

## His Kickass 101

### Chapter 101

The aroma of freshly baked bread and simmering tomato sauce fills the air as I sit at my desk, reviewing the inventory for the week.

It's still early in the day, but the restaurant has already started to come alive. My eyes flit over numbers and figures, but my thoughts keep drifting to the chaos of last night—Karl, John, Ethan, and that cook-off looming in the future like a beacon of both opportunity and uncertainty.

As I'm about to turn my attention to the newly arrived email from Calvin, there's a soft knock on my door. "Come in," I call out, hoping it's not another crisis that needs immediate attention.

The door opens, and it's John, looking a little sheepish. "Hey, Abby, you got a minute?"

I nod, gesturing for him to take a seat. "Sure, what's on your mind?"

He hesitates, choosing his words carefully. "Look, about last night—I lost my cool, and I shouldn't have said what I did. I was...riled up, and I didn't mean it. It was a long evening."

I eye him skeptically, remembering his cutting remarks and confrontational demeanor. "You think?"

winces. "I do. And I'm sorry. If you're willing to forgive an old dog for his foolishness, I promise I'll train Karl properly and be more respectful.

sincerity in his voice tips the balance for me. We've been through a lot, John and I, and though he's far from perfect, he's an important part of this

say, extending my hand across the desk. "Apology accepted. Let's move on and make this a great place for everyone.

agrees, shaking my hand

get back out there; dinner service won't prep itself," I say, and we both stand to head back to

door swings shut behind him, I can't help but feel a small sense of relief. One hurdle cleared, but still so many more

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The evening begins like any other, the staff bustling around the kitchen as orders start pouring in.

But there's a palpable change in the atmosphere. John's tone is softer, more instructive, less caustic. I see him explaining the finer points of sauce reduction to Karl, who listens intently. My eyes meet John's for a moment, and he gives me a nod.

The dinner rush kicks in, and everyone springs into high gear. Plates are flying, stoves are blazing, and the air is thick with the tantalizing smells of grilled meat, sautéed vegetables, and melting cheese.

But despite the chaos, there's an underlying current of teamwork that wasn't there before.

"Table six is ready to go, Abby," Ethan calls out, sliding the plates onto the counter. I do a quick check for presentation; everything looks good.

move, people!" I yell, and servers swoop in to whisk the

then, I hear John's voice, commanding but not overbearing, instructing Karl on the proper way to plate the linguini. "Remember, Karl, it's all about balance. You want enough sauce so it's flavorful but not so much that it's

to listen, holding

John," Karl replies, his tone earnest. He adjusts the angle of his tongs and the pasta lands gracefully on the plate, a garnish of parsley providing the finishing

John comments, and Karl beams, clearly pleased by the rare

a small interaction, but it feels like a giant leap forward for both of them—and for me. As the night wears on, I watch Karl and John weave around each other in a sort of uneasy but effective partnership. They're communicating, working together to get the meals out, and not a single steak comes back

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"What happened?" I rush over, my eyes narrowing with concern.

"I, erm... I rolled my ankle while serving table nine. Just give me five minutes and I'll get back out there," she says, grimacing with each word.

I take one look at her flushed face, her ankle swelling before my eyes, and shake my head. "No, you're going home. Put that leg up. I'll take over your tables tonight."

Daisy starts to protest, her eyes filled with worry. "But the tips—"

"Don't worry about that. Whatever tips you miss out on tonight, I'll cover. Just go home and take care of yourself."

She hesitates for a moment before finally nodding, gratitude flooding her features. "Thank you, Abby."

"Get better, okay?" I say as she limps out of the restaurant, supported by Ethan.

I tie on an apron and grab a notepad, turning my attention to Daisy's tables. And then I see her—Emily, the Luna who used to be an acquaintance of mine, sitting there with her friends, smirking as if she owns the place.

Here we go.

