kitchen hums with activity, and the scent of delicious food wafts through the air. I can see Jake orchestrating the dance, but there's a tension in his

He spots me as I enter, relief flooding his features. "Boss!

"I promised, didn't I?" I reply with a

Karl watches the exchange, an amused smile on his lips. "You truly are something else, Abby. When others would've given up, you push

I chuckle. "That's what happens when you find something that really matters

He shakes his head in wonder. "You never cease to

...

The familiar buzz of the restaurant starts to die down as the night progresses. Customers shuffle out, their conversations and laughter echoing in the now-emptying

I make my way to the office at the back, my feet heavy and fatigue starting to sink in. The burn on my arm throbs gently, reminding me of the ordeal I've been

Switching on the dim overhead light, I sit down at my cluttered desk, papers and bills scattered haphazardly. My computer screen blinks to life, displaying the endless emails and reservations. Despite the exhaustion, there's a small, triumphant smile on my face. We made it through another

The soft creak of the door interrupts my thoughts. Karl steps in, looking just as weary but with a hint of concern in his eyes. "You

Chapter 44

Abby

The door to my office clicks shut, its noise echoing in the room, serving as a final punctuation to Karl's exit.

I watch him go, and the residue of our past, thick with pain and longing, clings to me, making it hard to breathe.

A sigh escapes me as I lean back into my chair, the cool leather pressing against my back, providing a temporary relief.

The whiff of the past and our complicated relationship is still strong in the air. Passing a hand over my face, I let the sensation of touch distract me momentarily. How I wish things could be different, simpler.

But my heart is still entangled with Adam's, and the thought of ending it leaves me adrift in a sea of uncertainty. I haven't made my decision yet; I love Adam. He's been my rock for a long time now. We have plenty in common, and he's sweet and caring...

But he just doesn't seem to have the same passion for me as I would hope he would. He's sweet, yes, but I don't feel like a priority in his life.

I want him to want me; I want him to get angry and jealous over Karl, I want him to have sex with me, I want him to show up when he says he will because he can't get enough of me. And yet here I am, a ring on my finger, and he can hardly make time for me. It makes me feel worthless.

Then there's Karl. Sweet Karl. He's changed so much recently. He's become kinder, more understanding. He still has his rough edges, his undeniable Alpha attitude, but that's what I like about him.

But he divorced me. His words may be dripping with sweetness now, but nothing can erase that fact.

My phone vibrates on my desk, its sudden intrusion breaking through my thoughts. The screen displays Leah's name. Picking it up, I answer,

"Abby, Chloe told me about what happened. Not just with Adam, but... your burn. Are you

I glance down at my arm, the scarlet mark still raw and angry. "I'm fine now. Got the burn taken care of," I reply, attempting to sound more upbeat than

"And Adam?" Leah's voice is laced with concern, but there's also an underlying tone that makes

I fall silent. How do you explain something you don't fully

Leah sighs on the other end, as though reading my thoughts. "Listen, Abby. Whatever happens between you and Adam, know that I'm behind you. But..." she pauses for a moment. "Just remember not to run back to

A flash of irritation courses through me. Why does everyone assume I'd go running back to him? Is that all they think

"Leah," I snap before I can stop myself, "everyone seems to believe I'll just fall back into Karl's arms. There's nothing between us. And besides, if I do decide to end things with Adam, I want to be single for a while. I don't need to jump from one relationship to

Leah's voice is soft when she responds, a hint of hurt evident. "Okay, Abby. I was just looking out for you. You know how we all feel about

Guilt washes over me. I didn't mean to snap. "I'm sorry, Leah," I say, exhaustion from the night weighing on me. "It's just... it's been

Leah chuckles, the warmth returning to her voice. "I know, Abby. It's okay. Want me to come over?"

A genuine smile tugs at my lips. "How about one of our weekly tea dates? With Chloe too? I've missed those."

"You, me, Chloe, and an avalanche of pastries?" Leah teases. "It's a date. I'll set it up."

Gratitude fills me. "Thanks, Leah. It means a lot."

The call ends, leaving me wrapped in my own thoughts once again. With a sigh, I decide to make my way to the bar for one last drink before heading home.

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The fading ambient lighting casts long, delicate shadows across the bar, wrapping everything in an almost ethereal, intimate shroud. There's a sense of stillness, like the world has paused just for me. I sit alone at the sleek mahogany counter, cradling a half-filled glass of white wine, its crisp scent providing a faint comfort.

Soft jazz music filters through the speakers, a melancholy tune that matches my mood perfectly. The chairs have been turned up on the tables, the floor recently mopped, and a faint aroma of citrus cleaner still hangs in the air. The setting is pristine, almost picture-perfect, but it feels hollow tonight. Like an exquisitely crafted scene missing its central character.

