

His Kickass 51

Chapter 51

Abby

“Alright, paperwork’s done,” Karl declares with an air of finality, piling the last of the filed sheets into a neat stack.

The office is a maze of papers, scattered across the desk and floor, but we’ve managed to conquer the monster of bureaucracy.

I chuckle, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. “Who knew running a restaurant came with so much... paper?”

Karl snorts. “Did no one warn you?”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Alright, Mr. Know-It-All. Next is ordering. Let’s head to the kitchen and see what we need.”

He nods, and we make our way to the heart of the restaurant. The stainless steel countertops gleam under the dim overhead lights, and I breathe in the familiar mix of spices and cooked food. There’s something soothing about being here, even when the bustle is gone.

I grab a clipboard and start jotting down a list. “We definitely need more garlic, basil, tomatoes...”

Karl starts peeking into various containers and cupboards, joining in on the inventory. “Don’t forget the mushrooms and parmesan.”

There’s a moment of comfortable silence as we both get absorbed in our task.

Then, from a distance, the soft strumming of a guitar fills the space. It seems one of the staff has left a radio on.

“Is that... Ed Sheeran?” Karl asks, looking up with a smile.

I nod, swaying slightly to the rhythm. “Perfect. I haven’t heard this song in a

My head instinctively bobs to the music as I get back to work. But then, I feel a presence beside me. I look up to see Karl standing beside me, his brown eyes sparkling with

“Dance with me?” he

Shaking my head, I turn away slightly. “You’re ridiculous. We’ve got work

“C’mon, Abby. We haven’t danced in so long.” Before I can stop him, he reaches out, grabbing my hand and twirling me

I quickly pull away as a heat creeps up into my

But it’s too late. With a mischievous laugh, Karl grabs me again, pulling me closer this time. I have no choice but to sway along with him, partially victim to his Alpha aura and partially victim to my own

Before I know it, the cold, hard kitchen tiles are becoming our dance floor as the soft lyrics echo

As the soft chords of the song fill the kitchen, Karl’s hand finds my waist, pulling me in closer. There’s a gentle pressure as his fingers dance against my back, guiding our movements. Our feet, somehow in sync, tap and slide against the cold tiles, creating a rhythm of their

His eyes, intense and warm, lock onto mine. Every turn, every twirl is executed with a fluid grace that sends a rush of memories flooding

Despite the time and distance that has come between us, the weight of Karl’s body against mine feels familiar,

I won't admit it, but... I've missed this.

I remember those nights we used to spontaneously decide to go out, drawn to the thumping beats of dance clubs and the infectious energy they promised. Karl had always been such a good dancer, an unexpected trait for someone of his stature and responsibility.

His steps had a confidence, a surety to them that drew me in. The way he could command a dance floor was akin to the way he led our pack—with authority and finesse. Dancing with him wasn't just about the steps or the music; it was an unspoken language of passion, understanding, and connection.

I used to love the feeling of being twirled under his arm, the heat of our bodies moving together, the exhilaration of losing ourselves to the beat. The world outside ceased to exist; it was just the two of us and the rhythm that pulsed through our veins.

His voice, low and slightly teasing, breaks my reverie, almost as though reading my thoughts. "Remember how we used to dance the night away? Every weekend, sometimes even on weekdays."

I blush, nodding. "I remember. You'd spin me around till I was dizzy, and we'd laugh like kids, not caring about anyone watching."

Karl chuckles, his grip tightening around my waist for a brief moment. "There was that one time..." he begins, a mischievous glint in his eyes, "at that club downtown. We danced for hours, didn't we? Until our feet ached and our clothes were soaked in sweat."

The memory surfaces, and I can't help but giggle. "God, yes. We must've looked a mess by the time we left."

He smirks, his gaze becoming more intense. "Well, dancing wasn't the only activity that made us sweat, was it?"

My eyes widen in mock horror, and I smack his chest, feigning indignation. "Karl! You absolute pig!"

But my reprimand lacks any real heat, and the flush that creeps up my face gives me away. His laughter rings in my ears, warm and infectious, and I find myself laughing along, even as I try to muster up a glare.

The laughter gradually dies down, replaced by the soft hum of the music and the steady beat of our hearts. We're closer now, our faces inches apart, our breaths mingling. The intensity of his gaze holds me captive, and for a split second, everything else

But reality quickly crashes back in, reminding me of the boundaries, of the lines we've drawn. The lines that

With a deep breath, I gently pull away, breaking the magnetic pull between

Maybe because I suddenly notice how hungry I feel, or maybe because I want to change the subject, I gesture toward the fridge. "Are you hungry?" I

He pauses, a hand on his stomach. "Starving,

Smiling, I move to the refrigerator. "How about some pasta? You can help with that, too, since you seem to be so keen on

Karl raises an eyebrow. "You trust me helping in the kitchen, after the paperwork

"Let's just say... I'm willing to risk it." I wink, pulling out a packet of spaghetti and some fresh ingredients. "Can you handle chopping the garlic

He salutes playfully. "Aye, aye,

As I boil the water, I sneak glances at Karl. To my surprise, he's deftly chopping the garlic, each piece uniform. The tomatoes are next, and he slices them with an ease

"You've gotten better," I comment,

Chapter 52

Abby

Sitting in the dimly lit kitchen, the soft clinking of our utensils is a comforting lullaby against the evening's silence. I sneak glances at Karl every now and then, his features illuminated with a gentle glow from the overhead light. He seems lost in his thoughts, enjoying every bite.

"This pasta turned out really well," he murmurs, drawing my attention.

I chuckle, twirling another mouthful onto my fork. "Team effort, remember?"

Karl smiles. "Yes, but I think someone here had the magic touch, and it sure as hell wasn't me."

Laughing lightly, I shake my head. "You flatter too much, Mr. Know-It-All."

As I twirl the spaghetti around my fork, Karl's gaze meets mine, a hint of mirth in his eyes. "You know," he begins, pausing for effect, "I never thought I'd see the day where you're more engrossed in your food than in giving orders."

I feign shock, clutching my chest. "Mr. Karl, are you insinuating that I'm bossy?"

His laughter fills the room, its rich timbre a comforting note in the ambiance of our intimate dinner. "Never, Miss Abby. Simply observing," he winks.

Giggling, I take a playful swipe at him with my napkin. We continue this light banter, laughing over silly anecdotes and shared memories. With each passing minute, my guard slips a little further.

I hate myself for it, for being so easily lulled into this contentment. For being so comfortable and at peace in Karl's presence.