"Nice to see you all again," I greet, forcing a smile as I approach the table.

well! If it isn't Abby," Emily says, a stiff smile taking over her features. "We were just talking about you?" I manage an equally stiff smile and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Hopefully only good her friends exchange glances, their eyes twinkling with a fakeness that makes my skin crawl. "Of course,"

I get you started with some

wines, a cosmopolitan, and a gin and tonic," Emily says, her tone dripping with up," I reply, making a note on my

I move away, my ears catch snippets of their conversation, laced with contempt. "Wow. Last time I figured it was just a fluke, but she's waiting

an ex-Luna doesn't even get to run her own restaurant, but has to wait tables

a giggle. "Maybe she can't handle running the place. Probably gave it over to one of the men. She was always like that, you know. Letting Alpha Karl run everything, always giving him

As I listen to their words, my hands start to tremble. I head into the back room to catch my breath, my eyes stinging, the weight of their comments crashing down on me. Who do they think they are, coming into my restaurant and speaking about me like that?

"Abby, you alright?"

I look up to see Karl standing there, his expression etched with concern.

"I'm fine," I lie, unable to hide the shake in my voice.

“You don’t look fine. What happened?”

Against my better judgment, I find myself spilling the story about Emily and her friends. His face tightens with each word, his eyes darkening like a stormcloud.

“I’ll handle this,” he says, setting his jaw.

“No, Karl, don’t make a scene,” I protest, but he’s already pushing through the swing door, his resolve unbreakable.

I follow him out, my heart pounding as he approaches Emily’s table and pulls up a chair.

“Evening, Ladies.”

and her friends perk up, their

Alpha Karl?” Emily exclaims. “What are you

“I work here. As a dishwasher-slash-line cook,” he says, locking eyes with

up, surprise flickering across her face. “You’re... working here?”

Karl asks. “Got a problem with

beat of silence, a moment of surprise before Emily collects herself and shoots him a smirk. “No problems. None at all. For an Omega or a Beta, at least. But an Alpha such as

of it?” Karl says, standing to his full height. His shadow casts across the table, making Emily and her friends appear small. “Think that service jobs aren’t fit for

Emily swallows. “Well—”

Chapter 103

Abby

My office is silent as I scroll through the new emails that have landed in my inbox. My fingers drum on the desk, anticipating the one email that I’ve been waiting for the most—the details of the upcoming cooking competition.

And then, there it is, bolded and marked with high importance: Cook-Off Competition Details.

Taking a deep breath, I click on it.

The email is concise but packed with information. Attached to it is a long list, detailing every possible dish that might come up during the competition.

My heart rate quickens as I scan the list. Some dishes I recognize, ones I’ve made a thousand times over in my career, but others are unfamiliar, exotic even, presenting challenges I’ve never faced before.

I won’t know which three dishes I’ll be asked to prepare on the spot. Which means only one thing: I have to practice all of them. Every single one.

Grabbing a notepad, I jot down a list of ingredients I’ll need for the more exotic dishes, then turn my attention to the restaurant’s supplier portal, adding item after item to the shopping list. The ingredients range from the ordinary to the obscure. Each addition of expensive truffles, caviar, and fresh scallops makes my anxiety spike.

How can I perfect so many dishes in such a short time?

the orders are placed, I stretch and push back from the desk, glancing at the clock on the wall. It’s getting late, but there’s no time to waste. Without a second thought, I pull my hair into a messy bun and prepare to head to the kitchen to get

can leave, however, a sudden page over the intercom draws me from my

you come up front for a moment? I need help with the register.” It’s Chloe, her

my laptop with a sigh, I head to the bar where Chloe is standing. Frustration is evident on her face as she fiddles with the register. “Hey, what’s going on?” I ask, striding up to

damn thing,” she mutters, her fingers hovering over the register keys. “It’s been acting up all

step beside her and start navigating through the system. A few prodded buttons and adjusted settings later, the machine whirrs back to life, responding as it should. Chloe releases a breath she’s seemingly been

Abby. I thought I’d have to do all the transactions

I reply, giving her a reassuring smile. “Anything else I can help

She shakes her head. “No, that’s it. But...” She hesitates, her eyes flickering with an unspoken thought. “Abby, about the other night... I shouldn’t have snapped at you. Especially not over Karl.”

I lean against the counter, crossing my arms. “Chloe, it’s alright.”

“No, it’s not,” she insists, her eyes earnest. “I’m your best friend, Abby, and I’m just... I’m worried about you. I don’t want to see you get hurt again, fall into another toxic relationship.”