The memories of last night still haunt me. Adam's biting words, the tension between us, the unanswered questions. It feels like a chasm has formed overnight, swallowing the joy and comfort our relationship once held.

Distracted by my tumultuous thoughts, I hardly notice the tap on my shoulder until the sensation becomes more persistent. I turn, and for a split second, everything else fades away.

“Adam.”

His familiar eyes, usually so warm and inviting, look heavy with emotion. There’s a weight to his presence, a palpable tension that immediately sets me on edge. The bar’s ambient lighting creates a soft halo around him, but it does little to alleviate the storm of emotions brewing

“What are you doing here?” The surprise in my voice is unmistakable, the hurt even more

“I needed to see you, Abby,” he says, carefully taking the seat next to me. The space between us feels charged, as if a single spark could ignite

I take a moment, sipping my wine to gather my thoughts. The cool liquid does little to temper the heat of my emotions. “I don’t know if tonight’s the best

He sighs, his fingers drumming nervously on the bar. “I know, after last night... but there’s something I need to

I feel the world around me blur. His voice, usually so confident and assured, now trembles with uncertainty. The dim bar, with its plush red booths and ornate mirrors, seems to close in on me. The distant murmur of the city outside is drowned by the beating of my

“Adam, if this is about last

He cuts me off with a shake of his head. “No, it’s not just about that. I’ve been... untruthful with you, and I need to come

A cold dread seeps through me, chilling my spine. The wine in my glass suddenly tastes too sharp, too bitter. I push it away. “Untruthful? What do

Chapter 45

Abby

“Adam... Are you cheating on me?”

The anticipation of what Adam is about to say feels like a giant pit in my stomach. He stares down at his hands, his fingers worrying each other in the dim light of the bar.

“Abby,” his voice starts with a tremor, “I’m not cheating on you. I would never do something like that. Not to anyone, and especially not to you.”

The sound of the soft jazz music I’ve got playing on the speakers almost seems to die down, replaced by a poignant silence. I’m a little relieved, but not completely. In an odd way, I think that I almost wish he was cheating on me. It would make things easier. But now, I think that it must only be an even more complicated explanation, and whatever it is, I’m not sure if I’m ready for it.

“What is it, then?” I ask. Every fiber of my being is attuned to him, waiting.

Adam hesitates for a moment, raking a hand through his hair, a gesture I’ve come to associate with his nervousness.

“I’m not into women.”

His words crash over me like a tidal wave. I struggle to keep my composure, trying to grasp what he’s just admitted. My mind goes blank, and then rushes in with a barrage of thoughts.

Confusion, hurt, and disbelief lead the

“You’re... gay, Adam? And you knew all this

Adam nods slowly. I feel like I’m drowning. “You knew all this time, and yet you still put a ring on my finger,” I murmur, shaking my head in disbelief. This has got to be some kind of sick dream. “Why did you get together with me so

After a moment of tense pause, Adam speaks. "I got together with you so quickly because..." He sighs, his voice barely above a whisper. "...It made my family happy. It was a way to keep my secret

A lump forms in my throat. Tears well up, threatening to spill. "But why me, Adam?" I croak out. "Why would you do this to me, of all the people in the

He takes a shaky breath, his gaze filled with remorse. "It wasn't planned, Abby. When we met, I was lost. The pressure from my family was suffocating. Being with you, it gave me an escape. Our friendship, our moments... they all felt genuine. But as things progressed, it became about maintaining a lie. A lie I trapped myself

I feel sick. "That's not fair," I mutter, blinking away the tears that threaten to come. "You toyed

Adam sighs deeply. "I know it's not fair," he murmurs. "And I know it's shitty of me. I realize that now. But I guess throughout our relationship, I just kept telling myself that I could be happy with you. That even though I wasn't sexually attracted to you, you made me laugh and smile and you're my best friend. I thought that I could get over the other stuff and just spend my life with someone who makes me

The bar around us fades, and it's just the two of us in our bubble of truth and revelations. He's vulnerable, and as much as I want to rage at him, I find myself filled with a strange understanding. Not acceptance, but an understanding of the chains society can wrap around someone, chaining them to expectations

He's still speaking, words tumbling out. "I'm so, so sorry, Abby. I've been untruthful, and you didn't deserve any of this. I care about you, deeply. But not in the way you should be cared for. Not in the romantic way you deserve."

I rub the heel of my hand into my eyes, trying to stem the tears. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I whisper, pain evident in my voice. "Why let it go on for so long without so much as a hint?"

His eyes are glistening, mirroring my own emotions. "Fear," he chokes out. "I was afraid of losing you, of losing the one person who made me feel normal."

The gravity of it all weighs on me. "So, all this time, every touch, every moment, was it all a lie?"