As I reach for my glass of water, my fingers brush against his.

I can't help but notice the warmth of his touch, and how his skin feels against mine—strong yet gentle. In the dim light of the kitchen, he looks... captivating. The way the soft glow accentuates the rugged contours of his face, the spark in his eyes, and that boyish charm that lurks just beneath his often stern exterior—it's all disarmingly

I can't deny it any longer, how easy it is to get lost in the moment with him. To forget about our differences, about the hurt of the past, and simply revel in the now. The pull is magnetic, almost primal, and it scares me just how much I'm drawn

"Earth to Abby," Karl's voice interrupts my reverie, accompanied by a

Shaking my head slightly, I chuckle. "Sorry. Lost in

"Thinking about how wonderful my culinary skills are?" he teases, raising

Laughing, I reply, "More like thinking about how to recreate

Throughout the meal, we continue our back and forth, and it's so... effortless. The laughter, the light touches, the shared glances. With every word, every gesture, Karl's being so sweet, so genuine, that I almost forget about the man he's supposedly

But as the evening progresses, Chloe's words echo in my mind—about how Karl used to be this kind, gentle, and loving soul, and how all of it changed after the

The transformation from this sweet boyfriend to a more aloof husband. The haunting thought makes my heart clench in trepidation. This could all be an act. A way to get

However, tonight, I just want to push those thoughts aside. Tonight, I want to believe in this version of Karl. I want to drown in this gentle current of nostalgia and comfort. Just for tonight, I wish to be this carefree girl again, laughing and joking with the man she once loved

I look across the table, locking eyes with him. "Thank you, Karl," I say softly,

He smiles, a genuine, warm smile. "Always,

Once we finish the meal, I clear away the plates, placing them in the dishwasher. Jumping up, I seat myself on the countertop, pulling my notepad closer.

"Alright," I begin, twirling the pen in my fingers, "time to finalize our order. Let's hear it."

Without missing a beat, Karl starts listing off ingredients. "We need rosemary, thyme, some fettuccine, canned tomatoes... more of that spicy olive oil."

I scribble quickly, noting down each item. I watch in amusement as he scuttles from one corner to the other, checking shelves, peeking into containers, and being utterly relentless in ensuring nothing's left out.

"You're like a whirlwind," I comment, half laughing.

Karl winks at me from across the room. "Efficiency, Abby. I learned from the best."

The list grows, and at some point, Karl comes closer, presumably to look into a nearby cabinet. That's when I notice the sheen of sweat on his forehead.

His dedication to help me, especially after a long day, is touching. Maybe it softens me a little.

"Hey." I beckon him closer, setting down the notepad for a moment.

He complies, approaching with a slow, measured pace. His closeness sends a tiny jolt of electricity down my spine. Without a word, I reach out, wiping the sweat away with the back of my hand.

"You've been such a trooper tonight," I tell him softly. "Thank you."

There's a momentary silence between us, punctuated only by our slightly uneven breaths. But then, before I can stop him, Karl's hand shoots out. His arm wraps itself around my waist, pulling

Our breaths mix together, husky and

"I know you want me," he murmurs. "I know you want

He's not wrong. I do want him. Ever since I had that wet dream about him, I haven't quite gotten those images out of my mind. I know that I made a promise to myself and to my friends that I would never do this with him, I can't help it. He looks too hot in the dim light of the kitchen, with a sheen of sweat on his forehead and his sleeves pushed up to reveal his sinewy forearms, for me to push him

Neither of us has to speak. Before I know it, our lips are locked in an intense kiss. He tastes sweet and salty, like wine and spices. A soft moan echoes between us as his tongue works its way into my mouth, exploring me in ways that Adam never

I needed this. To be touched, wanted, loved. I haven't felt this

"Abby..."

"Just shut up," I murmur, wrapping my legs around him and pulling him closer. "Just be quiet and

Karl does as I tell him to. I feel the warmth of his body lean into me as his lips trail across my jaw and down my neck. With a mischievous grin, I tighten my legs around him and buck my hips against his, reveling in the deep groan that escapes his

With a low, guttural groan, Karl begins working his lips and tongue along the neckline of my shirt. I didn't realize it earlier, but my shirt today was low-cut with a slightly lacy trim. Did I pick it out because I wanted to, or did I pick it out for attention? I'm not sure, but either way, I'm not

Reaching down, I start groping toward his groin. He's already

“God, I forgot how big you are,” I murmur teasingly, wrapping my fingers around his shaft through

Chapter 53

Abby

The sun’s barely peeking over the horizon as I pull open the door to the restaurant.

I can already feel the hustle of a new day, the potential for a fresh start. Walking in, I expect the familiar comfort of an empty space, but I’m met instead with Ethan’s brooding form. His jaw is set tight, his brow furrowed.

He doesn’t look up as I approach.

“Morning,” I greet cautiously, sensing the tension in the air.

He sighs heavily. “Abby... What the hell happened here last night?”

Confused, I follow his gaze. The kitchen. Oh no. My heart skips a beat as memories of last night flood back. The cooking. The laughter. The... moment with Karl.

“What do you mean?” I manage to ask, feigning ignorance.

Ethan’s eyes fix on me, and I can see his irritation. “I’ll show you.” Without waiting for a reply, he leads me into the disaster zone that is the kitchen.

Every counter is smeared with remnants of our late-night feast. Pots and pans are scattered everywhere, some still containing leftover food. The sight makes my stomach churn with guilt. How could I have been so careless?

I feel the heat rise to my cheeks. “I... I was working late last night. Got hungry and...” I trail off, trying to find a good excuse, but words fail me.

Ethan just raises an eyebrow, his expression demanding more.

“And... I forgot to clean up,” I finish lamely, avoiding

A beat of silence. Then, “Forgot?” His tone is sharp, filled

My mind races. If he even catches a hint of what transpired with Karl, rumors would spread like wildfire, jeopardizing not only my reputation but potentially the restaurant’s as

“I was exhausted,” I

His eyes scan the kitchen, lingering on a particular spot on the counter, and my heart races. That’s where Karl and I... No. I shake my head mentally. Now’s not

Taking a deep breath, I roll up my sleeves. “I’ll clean this up, Ethan. I’m

He sighs, his anger simmering down to annoyance. “Just... be more careful, Abby. This isn’t like

You have no idea, I think grimly. But all I say is,

As he walks away, I’m left with the mess—both the literal one in the kitchen and the tangled one in my heart. As I scrub the counters, my mind can’t help but drift back to

To Karl.

