

His Kickass 141

Chapter 141

Abby

“Gerald, Abby, would one of you care to explain what's going on?”

Karl's voice is somehow exceedingly calm, juxtaposed against the chaotic energy filling the room. I feel like I've just stepped into a scene that I never should have witnessed with my own eyes, like a complete stranger in a home that I once used to rule.

Gerald wastes no time with his explanation. “I found her in your private office upstairs, sir,” he announces, as if he's just solved a great mystery. “She was reading your emails, going through your personal computer.”

Karl turns toward me, his face covered in a puzzled expression. “Abby? Is this true?”

I nod, feeling embarrassed. “Yes, to an extent.”

Suddenly, Gerald butts in before I can finish. “Sir, I've always suspected she's a spy for another pack, and this just further proves my point.”

My jaw drops open, incredulous. I whirl around to face Gerald, wincing against his iron grip on my arm. “Really, Gerald? A spy? Are you losing your marbles? What pack would I even be spying for, and why?”

He sneers, his eyes turning into two narrow slits of suspicion. “I'm not entirely sure, but it's no secret I've had my eye on you for years. Your behavior has always been...off. Perhaps you even plotted with that gardener—what was his name? The one who has conveniently run away—to create this ‘cheating’ fiasco as a

I can't believe what I'm hearing. It feels like I've just stepped into some sort of parallel universe, one where wild accusations are flung around like

“Gerald, you’re completely delusional,” I fire back, my voice shaking with a mixture of anger and disbelief. “I’ve never done any such thing. You’re so busy playing detective that you’re seeing conspiracies where there are none!”

Gerald scoffs. “Ha! As if I don’t—”

“Be quiet!” Karl’s voice booms, echoing off the walls of the study, drowning out my indignation and Gerald’s baseless accusations. The room falls silent, like a courtroom awaiting a verdict. Meanwhile, Gianna leans casually on the desk behind Karl, a knowing smirk on her face.

All I can do is think back to the moment I witnessed between her and Gerald earlier; was this a plan of theirs, somehow? To make me look bad in front of Karl? I always knew that Gianna hated me, but this feels like a new low, even for her.

Karl’s gaze locks onto mine, and for a brief moment, I see a flicker of something—doubt? Concern? It’s hard to tell. Then he turns his attention to

“Do not interrupt her,” Karl commands, his voice as icy as his stare. He turns back to me, and his stare is just as icy. It’s clear that he’s not entirely sure who to believe right now. “Abby, explain

I stand there, frozen, my eyes locked onto Karl’s. The atmosphere is so thick with tension, you could cut it with a knife. Gerald’s grip is like iron on my arm, branding me as if I’m already guilty.

“Listen, Karl,” I stammer, my voice laced with desperation, “I just thought you left your laptop on. I was going to turn it

Karl’s eyes narrow, but not in suspicion—more in contemplation, as if he’s piecing together a complicated puzzle. “And the emails?” he asks, his voice

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The butler loosens his grip, a look of disbelief contorting his face. But before he can leave, Gianna, who’s been watching the whole scene unfold like some sort of soap opera, steps in.

“Wow, Karl,” she sneers, her lips curling into a contemptuous smile. “So now we’re letting not just cheaters but liars and thieves back into our home?”

The room goes silent. A rush of blood fills my ears. I can’t believe she just said that.

Karl’s face reddens, his eyes flashing with something that looks a lot like betrayal. “Both of you, out. Now.”

Gianna tosses her hair over her shoulder, glaring at me one last time before stalking out of the room, her heels clicking angrily against the hardwood floor. Gerald follows, throwing me a disdainful glance as he leaves.

The door slams shut, and I’m left standing there, my heart pounding in my chest, my eyes blurring with tears I refuse to let fall.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, wiping away a stray tear. “I never should have

I turn and make my way to the door, but Karl’s voice stops me. “Abby,

I don’t turn around. I can’t turn around. I’m too scared to see the expression on his face. What if it mirrors Gianna’s or Gerald’s? What if he thinks I’m guilty too? What if there’s still a hint of her lipstick on his lips?

Instead, I rush out of the room, bolting up the stairs and to my room, ignoring the confused stares of the dinner guests.

...

A soft knock on my door interrupts my thoughts a little while later. I’m sitting on my bed, my mind still swirling, when Karl walks in. He looks drained, as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders.

“May I?” he asks, gesturing to the empty space beside me on the bed.

I nod, scooting over to make room. He sits down, and for a long moment, we're both silent, lost in our thoughts.

"I know you didn't steal anything," Karl finally says, breaking the silence. "And I feel like I should explain myself too. About... Gianna."

My throat clenches. I'm about to tell him that I don't want to know, but it's too late.

"It was a misunderstanding," he says. "She said she has feelings for me, and she kissed me. But I'm not interested in her. I hope you know

For reasons that I don't want to admit to myself, I feel almost relieved. Almost.

I swallow, trying to feign indifference. "What goes on between you two is none of my—" I begin, but I'm quickly cut

"No, Abby," Karl says, his voice firm. Before I can stop him, he reaches over to grip my hand. His fingers are warm and smooth. "I'm not interested in Gianna. I never have been, and I never will be."