He shakes his head, quickly, "No, not a lie. Distorted, yes. But I've cherished our moments, Abby. I just... I couldn't offer you the kind of love you expected."

I can't help but feel a pang of sympathy. Here is a man, torn and twisted by societal expectations, trying to find his place. But at my expense? The juxtaposition is jarring.

A long, heavy silence stretches between us. The distant sounds of people passing by on the street fills my ears, but it all sounds so far away. I feel like I'm trapped in a vacuum chamber.

Without thinking, my fingers slide to the engagement ring on my finger. The cool metal feels foreign now, a symbol of a love that wasn't truly mine. With tears blurring my vision, I carefully slide the ring off, the finality of the gesture not lost on me.

I open my palm, displaying the once treasured ring to Adam. He looks down, his eyes reflecting the same pain I

"Abby..." His voice cracks, and I can tell he's struggling with his

"Take it," I whisper, pushing the ring towards him, my tears now streaming down my face. "It doesn't belong to

Adam's gaze shifts from the ring to my eyes, and in one swift movement, he pulls me into a tight embrace. The world fades away as I bury my face into his shoulder, our shared grief enveloping us. His warmth, even in this moment of heartbreak, offers a

We sit like that for what feels like an eternity, two souls bound by a story of love, truth, and regret. Sometimes, the hardest goodbyes are the ones that bring the most

When we finally pull away, we're both wiping tears out of our

"Can we still be friends?" he eventually murmurs, breaking the quiet. "Especially in our professional

Taking a deep breath, I finally respond, “It’s going to take time, Adam. But... yes. We

Relief washes over his face, but it’s short-lived. He suddenly becomes introspective, his gaze distant. “There’s something else,” he starts

Chapter 46

Karl

“What do you want?”

Adam’s voice is apprehensive, and for good reason. It’s not everyday that I set food inside his restaurant, and it’s certainly not everyday that I show up telling him that I have a proposition for him. But I’ve been plotting this for a long time.

Abby clearly doesn’t realize that Adam doesn’t care about her as much as he should. Or maybe she does, but she doesn’t seem ready to leave him for some strange reason. She deserves better—she deserves me. And maybe she just needs a little push to get the gears in motion. I swear, once she’s free from Adam, she’ll realize just how much of a mess their ‘relationship’ is. And I know exactly what it’ll take to convince him to leave.

The ingredients.

I’ve been holding onto them for a while now, waiting for the perfect time. And after what happened the other night, when Adam stood his own fiancée up for a dinner date, I think it’s finally time.

“Let’s talk in private,” I say, smirking slightly. “You free later?”

Adam looks around with a puzzled look on his face. “Why? Why can’t we talk here, now?”

I shake my head. “Trust me, Adam; I’m not planning on doing anything shady if that’s what you’re worried about. I just have something I want to show you.”

“Look, man, whatever it is, I’m not interested,” he says. “I’ve got a restaurant to run.” I watch as he tosses a dishcloth over his shoulder and heads for the kitchen. Sliding down from my barstool, I follow him. When my hand makes contact with the swinging kitchen door, stopping it from closing in my face, he whirls around and gives me another puzzled look.

“But this is about your restaurant,” I say, stepping into the bustling kitchen. “I swear. You won’t want to pass this up.”

With a sigh, Adam looks around warily and finally shrugs. “Alright. Meet me outside later, I guess. I’ve got a lunch rush to deal

“Kay.”

...

It’s later tonight, and just as promised, I’m waiting outside the restaurant. There’s an unlit cigarette twirling between my fingers as I ponder what I’ll say to Abby once she and Adam break up, which they’re sure to do after

Adam is easy to read, and I know that he won’t pass up what I’m about to give

A small smile plays on my lips as I imagine Abby leaning on me, using me as a shoulder to cry on. I’ll give her plenty of time, of course, but eventually she’ll realize that I have changed—and the rest will be history from

My thoughts are interrupted when the door to the restaurant swings open, and Adam steps out, wiping his hands on his apron. The cold evening breeze rustles his hair as he tosses a bag of trash into a

“Adam!” I call out, stepping into the

He freezes, but only momentarily. I can see him stiffly wipe his hands on his apron again, as though it’s a nervous tick of his, before he turns to face

“Alright, Karl,” he says, folding his arms across his chest. “What did you have to

“It’s better I show rather than tell,” I say, a slight smile playing on my lips as I slip the still-unlit cigarette back into its carton and drop it into the inner pocket of my jacket. “Follow

Adam nods hesitantly, but follows me as I lead him to my sleek, black car parked down the street. The soft hum of the city surrounds us, punctuated by the distant honking of cars and the laughter of late-night wanderers.