Every spot I clean, every dish I wash, feels like an echo of his presence. The way he smiled, the sound of his laughter, the touch of his

No. I need to stop this. Last night was a mistake. An indiscretion borne out of nostalgia and exhaustion. It shouldn’t have happened. I shouldn’t be thinking about him like this.

The more I scrub, the more I try to erase not just the stains of food but the remnants of those feelings. The confusion. The longing. The regret.

Hours seem to pass as I'm lost in my thoughts, cleaning up my mess in more ways than one. By the time I'm done, the kitchen is spotless—gleaming counters and organized tools. I wish it was as easy to sort out my emotions.

I lean against the counter, the same one where Karl and I shared that moment, and close my eyes. The memory is still fresh, the feelings raw. But this is neither the time nor the place to deal with it.

With a deep sigh, I push away from the counter, reminding myself of my responsibilities, the reputation of the restaurant, and the promises I made to myself.

Today is a new day, and I need to focus on the present, not get lost in the memories of last night.

...

The sunlight slants through the half-drawn blinds, casting soft golden beams onto my desk as I skim through the restaurant's monthly earnings. There's a particular rhythm to the mornings here, where the distant hum of activity outside my office gently soothes my usually anxious mind.

Then there's a knock, crisp and assertive.

"Come in," I call out, expecting to see Ethan or even Karl.

But the door swings open to reveal a tall, commanding figure that I don't recognize.

Dressed in a sharp charcoal suit, with an air of unquestionable authority, the stranger's steel blue eyes meet mine. He extends a hand, introducing himself. "You're Abby, correct?" he asks. "The owner of

I nod, furrowing my brow. I wasn't expecting any health inspectors today. "Yes," I

The man smiles. "I'm Calvin

Rising to greet him, I shake his offered hand, slightly taken aback by the unexpected visit. "Mr. Thompson. I don't believe we had an appointment. How can I

Without preamble, he begins, "I represent the Alpha Gathering Committee. I understand this might come as a surprise, but your restaurant has garnered quite the

I know all about the Alpha gathering. It's where deals are struck and alliances formed, all over sumptuous meals and

And it's where I promised to go on that date with Karl, since I lost

My mind races, trying to grasp why a representative from the committee would be standing in my modest

Calvin continues, his tone steady, "Among countless establishments in this city, yours stands out. As such, you are among the four finalists we're considering to cater for our

I blink, trying to process the weight of his words. "Finalist? You've been assessing

He nods, looking around the office, perhaps trying to read the story of my journey from the certificates and mementos adorning the walls. "We've had undercover food critics visit over the past few months. Your dishes, your service, the ambiance—they've all consistently

Chapter 54

Abby

"This... Isn't a prank, right?"

Even as I utter those words, I feel like an idiot. But I can't help myself; I just can't wrap my head around this whole situation. My little restaurant was chosen as one of four finalists for the Alpha gathering out of all of the amazing restaurants in the city?

The rich timbre of Calvin's chuckle fills the room. "A prank? No, ma'am, this is as real as it gets. But, I'd advise you not to pop the champagne just yet."

I raise an eyebrow, my heart still pounding hard. "Why's that?"

"The selection process requires a cook-off," he explains. "Each of the four chosen restaurants will compete to showcase their culinary prowess. Based on this, we'll decide which establishment will have the honor of catering for the Alpha gathering. It will be quite rigorous."

The gravity of the competition he's describing does little to dampen my excitement. This is an incredible opportunity, and even just being considered feels like a massive win. "So, what you're saying is that there's a chance, even if it's one in four?"

"Exactly. And considering the caliber of dishes you serve here, I'd say you stand a good chance." Calvin's smile is enigmatic, but it's clear he's not just trying to flatter me. "If you accept our offer to participate, I'll make sure all the details and requirements are sent to you ASAP."

A whirlwind of thoughts race through my mind. The dishes I'd prepare, the strategies I'd employ, the possible reactions of the judges. But even amidst this rush, the answer is clear.

"Of course I accept," I say, my voice firm and decisive.

"Excellent. I believed you would," Calvin nods, pulling out a sleek card from his pocket and placing it on my desk. "This is my direct contact. Should you have any questions or need clarification, don't hesitate to reach

I take the card, the cool, smooth texture a stark contrast to the warmth of my fingers. "Thank you, Mr. Thompson. I won't let you

A glint appears in his eyes. "I'm counting on it." With that, he rises, the action smooth and full of a quiet grace that makes me all the more aware of the significance of

After he leaves, the weight of what's just transpired

The room suddenly feels too silent, too still. I gently shut the door and then, unable to contain the surge of excitement, lean back in my chair, covering my face with both hands. A muffled yell of pure, unadulterated joy escapes

It's more than just an opportunity. It's a validation of every sacrifice I've made, every late night I've endured, every ounce of passion I've poured into this establishment. Winning this cook-off would do more than just garner business. It would be the realization of a dream, a testament to the love I have for the culinary

The idea of my restaurant's name being spoken in the same breath as the city's elites, the increased footfall, the credibility—the implications

But more than that, it's the recognition. Every chef, every restaurateur dreams of being acknowledged for their craft. And this? This is as big as

Even though the road ahead is uncertain, even though the competition will be stiff, this moment, this opportunity feels golden. It feels like the universe's way of telling me that every challenge I faced, every hurdle I overcame, was leading up

The stakes are high, yes. But the thrill? The thrill is

Adrenaline pumping through me, I burst into the bar area. Ethan and Chloe are engaged in what looks to be an amusing chat, judging by their smiles. But all that is forgotten as I dramatically slam both hands on the bar counter, grabbing their attention.

"You guys! You will not believe what just happened in my office!" I nearly shout, my voice an octave higher than usual. The sheer excitement makes it difficult to control my volume.

Ethan's grin fades to an expression of curiosity while Chloe's eyes widen. "What is it, Abby?"

Without pausing for a breath, I recount my meeting with Calvin. "We've been chosen as one of the finalists to cater for the Alpha gathering! There's going to be a cook-off and everything!" I can barely contain the elation bubbling within me.

The pair's expressions morph from surprise to pure shock. "Are you serious?" Ethan gasps, his blue eyes searching my face for any sign of jest.

Chloe's eyes sparkle with shared excitement. "Oh my God, Abby!" She squeals, wrapping her arms around me in a tight embrace. The warmth of her hug only adds to the fuzzy happiness that engulfs me.