Her words sting, echoing the fears I keep buried deep down, but I push them away, offering her a small smile. “Chloe, I already married Karl once, remember? Learned my lesson the hard way. It’s not going to happen again.”

“I know,” she says softly, “but it’s just... you deserve so much better, and I can’t stand the thought of him hurting you again.”

I reach out, gently squeezing her hand. “I appreciate your concern, Chloe, but I’m not a teenager anymore. I can make my own decisions, and I don’t need to be monitored or told what to do.”

Chloe holds my gaze for a beat, a mix of emotions swirling in her eyes, before she gives a slow, reluctant nod. “I understand.”

“Thank you,” I say, my voice soft, before turning away.

I make my way back to my office, Chloe’s words reverberate in my head. A part of me is warmed by her concern, but another part is frustrated. This entire situation, I realize, is like walking on a tightrope, balancing between concern and independence, friendship

want this to strain my friendship with Chloe. Our bond means more to me than

at the same time, I want—no, need—her to trust me, to trust my judgments and my decisions. I’m not the same Abby who fell for Karl’s charms all those years ago, who got lost in a relationship that cost me my self-worth and got my heart broken. I’ve grown, learned, and changed. Why can’t my friends see that? Why does it feel as though all of my friends just see me as a fool who would so easily fall for a guy that’s bad for

sink back down into my office chair, though, a thought comes to mind. A memory, rather. The feeling of Karl’s hands on me, the taste of his lips. Our intimacy in the kitchen, which we haven’t spoken

A wonderful, horrible, delicious mistake. And it can’t

...

has long since fallen quiet, with the last employees heading home for the night. I’m here alone, standing in front of the gleaming counter with a pile of ingredients and a printed-out list of the dishes in front of me. I’ll still need to wait on some of the more exotic dishes, but I can still practice the ones I’m prepared for, like boeuf bourguignon and braised

knuckles, I begin with the dishes I'm less familiar with, meticulously following the provided

Chapter 104

Abby

The tension in the room feels palpable, a thick curtain of unsaid words and unexplored emotions hanging in the air between Karl and me. My grip tightens on the knife handle as I glance at the chaos of ingredients strewn across the counter.

"Tell me first," I blurt out, wanting to avoid the inevitable confrontation as long as possible. "What are you doing here? The restaurant closed hours ago."

Karl sighs and shakes his head, walking past me and over to the line. I watch as he bends down behind the counter and disappears for a moment, muttering to himself, before he stands back up and holds something up in the air: his wallet.

"Dropped this earlier," he says, slipping it into his pocket. "Wanted to come back and make sure it was here. Now it's your turn. What are you doing here at..." He glances at his watch. "One o'clock in the morning?"

I swallow, glancing around at the ingredients and half-cooked dishes all around the kitchen. The sink is full of empty dishes from failed attempts, the trash can is practically overflowing with said failed attempts, and the various successful attempts are lined up on the adjacent counter for pictures to keep in mind for presentation ideas.

"I, um..." I find myself choking up slightly. "I'm just practicing," I half-lie. "Wanted to test my skills."

Karl raises an eyebrow. "And waste all these ingredients? You're not that type of chef."

nearly curse out loud. Karl is right; I've never been the type to

in the past, when I've gone on creative cooking sprees, I would never just throw things away when the dishes don't turn out perfectly. There's a food pantry right down the street that I visit frequently to donate dishes, and when I lived with Karl, the servants and guests were always

might as well tell me, Abby.” Karl finally breaks the silence, his voice tinged with impatience. I can tell that he’s onto me, and probably has been for some time. Probably since he found me hugging Ethan and Chloe. “You’ve clearly been up to something huge here lately, and I’m starting to feel like I’m the last to know. Why keep me in

I put the knife down, my eyes meeting his. There’s no point in avoiding the inevitable any longer. I might as well rip off the band-aid now. “Okay, fine,” I mutter, wiping my hands on my apron. “I’m one of the finalists to compete to cater the

widen for a fraction of a second before his expression smooths over into something I can’t quite decipher right now. “That’s great, Abby. I’m proud

something’s off. His voice lacks the warmth I had hoped for, and his smile isn’t quite reaching his eyes. I can sense what I feared all this time—that he’d prefer that I go to the Alpha party with him instead of

don’t sound like you mean it,” I prod, my own words edged with a surprising bitterness to

“What? I said I’m proud of you,” he retorts, clearly irritated now.