Reaching the car, I click the button on my key fob, and the trunk slowly pops open, revealing the contents inside.

Stacked neatly are bins filled with the crème de la crème of ingredients. Golden saffron threads, the scent wafting into the night air, freshly picked white truffles, caviar, and even a jar of edible gold flakes. It’s a chef’s dream, and that’s only what’s sitting on the surface.

Adam’s eyes widen, the chef in him taking over as he reaches out to touch a bin, his fingers brushing over the precious items.

“Where did you get these?” he whispers, his voice filled with awe. “Some of these can set someone back hundreds, even thousands!”

I suppress a triumphant smile. “Connections. People who owe me favors.”

“Damn,” Adam says with a chuckle. “May I?”

I nod. With a grin, Adam picks up a glass jar filled with rare mushrooms. That jar alone cost me \$4,000. “Are these Alban white truffles?” he asks, turning it in the orange glow of the streetlights.

“Yup,” I say, leaning against the side of the car. “Those ones weren’t so easy to get.”

Adam chuckles again and gingerly places the jar back in the box. "That's awesome, Karl," he says, turning to look at me once more. There's an apprehensive look on his face again. "But why show me this?"

I pause for effect before giving him my practiced answer. "These ingredients could be yours, Adam."

His eyes snap to mine, confusion

I swallow hard, steeling myself for what comes next. "I want you to break up with

Adam straightens, his face a mask of disbelief. "You've got to be kidding me. All this... for Abby? Why would

Choosing my words carefully, I continue, "I've been observing, Adam. The way you interact with some of your staff, especially your sous chef. It's clear to me you might not be as invested in Abby as she is in you. You might not even swing her way, if you catch my

For a moment, silence envelops us, the weight of my words sinking in. Adam looks like a deer caught in headlights. "What are you

"I think you know what I mean," I say, locking eyes with him. "I believe you're with Abby to keep up appearances, perhaps for your family or reputation. But it's not fair to her, and you

Adam freezes, swallowing. "And what do you care? She's your ex. You divorced her." His voice is tense, hoarse. I know I've struck

"She's my ex, yes, but I still care about her," I say. "I can't stand to see her in a relationship where she's not

Adam takes a step back, his face a turmoil of emotions. "You have no idea what you're talking

“Don’t I?” I challenge. “Look, I’ve been there. The pressure, the expectations. I get it. But Abby deserves better. She deserves honesty. Don’t

He rubs his temples, clearly conflicted. “And what if I say no? What if I refuse your...

Chapter 47

Abby

In the dimly lit café, surrounded by the soft murmur of conversations and the aroma of fresh coffee, I sit with my friends, watching their eyes widen in disbelief as I relay the events of the past few days.

“You broke up with Adam?” Leah, with her ever-present surprise, always finds a way to make her eyes bulge out in an almost comical manner.

“Sort of,” I reply, stirring my iced coffee absentmindedly. I don’t want to ‘out’ Adam for his orientation, so I decide to leave that part out. Around the restaurant, the clinking of the ice cubes and the soft sound of voices meld together to create a soft jingle that feels oddly comforting when I need it the most. “It was... more of a mutual thing.”

Chloe gives me a sharp glance, her red lipstick making her pouty lips seem even more pronounced. “Mutual?” she asks. “Mutual how?”

I shake my head. “I don’t wanna get too into it,” I reply. “But I’ll just say this: it was never gonna work out. Not in a million years.”

Both Chloe and Leah shoot me a sideways glance. Even though I’m staring down at the frothy cappuccino sitting in front of me, I can see them look at each other in my peripherals and mouth some silent words to each other. I pretend not to notice.

“You don’t seem too heartbroken, Abby,” Chloe finally says.

Shrugging, I admit, “I’m sad, yes, but not heartbroken. More like... hopeful.”

It's the truth, too. Adam's confession did make me sad; I spent the first three nights crying and cursing the Moon Goddess. But it's been a week now, and I feel surprisingly good. I feel free. Like a weight has been lifted off of my shoulders. Like a whole host of opportunities lay before me, waiting to

"Hopeful?" Rebecca repeats, arching an eyebrow.

"For the future," I say, smiling softly. "For new opportunities, new

Chloe snorts, reading my wistful expression instantly. She's always been good at that. "Don't tell me you're considering Karl as one of those 'new

My cheeks burn. How can I explain the complex web of feelings I have for Karl without

"Of course not," I lie, knowing that I'll absolutely never, ever, not in a million years, admit that I have thought about it. "But he was there for me, Chloe. When Adam wasn't. There's no

She rolls her eyes. "I know, I know. He played the knight in shining armor, jumped in front of the flames, stood by you during the hospital visit. I've heard the tales of

"But it's true," I insist. "He showed me a side of him that I had forgotten existed. And honestly, I think he's changed, too. For

Leah, ever the mediator, finally speaks up. "Both of you have a history together. It's natural to feel something when you see a familiar face during difficult times."