"I'm so, so proud of you!" she gushes, pulling away but holding my shoulders at arm's length, looking at me as though she's seeing me for the first time.

Ethan clears his throat, a playful twinkle in his eye. "Do I get a hug, too?"

Laughing, I envelope him in a hug, his lanky frame bending to accommodate mine. "Of course, you do," I mumble against his chest. Pulling back, I add, "I'm going to need all hands on deck. This could change everything for us!"

"We're with you every step of the way," Ethan promises, his tone sincere. "Whatever you need,

A cacophony of clinking dishes and muted conversation from the kitchen is momentarily overshadowed by the sound of a door

From the corner of my eye, I spot Karl, clad in his bandana and t-shirt, striding into the dining area. His brow is furrowed, presumably from the loud commotion we were

He takes in the scene, confusion evident in

"What's going on? Why's everyone

My heart does a little flip, and I'm instantly transported back to our stolen moment in the dim kitchen last

The sensation of his lips, his breath against my skin, and the electricity between us makes my cheeks flush. The very thought of looking into his eyes threatens to unravel me. I quickly glance down, desperately hoping to regain some semblance of

Chloe, ever the keen observer, smirks ever so slightly. "You gonna tell him or should I?" she teases, nodding

Gathering up every ounce of courage I possess, I lift my gaze to meet his. His brown eyes are filled with curiosity, but there's also a hint of... concern? It makes it all the more difficult to breathe, but I force myself

"I... Um..."

Chapter 55

Abby

The ambiance of the restaurant after hours is one of muted stillness, a stark contrast to its bustling daytime persona.

I absolutely cherish these moments, where the world seems to fade, and it's just me and my culinary creations.

Tonight, it's not about a new dish or preparation for the next day's service, nor is it even about the upcoming cookoff for the Alpha party competition.

Instead, it's personal. Chloe's birthday is tomorrow, and there's no way I'm going to let it slide without a special treat. Hence, the covert operation: baking her a surprise birthday cake and finalizing our party plans.

The ingredients lay sprawled on the counter: flour, sugar, eggs, chocolate, vanilla extract, and a myriad of decorations. I've decided on a red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting—her absolute favorite.

As I start mixing the batter, a shadow unexpectedly looms over me.

Startled, I nearly drop the whisk. Turning around, I'm met with the piercing gaze of Karl. He stands there, his arms crossed, a mixture of annoyance and curiosity evident in his brown eyes.

"Karl!" I exclaim, caught off guard. "What are you doing here? It's late. You scared me half to death."

He arches a brow. "Could say the same about you."

Flustered, I reply, "I could ask you to leave since I literally own the place."

His smirk is both infuriating and charming at the same time. "Trying to pull rank on me, Abby? Really?"

"Well, what do you want?" I sigh, not in the mood for his banter, especially given our recent

Instead of answering, he glances down at the mess on the counter, then back to me, eyes softening

"Baking a

I nod, rolling my eyes. "Observant, aren't

"I can help," he offers,

"With the way you reacted the other day? I think I'm good, thanks," I respond, a little sharper than intended. The memory of the recent confusion between us is still fresh in my mind, the way that he stormed out angrily since I told him that I couldn't have sex

Karl looks down, momentarily lost in thought. When he speaks, his voice is filled with a rare vulnerability. "Look, I might not be a fan of surprises, but I can't bear to see someone struggling alone. Especially not you. Let me help,

I'm taken aback, not only by his words but the genuineness in his gaze. "You're not still mad about the

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "A bit, yeah. But this isn't about that. It's about..." he pauses, searching for the right words. "...Doing something

The sincerity in his voice warms my heart. "Fine, but only if you promise not to mess

Karl's brown eyes glint with mischief, replacing the annoyance in them. "Wouldn't dream of

He washes his hands quickly and then moves to stand beside me. With deft hands, he helps pour the flour, adding just the right amount of cocoa powder. The batter comes together beautifully, velvety and

For the next hour, it's a blend of teamwork and teasing. There's an unexpected ease between us, a camaraderie that blossoms as we laugh at each other's quips and focus on perfecting the cake.

Soon, the batter is poured into a mold, and it's slid into the preheated oven. "Now, we wait," I announce, brushing my flour-covered hands on my apron.

Karl grins, holding up a cupped hand full of flour. "How about a little fun while we do?"

Before I can process what he means, a cloud of white powder is flung at me, dusting my hair and face.

Flour is clinging to my hair, eyelashes, and the tip of my nose. I stare at Karl in wide-eyed disbelief, the initial shock giving way to mischief.

"Karl!" I shriek, both shocked and amused. I look at him, my expression feigned outrage, but the giggles escaping my lips betray me. "You'll pay for that."

His laughter fills the room, a deep, infectious sound. “Bring it on, chef.”

Without another word, I scoop up a generous handful of flour and, with all the strength I can muster, hurl it right at him.

His reaction is comically slow. The flour smacks him square in the face, rendering him ghost-like in appearance. For a split second, the kitchen is shrouded in silence—then both of us erupt in peals of laughter.

One handful becomes two, two becomes four, and before we know it, we’re engaged in an all-out flour war. Clouds of white powder fly in every direction, settling on counters, the floor, the oven—everywhere.

It’s madness, it’s chaotic, but it’s also... freeing. As we duck, dodge, and counter-attack, I’m transported back in time.

Memories of our old shared kitchen resurface—of simpler times when we used to engage in impromptu food fights and end up laughing on the floor. And then, almost always, laughter would give way to an

A sudden warmth fills my cheeks as flashes of those memories—of tangled limbs and whispered promises—overwhelm me. I quickly turn away, the reminiscing threatening to reveal emotions I’ve been desperately trying to keep

I glance at the oven, noticing that the cake’s baking time is nearly up. “Okay, okay! Truce!” I call out, hands raised in

Karl, though covered head to toe in flour, grins. “Fine, truce. But only because you said

Rolling my eyes, I gesture at the utter mess we’ve made. “Look at this! Now, who’s going to clean up this

“Considering I started it,” Karl chuckles, brushing flour off his arms, “I’ll

“Damn right you will,” I retort, feigning sternness. But then I add, softer this time, “Thanks,

To my surprise, instead of his usual witty comeback, he simply salutes me with a playful response. “Aye aye, captain,” he says, and grabs a broom to

As I carefully remove the cake from the oven, setting it on the counter to cool, the comfortable silence between us is broken by Karl’s

“About last night...” he begins, clearing

I instantly stiffen. It’s the last thing I want to discuss, especially after the rollercoaster of emotions tonight has been. I turn to face him, a wall of defenses

“It was a mistake, Karl,” I say tersely. “I don’t want to talk about

Chapter 56

The restaurant buzzes with an energy that I haven’t felt in a long while. Streamers hang from the ceiling, twinkling fairy lights wrap around the bar, and the laughter of friends and colleagues fills the air.