“Yeah, but your tone says otherwise. What’s going on, Karl?”

He hesitates, running a hand through his hair. “Look, I wanted to go to the Alpha party with you. As your date. This whole catering thing sort of ruins that, though, doesn’t it?”

For some reason, even though I expected this sort of response from him, I’m still taken aback. I guess there was a part of me that hoped that he really has changed, that he would be genuinely happy for my success instead of making it about him.

“You’re upset because you wanted to go to a party? Seriously?”

“It’s not just any party, Abby. The Alpha party is a big deal. I thought it could be something special for us,” he shoots back, his eyes locked onto mine. “And besides, you promised. Or did you forget?”

My heart pounds in my chest. "I didn't forget," I say. "But this competition... It could be huge for my career. It's going to be on television and everything. I'm sorry, but I hoped that you would understand."

I understand," he says, turning away from me for a moment. "But what about us? Don't I mean something to you too? I thought you wanted to go with me." His voice rises with each word, filling the

There is no 'us', Karl," I murmur. "I've told you countless times before that it's not going to happen

you, though?" His voice is low and strained, like he's trying to hold himself back. "Because it feels to me like you've just been keeping me on a string this whole time, giving me vague promises and hoops to jump through. And let's not forget what happened the

wince at his words. The memory of our night right here in this kitchen whirls through my mind, reminding me of how it felt to have him close like

about it now makes my wolf begin to stir ever so slightly. But I've already decided that it can't happen again. I made a promise to my friends, and most importantly, to myself. Fool

work," I say, blinking away the tears that are threatening to come. "Our lives are too different now. And you broke my heart, made my wolf go to sleep. I still can't forgive

don't forgive me," he replies, throwing his hands up in the air. "But you can't deny what's happening between

Chapter 105

Abby

The night weighs heavy on me, each mile that separates Karl and me adding to the burden I didn't think I'd ever have to bear again. I spend the rest of the night tossing and turning in bed, trying to bury the memories of our argument and the sting of his words. It's infuriating that he would have the audacity to be mad about my accomplishment.

He should be thrilled for me.

Shouldn't he?

...

wake up the next day with dark clouds lingering in my head, mirroring the ones outside my window. I head straight to the kitchen to work it all off. When emotions get messy, the kitchen has always been my sanctuary. But today, even my sanctuary seems to be turning

day passes by in a blur. Before I know it, the restaurant is empty, the day having been a whirlwind of rushes and demanding customers. Finally, I find myself alone amidst a storm of spices, ingredients, and equipment. At least now, in the empty kitchen, I can

the thing is, I've attempted this delicate souffle five times now. It keeps

I snap, tossing my whisk into the sink with an unwarranted amount of aggression. My apron follows, flung across the counter as I grip the edge, my knuckles going

is one of the key dishes I want to practice for the competition. I've never had good luck with souffles, and it seems as though that bad luck is still getting in the

My heart is pounding like I've run a marathon, and I feel so stupidly vulnerable standing here, defeated by eggs and sugar. Tears of frustration are dangerously close, and I hate myself for it.

I can handle a hectic dinner rush, a dysfunctional kitchen, a competition. But to add Karl's drama onto it? It's too much.

"Stop being such a drama queen, Abby," I chastise myself aloud, rolling my eyes at my own melodrama. That's when I hear it—a soft clearing of a throat. My body stiffens; that sound has dug its way into my senses more times than I can count.

Looking up, I find Karl standing at the entrance of the kitchen, his posture stiff and his eyes unreadable.