"Yeah," Chloe chimes in, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "especially when the 'familiar face' was a perfectly sweet gentleman before the wedding bells rang. And then turned into a totally different person after."

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of Chloe's words. She's not completely wrong. Something about the wedding changed Karl all those years ago; that was when he started getting jealous and controlling.

But somehow, I'd like to give him the benefit of the doubt. That was years ago, and we were too young for marriage. We weren't prepared for the emotional toll that such a commitment can take on a young mind.

"You're right. But I'd like to think that Karl has changed, Chloe," I murmur. "At least a little."

"Has he, though?" She looks me dead in the eye. "Remember last week? That little altercation he had with the waitress about her shirt being 'too revealing'? Or the way he still speaks about confident women, like they're sluts who need to be kept in their place? Some deep-rooted perceptions don't just change overnight, Abby."

My heart sinks. I remember that incident. The way he had commented about poor Daisy's shirt being too revealing, his face all scrunched up in disdain when I confronted him about it. His old habits. Old perceptions.

Before I can answer, Leah reaches across the table, placing a comforting hand on mine.

"You deserve the best, Abby. If Karl is truly different now, he should prove it, not just with grand gestures, but in everyday life. And from what I've seen and heard, he hasn't quite done that. Not yet, at

I sigh, wrapping my fingers around Leah's. "I know. I know you're both right. And even if he does change completely, I'm not sure if I can ever trust him

Chloe nods. "That's the spirit. And hey, who's to say you need a man right now? After all, you've got your restaurant. It's about time you finally start focusing on you and what makes

A laugh bubbles up from my chest. "And since when did Miss Chloe become the voice of reason when it comes to men?" I tease, implying her history with men. She's never had a long-term relationship, and seems to be entertaining a different man every

"Since always," Chloe retorts, her smirk in place. "You just didn't notice because you were too busy with all the

Leah chuckles. "Chloe's right, though. Abby, you need some 'you' time. Rediscover yourself, your passions. Don't rush into anything. Like you did with..." Her voice trails off, but I know what she's about

"I know," I retort, breaking off a piece of my croissant and dipping it into my cappuccino. "Like I did

"At least you realize that," Chloe says with a chuckle. "You two moved so fast, especially for someone who was fresh out of a marriage and had her

Chapter 48

Karl

Surrounded by the familiar hustle and bustle of the restaurant, I steal glances at Abby from behind the dishwashing station. She's busy overseeing the lunch rush, offering a smile to a customer here and a kind word to an employee there. From the outside, she appears so composed, as if nothing could break her stride.

My source had informed me earlier: Adam kept his word and broke up with Abby after all.

If that's true, Abby seems to be hiding it well. Or maybe she doesn't feel as upset as I thought she would.

This could be a good thing. Maybe I won't need to wait as long to make my move.

Lost in thought, I find myself wandering to her office during a slow point in the evening, just before the dinner rush. The door is ajar, and I can see her leaning over some paperwork. Summoning some courage, I push it open fully and walk in.

She looks up, momentarily startled. "Karl? What are you doing here?"

"Checking on you," I answer with a smirk, trying to inject some flirtation into my voice. "Heard you're single again."

Her brows furrow, and she immediately stiffens. "And what if I am?" she challenges, her tone sharp. "It's none of your business."

I lean against the doorway, trying to appear casual. "Thought maybe..." I trail off suggestively, tilting my head and attempting a playful grin. "Maybe this is our chance."

She pushes herself away from the desk, standing up abruptly. "Don't, Karl. Just because I'm single now doesn't mean I'm open to... whatever it is you're suggesting."

Abby's words are harsh, but I can see right through them. The way that her cheeks turn red when she looks at me, the way her chest heaves ever so slightly. "C'mon, Abby," I murmur, striding toward her. "We've missed each other for so long. You know it's inevitable that we get back together. Why not now?"

For a moment, Abby and I are standing incredibly close. She smells like cinnamon, and she's got a fine layer of lipgloss on. I could kiss her right now.