Tonight is more than just another party; it’s a celebration of someone I hold dear, and I can’t help but get swept up in the excitement.

“So,” Ethan says as we complete the finishing touches on some balloons. Leah is on her way with Chloe, who thinks that it’s just going to be the three of us girls going out for drinks. She has no idea. “You hear anything yet about the cook-off?”

Instinctively, I lower my voice and shoot Ethan a wary look. Karl is floating around here somewhere, and I haven’t mentioned the cook-off to him yet.

I’m not entirely sure why, other than the fact that I did promise that I would go to the Alpha party with him, and potentially catering it would get in the way of that.

“Not yet,” I answer as I tie an intricate knot on one of the bundles of balloons. “Still waiting to get the details.”

“Well, either way, I’m excited for you,” Ethan says gently. His leg seems to be hurting him, and he takes a moment to lean on the bar. “If you need any help, let me know.”

I can’t help but smile. Ethan has always been one of my most faithful employees, and I’m glad to have made him the new restaurant manager. He deserves it.

“Thanks, Ethan.”

Just then, a voice cuts through the room.

“Everyone get ready! Chloe is coming!”

In an instant, the room falls into a hush. People dart behind tables, the lights go off, and Ethan and I duck down behind the bar with smirks on our faces. I can hear the sound of the door opening, followed by Chloe’s confused voice.

“What the hell? Why is it so dark in here?”

The lights flick on. Everyone jumps out from their hiding places, yelling “Surprise!” at the top of our lungs. Chloe gasps and claps her hand over her mouth.

“You guys!” she shrieks, spotting me and closing the distance between us to throw her arms around my neck. “This is

“It’s the least we could do,” I say into her ear, hugging her tight. “Happy

...

Chloe, radiant in a simple yet elegant dress, floats around, chatting with everyone. Her joy is palpable, and seeing her this happy makes every ounce of effort worth

I survey the room from behind the bar, a contented smile tugging at my lips. But amid the thrum of celebration, my eyes catch a

Karl leans against the far wall, nursing his drink. Our eyes lock for a fleeting moment before he looks away, and a mixture of emotions churns within

Soon enough, the smell of delicious food wafts through the air as waiters begin to bring out platters filled with mouthwatering dishes: lobster tails, crab cakes, rice pilaf and

As the food lands on the table, Chloe's eyes light up like a kid on Christmas morning. She claps her hands together and squeals with

"Oh my God, Abby, you made

"The chef aims to please," I reply, sharing a knowing smile with

Chloe stands up, raising her glass. "I just want to say, I have the best friends in the entire world. Abby, Leah," she scans the room, locking eyes with each of us, "you two are the best anyone could ask for. To friendship and fabulous

Glasses clink, and for a moment, all is right with

"We should capture this," Chloe declares, her eyes scanning the room. "I want a picture

I grab my phone and start fiddling with it, trying to find the perfect spot where we can all fit in the frame. I prop it against a glass, angling it just so.

But after a few failed attempts—it slips, tips over, or just gives a skewed angle—I sigh in frustration.

“That’s not going to work, is it?” Chloe notes, sensing my minor struggle.

Before I can answer, her eyes land on Karl, who’s leaning against the wall, sipping his drink. “Hey, Karl.”

“What’s up?” he says, taking another sip of his drink.

“Take the picture for us.”

Chloe’s words are somewhat demanding, as though daring him not to take the photo, or subtly implying that she doesn’t want him in her photo. A weird tension fills the air for a split second, like a hush falling over a captivated audience.

Maybe it’s just me, but I sense a little animosity, a subtle standoff between Chloe and Karl that makes me uneasy.

“Actually, I think everyone should be in the picture,” I start to say, not wanting Karl to feel left out. After all, he’s a part of the team, part of this night. And he’s helped me immensely with the preparations.

Karl meets my eyes, and it’s as if he reads my thoughts. His face softens, and he puts down his drink. “No worries. I’d be happy to take the picture.”

The tension lifts, replaced by a collective sense of relief that ripples through the room.

“Good. Everyone, gather around!” Chloe announces, her excitement returning in full force.

We all huddle together, a motley crew of chefs, servers, friends, and family, each one of us with a unique story but connected through the thread of this very moment.

Karl grabs the phone, getting into position. “Ready? One,

The flash goes off, capturing smiles, joy, and a room full of people who matter. He takes a couple more shots for good measure before handing the phone back

“Thanks, Karl,” I say softly, flipping through the pictures. They’re perfect, capturing the essence of the evening in frozen snippets

But there’s something missing, and for a moment, I think to myself that the picture feels terribly empty without him by my side, just like old days. I push the thought away, though, and offer Karl a

“No problem,” he replies, his tone casual but carrying a depth I can’t quite

As he moves back to his original spot, my heart twinges with a mixture of gratitude and guilt. I’m thankful for his willingness to step in and help, to be a part of this moment in his own

But at the same time, I can’t shake the feeling that he should have been in those pictures too. He should be part of this memory

The meal passes in a whirlwind of laughter and shared stories, each dish a hit. I feel a sense of pride watching my friends and staff relish the

All the while, though, I can’t help but steal glances at Karl, who seems equally engrossed in his meal, but doesn’t seem to be talking very much. It’s

Eventually, the moment I’ve been waiting

I nod at Ethan, who dims the lights, creating an ambiance that adds a touch of magic to the

Two servers emerge from the kitchen, carefully carrying the cake—red velvet covered in cream cheese frosting, adorned with elegant designs and Chloe’s name scrawled in delicate

As they place it on the table, the room erupts in applause and Chloe’s eyes go wide with awe. We all sing happy birthday, and then slices are

Chapter 57

The city's nocturnal pulse is like a second heartbeat, a comforting undercurrent as I make my way toward the subway.

Tonight was something else. A blend of euphoria, sprinkled with an indescribable tension—thanks to Karl's abrupt departure.

I'm not sure why he left, or really even when he left. All I know is that one moment he was there, and the next he was gone. And he didn't come back.

Did someone say something? Did something happen? Was it the picture fiasco?