It's amazing how someone can fill a space even when they're trying to make themselves smaller. He has this gravity about him, always has, pulling things toward him whether he means to or not. And right now, that gravity feels like a trap.

quickens as our eyes lock. There's a lingering moment where neither of us speaks, and everything unsaid hangs heavy in the air between

saw the lights were still on. Thought you might be here," he finally says, taking a hesitant step into

are you doing here, Karl?" I ask, my voice laced with more bitterness than I intend. I cross my arms, taking on a defensive stance I wish I didn't

his eyes darting to the discarded apron, the mess in the sink, and the ingredients scattered across the counter like evidence of a culinary crime scene. "I came to talk about

my eyes, the back of them practically sore from how many times I've done that in the past 24 hours. "Of course you did," I murmur, the words coated with a layer of irony I can't help but slather

Chapter 106

"Listen, I just came to talk," he finally says. "If you don't want to, I understand."

I can't look away from him; his presence is too overwhelming, too filled with a history I've been trying to ignore. "You came to talk? Really? Because last time we talked, you made it abundantly clear how you felt about my success."

His eyes narrow, stung by my accusation. "I am happy for you, Abby. I wish you would believe that."

"How can I believe it?" I retort, gripping the edge of the counter to keep my hands from shaking. "Your entire demeanor changed. You said yourself that the competition would get in the way of the party."

looks down, exhaling slowly like he's measuring each breath, weighing each word before it leaves his mouth. "You're right. I said some stuff last night that I shouldn't have, because I was angry. But I am happy for you, Abby. Way more than you realize. And I'm

eyes meet his, searching for any sign of insincerity. All I find is a quiet regret that somehow makes me even angrier. "Sorry doesn't just erase things, Karl. You being angry about my success tells me you're not supportive of me, and I don't have room for that kind of negativity in my life right

looks up, his eyes intense and unwavering. "I want to be supportive, Abby. I messed up. Let me make

want to support me?" I can't keep the skepticism out of my voice. "Or is this just another attempt to win me back? Because those are two very

He steps closer, closing the gap between us, and I involuntarily hold my breath. "I can't lie and say I don't want you back. But above all, I care about you, Abby. That's never changed, even when everything else did."

His words touch something raw inside me, a nerve I thought I'd killed off long ago. I look into his eyes, and for a moment, just a moment, I let myself believe him. "You caring about me and showing it are two very different things. You have a funny way of showing you care."

"I know," he says softly, "and I'm sorry for that. I never wanted to hurt you. That's the last thing I ever wanted to do."

His sincerity disarms me, leaving me exposed. I've fortified myself with layers of resentment and independence, but now, standing in front of him, it all feels paper-thin. "Well, you have a knack for accomplishing the last thing you ever wanted to do," I say, my voice softer than I'd like it to be.

out a shaky breath, like he's been holding it in for as long as I have. "Can we start over? Can I be the person who supports you, the way I should've been

hangs in the air, filled with a weighty mixture of hope and regret. I want to believe that people can change, that old wounds can heal and become nothing more than scars. But life has taught me to be cautious, especially when it comes

you mean that," I finally say, "and not just because you see it as a way to get back into my life, or my heart. Because right now, all I need is a friend who genuinely

nods, his eyes searching mine like he's committing them to memory. "I'll always care about you, Abby. Above all

Chapter 107

Karl

"Watch it, you're massacring those veggies," John calls out, glancing over from the stove where he's sauteeing some garlic and mushrooms.

I chuckle, adjusting my grip on the knife. I'm supposed to be julienning some peppers, but instead I've lost my train of thought and accidentally begun dicing them instead. "Yeah, well, they had it coming."

John grins, shaking his head. "Y'know, you're not as unfunny and stupid as I thought you were."

"Could say the same about you," I reply, gathering the sliced vegetables into a bowl.

Who would've thought? John and I, mortal enemies turned reluctant allies. A couple of weeks ago, we could barely stand to be in the same room, but time and circumstances—and angry bosses—have a way of forcing you to reassess your priorities.

all about collaboration," John continues, his tone more philosophical than I thought the brute would be capable of. "You can't make a great dish with just one ingredient. Same with a kitchen. Everyone's got to pull their weight, contribute their flavor for the bigger

put that on a plaque

have everyone roll their eyes? Nah, I'll stick to cooking," he laughs, adding a splash of white wine to the pan, filling the air with a rich,

to Abby's office opens, and for a moment, my world narrows. She steps out, her eyes scanning the room as if looking for something—or someone. When her gaze falls on me, my heart leaps

she averts her eyes, quickening her pace as she walks out of the

The atmosphere turns brittle around me. John notices, his eyes narrowing. "Hey, snap out of it! You're burning the scallops."