But before I can, she shoves me away. "Fuck off, Karl. I'm

stung, I straighten up. "How will I ever get you to love me again, Abby?" The vulnerability in my voice catches even me by

She sighs, seemingly torn between anger and

"Honestly, Karl? I don't think it'll ever happen. But if you're so desperate for an answer..." She pauses, taking a deep breath. "Start by apologizing to Daisy, the waitress you belittled. And maybe, just maybe, change the way you view women who don't fit into your mold of

My cheeks burn, a combination of shame and frustration. "Is that what it'll

She shrugs. "It's

Suddenly, a figure appears in the doorway. Chloe, her face pinched with concern. "Is everything okay in

"Actually," Abby begins, her tone firm, "Karl was just about to apologize to Daisy for his inappropriate comments. Weren't you,

Feeling cornered, I groan inwardly but nod. "Yeah,

Chloe arches an eyebrow, clearly surprised. "Alright then," she says, leading the way. "Follow

Daisy is in the front, wiping down tables. As we approach, she looks up, her gaze immediately wary. She clearly wasn't

Clearing my throat awkwardly, I start, "Daisy, I... I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you. It was inappropriate and out of

She smirks, clearly amused. "Got a good scolding from Abby, did

My face turns a deeper shade of red. "It's not about that. I genuinely am sorry."

Daisy tilts her head, looking me up and down. "Well, thanks for the apology, I guess. But maybe think before you speak next time, yeah?"

I nod, thoroughly chastised. "I will."

Chloe hides a chuckle, her eyes dancing with mirth. She's clearly enjoying this a bit too much. "You good here, Karl?"

"Yeah," I mutter, still embarrassed. "I'm good."

As we make our way back to the kitchen, I can't help but think about Abby. It wasn't just about getting her to love me again, it was also about being a better man. For her. For myself.

Having mustered the courage to apologize to Daisy, I feel a strange sense of elation. Fueled by that small victory, I find myself back at Abby's office door on my way to the kitchen. Without knocking, I step inside.

Her eyes lift from the paperwork, and she regards me coolly.

"I apologized to Daisy," I state, almost challenging her. "Just like you asked."

A faint smile plays on her lips, but she remains composed. "Good."

I can't help but push further. "So, do you forgive me now?"

She looks at me, her gaze intense. "Karl, one little apology isn't going to bridge the gap you've created. You've got a long way to go. One genuine act of contrition doesn't erase the past or guarantee the future."

Swallowing hard, I muster up some courage. "I'm trying,

Her eyes soften just a touch, but her voice remains firm. "Trying isn't enough. You need to genuinely reflect on your actions and show consistent effort. Only then will anyone take you

I nod, absorbing her words. It's a hard truth to swallow, but

Her attention shifts to the clock on the wall. "Dinner rush should be starting soon. We need all hands on deck. Get back to

Groaning slightly, I reply, "Alright, alright. I'm

She smirks a bit, but her face is stern. "Don't cause any trouble

...

The kitchen is a frenzy of activity, the clang of pots and pans echoing through the air, and the aroma of delicious food

John, the head chef, commands the space like a general. He's known for his sharp tongue and has never been particularly fond of me. Tonight, it seems he's in rare

He notices me and sneers. "Ah, look who's back. Come to grace us with your

Biting back a retort, I head straight for the dishwashing station, rolling up my sleeves. But it's hard to concentrate with John hovering, always ready with a

When I accidentally drop a plate, it shatters with a loud crash. The entire kitchen falls silent for a split second before the noise picks up again. But John doesn't miss the opportunity to make

"This is why Abby only lets you wash dishes. Can't trust you with anything more," he jeers, laughing along with a

Chapter 49

Abby

The morning sun bathes my office in a gentle glow as I dial Leah's number, eager to discuss Chloe's upcoming birthday.

The phone rings a few times before Leah's raspy voice picks up on the other end.

"Abby? That you?"

"Leah, hey," I greet, trying to hide my concern. "You sound terrible. What's up?"

She lets out a congested laugh. "Caught a nasty cold. I'm in bed, sipping on some horrid chicken soup. Can't believe I'm missing all the action."

"That's terrible," I answer. "I was hoping you could help with Chloe's party prep."

A pause ensues, and I hear Leah sigh. "I wish I could, Abby. I had so many ideas, but right now I can barely lift my head off the pillow."

I let out a quiet chuckle, trying to keep the mood light. "Don't worry about it. Just rest up and get better, okay? We'll need you at the party in top form."

"What about the cake? I know you were keen on baking Chloe's favorite, the red velvet one."

"I've got it covered," I assure her. "And the party details too. It's a lot, but I can handle it."

"You sure?" Leah sounds skeptical.

"It's no big deal," I reply, although a nagging feeling at the back of my mind suggests otherwise.

"Alright, if you say so. Just promise you won't burn out."