My mind wanders back to Chloe and the palpable tension between the two of them. I know that Chloe dislikes him, and for good reason, but I think he's been trying to change. I just wish that she could see that.

"God, what am I thinking?" I whisper to myself, shaking my head. Standing up for Karl? For the man who divorced me, who forced me to dress modestly, who convinced me to dye my hair for his own pleasure? I should be siding with Chloe, not him.

And yet, I still can't help but feel a slight twinge of regret as I think about the empty space where he once stood tonight, calmly sipping his drink.

I board the train, reveling in the almost-empty car. After the whirlwind of the night, I really needed some quiet time like this. For some reason, the quiet subway at night always feels soothing to me, when it would make most people uncomfortable.

I sit by the window, staring into the dark tunnel as the train lurches forward.

That's when he sits next to me. A man in a crisp business suit, reeking of arrogance, and, as I soon realize, alcohol.

"Hey there, beautiful," he begins, his voice oozing an unsettling mixture of charm and

Ignoring him, I focus on the passing darkness outside the window. It's late, and the last thing I want is an unwanted interaction. Maybe, if I just pretend that he's not here, he'll get the hint and move on. It's worked before.

"So, what's a pretty thing like you doing all alone at this hour?" he continues, undeterred by my lack

I sigh. I should move. Gathering my things, I make my way to a seat on the opposite side of the train car. But he follows, plopping down beside me, closer this time. His scent—a cocktail of aftershave and booze—assaults

"Why'd you move, sweetheart? I'm just trying to make friendly

"Listen, I'm not interested," I say, voice firm, hoping to shut down any further discussion. "Find someone else to

"Oh, come on. You haven't even gotten to know me yet. I'm an Alpha, you see. And I've got lots of money. I could show you a night you'll never

My skin crawls at his insinuation. The word 'Alpha' seems to ooze from his lips as if it were a crown rather than a glaring red

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass," I reply politely, desperate for this ride

"You sure about that, sweetie?" His eyes narrow, and he lays a hand on my thigh, as if he owns it. "You don't know what you're

My stomach lurches at his touch. I shove his hand away, my patience shattering. "I said I'm not interested."

His face contorts, the veneer of faux charm vanishing, replaced by raw, seething anger. "You think you're too good for me or something, little bitch?"

“Just back off,” I growl.

The man smirks. “So you do think you’re too good for an Alpha like me. I should teach you some manners.”

Before I can stop him, the man leans closer to me, attempting to press his lips against my neck. With a yelp, I push him away and look around. No one is even trying to help me, either too engrossed in their phones or not wanting to get involved. I feel trapped and alone.

I assess my options. The train is coming up on a stop, which isn’t even close to my stop, but it’s better than staying here. And if he tries to follow me, I could at least try to fake him out and jump back on the train just before it takes off.

As the stop comes up, I stand abruptly, shoving the man away.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he growls.

“Getting out of here,” I say, gathering my belongings as the train screeches to a halt at the next station. The doors slide open, and I make my exit, not looking back, even when he yells something unintelligible after me.

My breath catches as I wait for the moment of departure, half-expecting him to make a last-minute exit to follow me. But he doesn’t. The train vanishes into the tunnel, taking with it the immediate threat but leaving me alone in a sea

I glance around the dimly lit station and curse under my breath. The platform is deserted, its shadowy corners making it an ideal place for unsavory encounters. A quick look at the time on my phone confirms what I already suspected: that was the last

“Great. Just great, Abby,” I mutter to myself, frustration mingling with the residual adrenaline in

Deciding that staying in this underground station isn't an option, I make my way up to the street level. The stairs seem steeper than usual, as if begrudging

When I finally emerge, the world I step into is devoid of life, the night sky a blanket of impenetrable black. Buildings stand like silent sentinels, their windows darkened eyes that watch but offer no

With a shaky hand, I pull out my phone, thumbing open the Uber app. The screen takes a moment to populate, and when it does, my heart sinks

No cars nearby. The nearest one is a 30-minute wait. I bite my lip, weighing the risks of standing alone on a desolate street corner for half an hour. They tip the scale in favor of

But what are my options? The streets are empty, no taxis in sight, and every storefront I can see is shrouded in darkness, closed for the night. A bus? Unlikely, given the hour and the lack of any visible

I pull up G****e Maps, the blue dot of my location blinking like a beacon in a sea of unfamiliar street names. Spotting a main road a few blocks away, I make my

"Okay. I'll walk to the main road," I murmur, pocketing my phone and taking a cautious step forward. "There have to be cabs there. Or people. Anything is better

Chapter 58

I'm pacing my living room, a glass of whiskey in hand, lost in my thoughts. The night has been a cocktail of emotions—high spirits at the party, laughter with Abby... And then, of course, there was the palpable tension with Chloe.

I thought I had managed to keep my feelings under wraps, maintain the casual facade. But Chloe had to go and ruin it, filling the air with words like poison darts.

"Stay away from him," she had whispered to Abby, not knowing that I was within earshot.

Who the hell does she think she is?

I throw myself onto the leather chair, my fingers gripping the armrests, the echo of Chloe's words still fresh in my mind. "Stay away from him," she had said, as though her voice could erect a wall between Abby and me—a wall I'm not certain even I could scale at this point.

"What is her problem?" I growl to myself, my thoughts a whirlwind of frustration.

"She clearly dislikes you," my wolf interjects, his voice a rumbling presence in the depths of my consciousness.

"You think I can't see that? And it's not the first time, either," I retort, my mind slipping back in time, to another party, another confrontation.

It had been a similar occasion. Friends, laughter, a lively atmosphere.

Abby had been radiant, the center of my universe. But then Chloe had started arguing with me. About what, I can barely remember.

What I do recall is the anger, my territorial instincts flaring up, the undeniable urge to assert my dominance. I had ended up kicking her out of the party.