"Sorry," I mutter.

I refocus on the task at hand, on the sound of the scallops sizzling in the pan, but the weight of last night hangs over me like a dark cloud. We'd argued, voices raised, over her decision to compete in that culinary contest despite our earlier agreement. I'd felt betrayed; she'd felt cornered. And now, this.

The wolf inside me stirs, restless. "You messed up big time," he says, a growl wrapped in a whisper.

"I know," I reply, my mind a swirl of regret and confusion. "Trust me. I know."

As the day winds down, as the kitchen grows quieter, the realization sinks in deeper. Abby isn't just the co-owner of this restaurant. She's not just another chef. She's someone I care deeply about, someone whose dreams and desires should mean as much to me as my own.

yet, I let my insecurities, my fears, get in the way. I shake my head, frustrated with myself, with the wedge that's been driven between

heading out. "You good here?" John asks, snapping me back to

"See you tomorrow," I say, forcing a

casting a somewhat concerned glance my way before exiting the kitchen. Alone now, I take off my apron and hang it up. My eyes catch Abby's office door, still closed, a barrier in more ways than

moment, I almost knock. But then, I decide that right now, I think I'd rather have a

“And you know how much this competition means to her,” my wolf retorts. “If you ever plan on winning her back, you need to show support. Show that you care. And not just about yourself.”

“I do care for her,” I shoot back defensively, but my wolf has already withdrawn, leaving me alone with my thoughts and my drink.

As if on cue, Chloe, one of the bartenders, walks over to refill my glass, her eyes cold, judgmental. It’s as if she’s trying to pour that disdain she feels for me into the glass along with the liquor.

“What’s with the look?” I ask, setting down the glass harder than I mean to. “You’re serving up judgments now instead of drinks?”

“Considering who’s asking, I think I can manage both,” she snaps, her eyes narrowing.

shoot up, surprise mingling with a touch of indignation. “I’m missing something here,

something? Oh, you mean like how you missed being supportive of Abby when she needed it?” Her voice drips

So she knows.

tells me everything, Karl. I know what went down last night, how you made her feel. After all you’ve put her through, you’ve got the nerve to get angry about her

like I’ve been slapped. Chloe has always been direct, no-nonsense, but this feels like a confrontation I wasn’t prepared for right now. For a moment, I almost consider being vindictive and asking if Abby also told her about the night that we almost hooked up in the kitchen, but I decide against it.

“Save it,” she cuts me off, stepping back from the bar. “If you want to make amends, you better do something more impressive than drowning your sorrows. Abby’s had enough, and I swear if you keep bothering her—”

“I realize I made a mistake, okay?” I say, my voice tinged with both frustration and desperation. “I want to make it up to her.”

Chloe scoffs, shaking her head as she turns away. “You’ll never make up for it, Karl. Not in Abby’s book, and not in mine. Especially not if you’re going to stomp all over her moment in the spotlight.”

“So what do you suggest?” I ask.

Chloe’s eyes narrow. “I suggest you leave Abby the hell alone. For good.”

I can come up with a retort, Chloe storms off. I down the rest of my drink in one go, the burn of the liquor a poor distraction from the knot of guilt tightening in

it,” I mutter, both to myself and to the situation that seems to be spiraling out of

wolf stirs inside me, agitated. “Don’t listen

to my wolf I get up, leaving some bills on the counter before heading out. The night air is cold, biting, a reflection of my

back in there,” my wolf says, his annoyance showing through his voice. “Chloe doesn’t know what the hell she’s talking

Chapter 109

Abby

“Let me help you.”

Karl’s words hit me like a ton of bricks. Karl, of all people, wants to help me prepare for the competition that we were only just arguing about? I can’t believe it.

“You’re joking,” I murmur.

Karl shakes his head, his eyes darting down to the failure of a souffle sitting between us. "Nope. Not joking. Do you want my help or not?"

Part of me wants to accept his offer, but another part of me, perhaps the more logical part, decides that maybe it's not the best idea. I'm angry right now over my argument with Karl and this damned souffle, and I know that I wouldn't exactly be the best kitchen partner tonight.