"I promise," I say, although the weight of responsibility is already settling in my chest. "Oh, and I'll be over later to bring you some chicken soup that's not horrid,

After ending the call, I immediately switch tasks, reaching for my phone again to book a karaoke place for the

The man on the other end, Mr. Lin, sounds elderly, his voice raspy

"Lin's Karaoke. How can I help

“Hello, Mr. Lin, I’d like to rent one of your rooms for a private party,” I begin, but before I can finish, the door to my office swings open, revealing Chloe,

“Abby, do you have a minute?” she asks, her eyes darting to the various party notes strewn across my

“Um,” I falter, my attention divided between Chloe and Mr. Lin. “Just a sec,” I tell him and turn my attention to Chloe. “What’s

She hesitates, her gaze fixed on my flustered expression. “I had a question about the bar, but if

Panicking, not wanting to raise her suspicions further, I quickly interrupt Mr. Lin, “I’m sorry, can I call you back?” I hang up without waiting for

Chloe narrows her eyes, her curiosity evident. “Who

I attempt a casual shrug, trying to push down the guilt. “Oh, just a supplier. Nothing urgent. What did

She looks unconvinced, but she proceeds with her query about the bar. As we talk, I can’t help but feel her eyes on my desk, scanning the various notes and lists. Her eyes stop on the corner of a sketch peeking out from under a pile of papers—the design for her birthday

“What’s that?” she asks, pointing at

Without thinking, I grab the paper and stuff it into my pocket. “Oh, just some doodles. You know how I get when I’m brainstorming.”

Chloe squints, clearly skeptical but doesn’t press further. “Alright. Well, I’ll leave you to your... brainstorming.” She smirks, retreating from my office.

As the door shuts behind her, I sink into my chair, heart pounding. I pull out the cake sketch, staring at the intricate design I'd spent hours perfecting. The close calls are becoming too frequent, and the risk of Chloe discovering everything grows with each passing moment.

Letting out a deep sigh, I consider my options. There's no way I can continue planning during regular hours with Chloe around. Every single detail could potentially blow the surprise.

Decision made, I grab my bag and start stowing away the various party-planning materials. If I'm going to pull off this surprise, I'll have to stay late, work in the quiet hours when there's less chance of Chloe walking in on me.

Gazing at the darkening sky outside, I steel myself for the long night ahead. The task seems daunting, but for Chloe's smile on her birthday, it'll be worth it.

...

In the dim light of my cluttered office, I sit hunched over a desk piled high with scattered papers, receipts, and a half-finished cake design.

The soft hum of the overhead light is the only sound accompanying my scribbles. The large clock on the wall informs me that it's past midnight, but sleep is a distant luxury, and Chloe's upcoming birthday weighs heavy on my mind.

The restaurant, usually abuzz with patrons and staff, feels eerily quiet now, save for the occasional clatter from the kitchen.

A framed picture of Chloe and me rests beside my workstation, our grinning faces captured during a sunlit day at a music festival. The warmth and laughter from that day feels a world apart from the cool, sterile atmosphere of my office.

Lost in my thoughts, I'm jolted back to reality when a paperclip drops from the heap, clinking softly against the wooden floor. I retrieve it, my fingers brushing against the intricate rug beneath my desk—a gift from Chloe after one of her overseas trips. Everything in this room reminds me of her in some way.

Tearing my gaze away, I refocus on the list of party essentials. String lights, floral centerpieces, napkins in her favorite shade of sea blue... Every detail counts. The looming pressure of making everything perfect becomes a tangible weight on my chest.

The last time we celebrated together, the surprise was spoiled. I won't let that happen again. And it's her twenty-fifth birthday, so it's a bit of a milestone. I want it to be special.

A distant clang echoes from the kitchen, followed by a

Curiosity piqued, I stand and stretch, my muscles protesting from hours of inactivity. As I step into the hallway, the smell of lemon scented cleaner wafts toward me. The restaurant's aged wooden floors, polished to a shine, reflect the ambient lighting from overhead

"Hello? Who's here?" I call out as I approach the kitchen, spotting a silhouette

Karl emerges, wiping his hands on a

"It's just me," he responds, looking surprised to see me. The stainless-steel backdrop of the kitchen makes his tanned skin and dark hair stand out even

"What are you doing here so late?" I ask, trying to keep the weariness from my

He shrugs, glancing towards the line of prepped stations. "Just wanted to give the kitchen floors a good

I'm a bit surprised. "Wow. Thanks, Karl. You've been a great help," I admit, glancing around at the spotless kitchen. "You can head home, though. I appreciate you staying

Karl, leaning against the kitchen island, raises an eyebrow. "What about you? Don't you think you should call it

I sigh heavily, running a hand through my disheveled hair. "I'd love to, but I can't. Not with so much left to

We lapse into silence, the soft hum of the refrigerator filling the void. Karl's eyes scan the room, taking in the scattered ingredients, the party planning notes, and finally resting on me. "You're doing this for Chloe, aren't you? The whole surprise birthday

My eyes widen. "How did

He chuckles. "You think you're the only one who noticed the extra glitter on the napkins and the overabundance of party supplies? Plus, I caught Chloe snooping around the back earlier. Had to divert her attention with some made-up tale about a corporate event

Chapter 50

Abby

"You... Want to help?"