The aftermath was equally vivid. Abby had been furious, her eyes ablaze with a fire I had

"You're trying to ruin my friendships, Karl," she had yelled, her voice strained with emotion. She had left with Chloe, her best friend, her confidant. Abby hadn't come home for two days. When she finally did, the atmosphere between us had been colder than a winter

"You were a jerk to Chloe," she'd told me, her voice heavy with disappointment when I tried to kiss her. "If you can't be nice to my friends, then don't expect any affection"

I groan, dragging my hands down my face, the weight of the past settling on my shoulders. "Is this what it's always going to be?" I ask out loud. "If I ever have a chance with Abby again, am I going to spend my life tiptoeing around her friends who can't stand

“You weren’t the best husband,” my wolf remarks, a touch of reproach in his tone. “You left Abby. You mistreated her. What do you

“I know, okay? I know I screwed up. And I’m working damn hard to be a better man—to be the kind of man Abby deserves,” I snap, my voice tinged with bitterness. “But it’s like no one can see that. No one’s even willing to give me a chance to prove

“Abby sees it,” my wolf whispers, his voice softening. “She might not fully realize it yet, but she senses the change in you. Otherwise, she wouldn’t allow you back into her life, even in the small ways that

I lean back into the chair, letting the words sink in, a tiny glimmer of hope in a sea of doubt and regret. Maybe my wolf is right. Maybe Abby does see the changes in me. And maybe, just maybe, that will be enough to rebuild what I’ve

Just then, my phone buzzes on the coffee table, ripping me from my internal monologue. The caller ID displays Gianna, my

“Hello?”

“Karl, you need to come home next weekend,” she says without preamble. “Your Council has called a meeting. Can you come?”

Home. The pack. The responsibilities I’ve been skirting ever since I moved to the city. I realize I can’t put it off any longer.

“Fine,” I say, gritting my teeth. “I’ll be there.”

I hang up, feeling the weight of my double life—the life I left behind and the one I’m struggling to build. It’s a constant juggling act, and sometimes I drop the ball.

As if on cue, my phone buzzes again, pulling me back to the present. This time, it’s Abby. My thumb hovers over the green button, a sense of dread mingling with anticipation. It’s late. Why would she be calling?

“Hello?” I answer, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Karl, it’s... It’s me,” she stammers, her voice tinged with anxiety. “I had to get off the subway. I’m a little lost. And—”

“Send me your location. I’m coming to get you,” I interrupt, my heart pounding. In a second, all other thoughts evaporate, replaced by a primal urge to protect.

I grab my coat and head for the door, locking my apartment with an urgency that mirrors my racing thoughts. I’m in my car in record time, my phone guiding me to her location.

As I drive, I find myself mulling over what the hell is going on between Abby and me.

One moment we’re throwing flour at each other like a couple of lovestruck teens, and the next I’m walking out of her life because her best friend tells her to keep her distance. And now here I am, picking her up in the middle of the night when she needs me the

Am I really the villain in their narrative, or just a casualty of

The thought is cut short as my phone indicates that I’m nearing Abby’s location. My eyes scan the dimly lit streets, eventually catching sight of her standing under

She looks shaken, glancing nervously over her shoulder at a group of men who are eyeing her with

Anger boils within me, hot and swift. Parking the car, I step out, my eyes meeting Abby’s for a split second—a silent assurance that she’s no longer

“Get in the car, Abby,”

Abby swallows. “Thank you... Wait,

But it's too late. I'm already storming toward the group of men, my hands balled up

"Hey, you got a problem?" one of the men sneers, taking a step

"Yeah," I reply, my voice icy. "I've got a problem with anyone who thinks they can harass a woman on

Chapter 59

The city lights blur past us as Karl drives, the tension in the car so thick I could slice it with a knife. My mind is still spinning from the events of the last hour—the creepy guy on the subway, the group of leering men, and then Karl, showing up like a storm, sweeping everything away.

My eyes shift to him for a moment, taking in his stern profile, the jaw set in a hard line. His knuckles are white on the steering wheel. It's clear he's still riled up.

"Hey... Thanks for picking me up," I finally manage to say, breaking the oppressive silence.

"You don't have to thank me. It's the least I could do," he replies, his eyes never leaving the road. The words hang in the air, laden with unspoken emotions and thoughts neither of us is willing to navigate right now.

Soon enough, we pull up in front of my apartment building, and Karl kills the engine. We both sit there for a moment, contemplating the space between us, both literal and metaphorical.

"Let me walk you up," he finally says, a subtle softness creeping into his voice.

I hesitate, weighing my options, but then nod. After everything that's happened so far tonight, some company up to my apartment door would be appreciated.

"Okay. Thanks, Karl."

We step out of the car, and as we walk to the building, I can't help but notice a dark red stain on his pristine white shirt. It's blood. My stomach churns at the sight.

“You’re hurt,” I blurt out.

He glances down, a wry smile pulling at his lips. “Don’t worry. It’s

Despite the churn of emotions and the image of Karl punching that guy square in the jaw flashing through my mind, relief washes over me. “Even so, you should get that cleaned before it

We reach my apartment door, and I unlock it, pushing it open. The familiar scent of home envelops me, offering a much-needed sense of normality after what just happened. I gesture inside. “You could come in for a minute. Let me clean that

The tension between us is palpable as we stand in the threshold of my apartment. For a moment, it feels as if we’re both teetering on the edge of something undefined and precarious, like standing at the edge of a cliff and daring to

“Are you sure?” Karl finally asks, breaking the moment, his eyes scanning my face for some hidden

“I’m sure,” I say with a soft chuckle, even though the feelings inside of me are rolling around like a tornado. “You came to get me when I really needed someone. The least I could do is help you clean your shirt,” I reply, my voice firmer than

He hesitates just a moment longer, as if weighing his options, before nodding.

I lead him inside, closing the door softly behind us. The apartment is still, the silence amplifying the sound of our footsteps as we head toward the

Pulling a stool out from under the kitchen counter, I gesture for him to sit. “Take a seat. I’ll get some club soda. It should help with the

He complies, sitting down while I rummage through the cupboard under the sink for the bottle. When I find it, I straighten up and grab a clean cloth from the drawer, dousing it in the clear liquid.

As I step closer to him, the atmosphere in the room changes subtly, becoming charged, electric. With a deep breath to steady my nerves, I reach for his shirt, gently dabbing at the dark stain. His muscles tense under my touch, a palpable reminder of the strength that lies just beneath the surface.

“Thanks for this,” he says, his Adam’s apple moving as he speaks. His voice is deep and gravelly, just the way I remember it.

I always loved the sound of his voice, especially when he would first wake up in the morning. And for a moment, just a moment, I think about what it would be like to wake up next to him again. Tomorrow morning, maybe. But I quickly push those thoughts away.

“It’s nothing,” I say. “It’s a nice shirt. I’d hate to see it get ruined.”

Karl smirks. “I could just buy another. But thanks.”

We’re close, too close, and my thoughts betray me, drifting to places they have no business going. Memories flicker through my mind—the feel of his arms around me, the heat of his lips, the sound of my name whispered in that deep voice. My heart starts to race.