Karl. Just a little tired," I reply, forcing a smile. "Besides, you've been working all day. You can head

don't want to go home," he says quietly, sliding the souffle back toward me from across the cold metallic counter. "I'm not tired, and home is boring. Let me

I know that I should push him away and keep working on my own, not only so I can focus fully on my preparations for the competition but also so we can both cool off after our arguments. But something stops me. Maybe it's the sincere look in his soft brown

I finally mutter, nodding. "I guess I could use some

need to be told twice. I watch for a moment as he slips off his jacket, revealing his sinewy biceps peeking out from beneath his short sleeves. I have to look away before I get too attached to his image, and refocus my attention on my fourth attempt at making a souffle while he washes

Before I know it, the eggs and other ingredients are laid out before me, my whisk deftly beating the eggs into a golden mixture.

"You know, I used to make souffles as a kid," Karl says out of nowhere.

"You made souffles?" I can't even begin to keep the surprise out of my voice. Karl rarely ever cooked when we were together, and he certainly never brought it up to me. "You never mentioned that when we were together."

“My mom used to make them all the time when I was little. It was my favorite dessert. She eventually taught me how to make the best souffles ever,” he confesses, almost shyly. “Would you like me to whip one up?”

My curiosity gets the better of me. “Sure. I’d love to see you try.”

sets to work, skillfully separating the egg yolks from the whites, stirring the flour and butter, and then folding everything in with care. I watch in amazement; the man has finesse, and it’s clear this isn’t his first time at the soufflé

oven dings, and Karl retrieves the dish, setting it on the counter. The soufflé has risen perfectly, its golden top a promise of the fluffy, airy delicacy

dips a spoon into it and extends it toward me.

the spoonful, the flavors bursting in my mouth—cheesy, eggy, and utterly perfect. The use of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese gives the soufflé a savory tang, but Karl incorporated just the right amount of sugar so that the two opposite flavors meld together into a symphony

meet, and for a moment, all the tension, the arguments, they vanish. There's just the two of us, and the culinary creation

Chapter 110

But I quickly shake off the idea. No, he doesn’t have enough experience. It would be silly for me to choose him as my sous chef.

Right?

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The next morning, Chloe greets me with a steaming cup of coffee as I walk into the restaurant. “Morning, boss lady. How are you today?”

“Good, actually,” I say with a grin, gratefully accepting the frothy coffee. “Had a successful night last night.”

“Oh?” Chloe asks, leaning on the bar as I take a seat on one of the stools, her own coffee in hand. “How so?”

and take a sip. “I was struggling with a souffle recipe. But you’re not gonna believe this; Karl showed up and offered to help. It’s crazy. He’s actually a master at making souffles. Who would’ve

Chloe’s face tightens. “Karl helped you?”

“Yes, why?”

him to stay away from you, Abby. I thought I was doing you a favor. But apparently he just

surprised and a little annoyed. “You told

Chloe shrugs. “He was moping about how you decided to go through with the competition. I told him that he should just piss off, basically.”

Her words make my head reel. While I understand the sentiment behind them, something about it makes me angry; maybe it’s because I only just told her that I needed to be trusted to make my own decisions, not have decisions made for me.

“What?” she says, sensing my terse look. “Something wrong?”

I swallow. The words come out harsher than I mean them to. “Chloe, it’s not your place to tell him to stay away from me.”

“I was trying to protect you, Abby. You and I both know that you don’t make the best decisions when it comes to men. And especially not when it comes to Karl.”

make me even angrier. Without meaning to, I stand abruptly, causing the barstool to scrape loudly on the floor and echo throughout the empty restaurant. "What do you know about good decisions?" I snap. "All you've ever done is hook up with anything

moment, Chloe is silent. Even as the words tumble out of my mouth, I realize how harsh they were. "Chloe, I

holds her hand up to stop me. "It's whatever. You're not entirely wrong. But I know you, and I

know Karl at all," I bite out. "He's changed, Chloe. Maybe it's about time you realize that he's trying to be better. And for the record, he apologized last

"So you're just going to let him waltz back into your life after everything he's done? Are you serious? Just because he 'apologized'? As if it wasn't just a tactic to get in your