I'm taken aback. It's not quite like Karl to willingly offer help, especially in the middle of the night like this. In fact, the very thought of it instantly whisks me back to a memory that was buried in the deep recesses of my mind from when we were married.

"Karl, could you pass me the pepper?" I had called out from our spacious kitchen, my hands full as I tried to juggle several trays of hors d'oeuvres.

New Year's Eve was tonight, and I had wanted to throw an unforgettable party for our friends. I had spent days now focusing on my preparations. Everything had to be perfect.

The house was buzzing with energy. But instead of the joyful kind, it felt tense.

Karl's servants moved around the house like shadows, silently and efficiently, executing his orders. While I loved that our home came with a staff that made everything seem effortless, I wanted to be involved in the preparations.

I wanted it to feel personal.

“Abby, let them handle it,” Karl had said, his voice strained.

His face was buried in his phone, undoubtedly dealing with some Alpha matters. The life of the leader of our pack was never easy, and often the weight of it all rested heavily on his shoulders.

But this party was important to me. A fresh start, a new year, a way to reconnect with Karl after what felt like months of him being distant.

“I want to do it,” I had insisted, rolling up my sleeves. “This is something

Karl had only shot me a brief glance, his chocolatey eyes filled with the kind of exasperation you’d expect from someone juggling the weight of the world.

“You always make things more difficult than they need to be,” he

I’d tried to brush off his comment, focusing on the golden brown mini quiches in the oven.

Everything was going well, until, in my distraction, the hors d’oeuvres were left for a tad too

The once appetizing aroma was quickly replaced by the acrid smell of burnt food. Panic settled in as I quickly opened the oven, smoke billowing out, the treats blackened and

“Damn it!” I exclaimed, my eyes filling with frustrated

Karl, hearing my outcry, finally pulled away from his phone. “What happened?” He surveyed the mess, his

“I... I got distracted,” I stammered, feeling small. “I need to start over. Can you

His expression twisted, the weariness and irritation evident. "Abby, I have Alpha matters to attend to. Matters that impact the community. And you want me to

"It was just a simple request," I murmured, hurt evident in my

But Karl was already walking away. "This whole party, your insistence on doing everything yourself, it's all just... silly."

Silly.

The word felt like a slap in the face. My vision blurred with tears. I had wanted this party, not just for our friends or for the turn of the year, but for us, as a couple, to find our way back to each other. To find moments in the mundanity of life that would reconnect us.

In a final act of taking control, Karl gestured for one of his servants.

"Handle this," he had ordered curtly, pointing at the kitchen mess.

That had been the last straw for me. Without a word, I had stormed out of the kitchen, my heart breaking with each step. It wasn't about the burnt hors d'oeuvres or even the party preparations. It was about feeling unheard, unimportant, and overshadowed by the looming 'Alpha matters.'

"Yes," Karl says, shooting me a slight smirk and drawing me back out of my memory. "I, Karl, want to help you."

I sigh, rubbing my temples. "Karl, I appreciate it, but I've got this. You've already been working all day, so you can head home."

Before Karl can answer, I gently extricate myself from his grip and head back down the hallway toward my office. But upon sitting back down in my chair, I notice a presence. I look up to see Karl standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets and an amused look in his eyes.

“Karl, I said you can go home,” I say, stifling a laugh. “You don’t need to be here. Really.”

He pushes off the doorframe, entering the office and closing the distance between us. His deep brown eyes lock onto mine, a steely determination evident

“I can’t just stand here and watch you work yourself to the bone,” he insists. “Just tell me what I can

My heart flutters at his insistence. Part of me wants to refuse, to guard my problems and maintain control. But another part, the one that’s exhausted and overwhelmed, yearns for an outstretched

Taking a deep breath, I relent, pointing at the towering pile of paperwork on my desk. “Okay, first, I need to file all of this for payroll. After that, I’ve got to put in orders for ingredients, and then there’s the paperwork for renewing the liquor

Karl nods, determination set in his features. “Let’s tackle the

Handing him a stack of paperwork, I give him a brief overview of how to file it. He listens intently, and for a moment, a flicker of hope ignites

Maybe, just maybe, this night won’t be as long as

However, my optimism is short-lived. Within minutes, I notice Karl’s brow furrowing in confusion, his hands shuffling the papers awkwardly. Glancing over, my heart sinks as I see the

“Karl, that’s not how they’re supposed to be filed,” I say, trying to keep the exasperation from my

He looks up, a sheepish expression on his face. “I thought I was doing it right. Sorry,

I take a deep breath, pushing down my rising frustration. “It’s okay. Let’s just go over it