“So, where’d you go tonight?” I ask, my voice a little too casual as I try to steer my thoughts back to safer ground. “I noticed you left the party early tonight without saying goodbye. Everything alright?”

He hesitates, his eyes meeting mine for just a second before looking away. “I had some things to think about.”

The vagueness of his answer hangs in the air, like a puzzle missing crucial pieces. I want to press him, to dig deeper, but something in his expression stops me. The mood feels too fragile to probe, too volatile to risk with hard questions.

There’s a heavy silence between us, punctuated only by the sounds of our breaths. His sounds husky, like he’s just as affected by my closeness as I am to his. And for an instant, I can feel my wolf stir, urging me to close the distance between

My hand hovers in the air, the cloth now forgotten as we lock eyes. It's a moment that stretches on, a weighty silence that says more than words ever

My eyes drop to the floor, suddenly aware of how dangerously close we are to crossing lines that might complicate

"All done," I murmur, lowering my hand. "Wash it when you get home. It should come

But before I can step back, his hand lifts to my chin, gently but firmly turning my face to meet his

"Do you really want to stay away from me?" he asks abruptly. The words land like a soft blow, leaving me

"What?" I murmur.

Karl sighs, his hand lingering on my chin for another moment just before he drops it to his side. "Chloe," he says quietly. "I heard what she said to you

My mind races for a moment before I finally recall what Chloe had said: that I need to stay away from Karl. At this point, I can't tell whether she was right

Chapter 60

I'm standing over a steaming pot of ragù, stirring as I listen to the sizzle and pop of ingredients melding together in culinary harmony.

The kitchen is a whirlwind of activity, the dinner rush in full swing. But amidst the orchestrated chaos, a discordant note strikes my ears. It's John, my head chef, talking to another member of the kitchen staff.

"The guy just can't get it together," John grumbles. "It's like he's deficient or something. Honestly, why Abby even hired him of all people is beyond me."

I immediately recognize that he's talking about Karl. I would normally be bothered by this sort of talk to people's faces, but today is Karl's day off, which makes the conversation even more inappropriate.

And despite what I think about Karl, it's not cool to be talking behind a coworker's back. Especially not in my kitchen, where I value respect.

"I swear," John continues, oblivious to the fact that I can hear him, "he's a downright jackass. And he can't follow directions to save his life. Hell, my kid was watching that one movie the other night, what's it called... Alice in Wonderland. He reminds me of Tweedledee. Now all we need is a Tweedledum."

John bursts out into laughter, clearly amused by his own jokes. No one else laughs; maybe because they've realized that I'm right here, listening to every word.

I'm well aware that Karl is still new to the restaurant business, still trying to acclimate to the hierarchy and flow of the kitchen. But we all started somewhere, and the last thing he—or any of us—needs is a colleague undermining him behind his back.

With a sigh, I delegate the sauce to someone else and wipe my hands on a kitchen towel.

"John, could you come into my office for a moment?"

His face pales a fraction, as if he knows he's been caught. "Erm... Sure, Abby," he responds, his voice edged with

Once we're behind the closed door of my office, I sink into my chair. I watch John as he hesitates, clearly uncomfortable, before taking the seat across from

"So, John, what's the issue with Karl?" I cut straight to the chase, my eyes meeting

John sighs, running his fingers through his hair. "Look, Abby, he makes a lot of mistakes. He's sloppy, and he can get downright belligerent when anyone tries to

I fold my arms over my chest, feeling a mixture of frustration and disappointment. John isn't wrong; I've seen it firsthand. Hell, I've lived it. Karl is an Alpha, and there's no doubt about it. But it doesn't mean that he should be badmouthed when he's not even around to defend

"John, you've been with this restaurant since we opened," I say gently. "You know better than to badmouth a coworker when they're not here to defend themselves. That's not how we handle issues in

He seems to flinch at my words. "I understand that, Abby. It won't happen

"It had better not," I reply, my voice firm. "I don't want you making a bad impression on the other employees. This isn't one of those restaurants where it's a free-for-all. Everyone needs to be respectful of everyone else.

John nods solemnly. "I get it, Abby. I do. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. But Abby, please, you've gotta do something about Karl. He's not exactly

"I know," I say with a sigh, already wondering how to broach the subject with Karl when we're already on such shaky ground. "We'll sort out any issues you have with Karl when he's present. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," John replies, his voice tinged with regret.

"Then you can go," I say, gesturing to the door. He nods, stands up, and exits my office, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I lean back in my chair, my mind racing. The atmosphere in the restaurant, especially the kitchen, is like a finely tuned instrument.

Each individual, from the dishwasher to the head chef, plays an important role. Disharmony in one section can disrupt the entire composition, and right now, we're on the cusp of some serious dissonance.

I understand John's concerns, even if I don't appreciate the way he's expressed them. Karl is new, untrained in the culinary arts, and struggling to fit into our tightly knit team. But he's also passionate and willing to learn, two qualities that can't always be taught.

I push away from the desk, a heavy sigh escaping my lips. The confined space of my office feels stifling, the air thick with unresolved tension. Deciding I need a break from this contained atmosphere, I get up and walk out into the bustling restaurant.

The lively hum of chatter and clinking dishes serves as a momentary distraction from my swirling thoughts. Navigating my way through the maze of tables and servers, I find Ethan by the bar, meticulously arranging glasses. As always, he seems to be in his element, his movements smooth and effortless.

"Hey Ethan, got a minute?" I ask, forcing a smile.

"Of course, boss lady. What's up?" he replies, looking up and catching my

"Mind if I help with the silverware?" I say, gesturing toward the pile of spoons, knives, and forks that are sitting on the end of the

"Be my guest," he replies, sliding over a bunch of cloth napkins for me to

As we start rolling silverware, I can't help but feel a bit more grounded. There's something therapeutic about the simple, repetitive action, a contrast to the complicated people issues I've been wrestling

"I heard you talking to John earlier. Everything okay?" Ethan ventures, breaking the comfortable silence we've fallen

I hesitate for a moment, contemplating how much to share. "Not really," I finally confess. "Karl and John aren't exactly getting along from the sounds of it, and it's creating a weird vibe in

Ethan nods as he neatly tucks a knife into a napkin. "Ah, the age-old clash of personalities in a high-stress environment. I've

“Really?” I ask, my

“Yep,” he says, setting down the rolled silverware and looking at me. “When I was younger, I apprenticed for a baker. The guy was a genius with pastries but had the personality of a rolling pin. We clashed—badly. It was an ordeal just to get through a day without a shouting