For a moment, my mouth hangs open slightly, as though the words want to come but can't seem to spill out the way they should. What would I even say, though? That I'm glad? That seeing her lipstick on his face filled me with more pain than I thought

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Abby

At the mention of the email and the rare ingredients, Karl's face turns pale. Seeing him like this instantly fills me with an odd sense of dread as my mind begins to whirl with unending questions: why did Adam send him that email? Why did Karl give him rare ingredients? When did Karl give him rare ingredients?

"Karl, please tell me what's wrong," I say again, more urgently this time.

He takes a deep breath, then finally speaks. "I bought a ton of ingredients for Adam," he admits, his voice barely above a whisper. "Rare ones. For his restaurant."

My heart is in my throat. "For Adam's restaurant? But why?" I ask, genuinely confused.

"He asked, and I just figured I would help him out," he murmured. But as he speaks, his eyes dart away from me, indicating that he's lying. I've always been able to tell when he's pulling my leg.

"You'd better not be trying to lie to me right now," I warn, my voice brittle. "I know you too well for

His shoulders slump, and he looks down at his hands, gripping the edge of the bed with white knuckles. "Alright, fine," he finally says, his voice low. "It wasn't

"Then what was it?" I press, but deep down, judging from Karl's appearance I'm not sure whether I want to know the answer or

Karl hesitates, then takes another ragged breath as though trying to steady himself. "I gave the ingredients to Adam to bribe him into... into breaking up with you."

The room spins. My head is swimming with thoughts, feelings, questions. I can't fathom why Karl would do such a thing, and I jump up to my feet, my voice rising an octave. "You what? You bribed him to break up with me? But why?"

"Because, Abby," Karl's voice is shaky, "I knew he was gay, and that he wasn't being honest with you. The ingredients were a way to convince him to be just that: honest. To come clean about his orientation, so you wouldn't waste your time on something that wasn't real."

His words hit me like a sledgehammer, demolishing everything I thought I knew. I look at him, stunned. "And since when is that any of your concern?" I find myself asking. "I don't recall ever asking you to be my knight in shining armor."

Karl pauses, his face still as pale as before. He can't meet my gaze, and instead keeps his eyes averted to the floor in front of him. "I care about you, Abby," he says. "I love you. It pained me to see you being tangled up in a relationship with someone who didn't feel the same way about you."

His words give me pause. I can understand his reasoning a little bit, but it doesn't make it right. "You never should have gotten involved. It wasn't your place."

There's a heavy silence. Karl still can't meet my gaze, and it infuriates me even more. I find myself pacing the room, clutching at my hair. To think that all this time I thought that Karl was changing, becoming a better person, only for this to happen, makes me sick.

"Listen, Abby," he says, standing in my way. "I could see how he looked at you, how he looked at other men. I just wanted to help."

"You could have talked to me

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There's a long, heavy silence. After what feels like an eternity, Karl finally meets my eyes, and there's a raw, aching vulnerability there that makes my heart drop into my stomach. "You're right," he says quietly, his voice filled with regret. "I didn't know at first. I just knew that he wasn't that invested in you, and figured that he'd take the bait."

My heart shatters. All at once, I want to scream, cry, and pass out. I can't decide which; maybe all three. "I can't believe this, Karl. How could you do something like that? Something so... cunning?"

He looks as if he wants to say something, to justify himself, but he doesn't. Instead, he stands there, staring at me with a sort of defeated look in his eyes, as if realizing that there are some things that even words can't fix.

"Abby, I—"

"Don't," I cut him off, my voice breaking. "Just don't even bother, Karl. I've heard enough. And to think that all this time, I really thought you were changing, becoming a better man like you said you would."

“But Abby, I am,” he pleads, trying to take a step toward me. “Trust me, Abby. I’ve been trying so hard to be better for you. To be the man that you deserve.”

I can’t help but let out a wry chuckle. “Bullshit,” I

I pull away from him, putting as much distance between us as the room will allow. “I’m booking a train home first thing in the morning. You can stay here, and you don’t have to worry about coming back to the restaurant with me. We’re done,

His face crumples, but he doesn’t argue. He knows he’s lost this battle, this war, and so do I. Maybe both of us have lost in our own ways. For a moment, we lock eyes, and I see a flicker of hope in his face—but I can’t bring myself to look at him for any longer. Just looking at him makes me sick.

Without another word, Karl crosses to the door to leave. But he pauses there, his hand on the doorknob, and speaks without looking over his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Abby,” he finally murmurs, his voice choked with emotion. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“It’s too late for that, Karl. You already have.”

...

It’s past midnight, and I’m still at my desk, hunched over my laptop as I try to find the earliest train home.

Adam is gay; I can accept that. What I can’t reconcile with is the gnawing question that keeps echoing in my mind: Would Adam have taken Karl’s bribe regardless of his orientation? Did Karl’s rare ingredients just expedite the inevitable? Or did they manipulate the course of my life, making a puppet of my emotions and a fool out of

I feel a crushing weight on my chest, making it hard to breathe. I’m so alone. My hand moves involuntarily to my phone, my thumb hovering over Chloe’s name on the contact list. I could call her. I could spill everything, tell her she was right, drown my sorrows in the comforting echo of a friend’s shared

But I

Chapter 145

Abby

The morning sunlight streams through the curtains, casting a warm glow that starkly contrasts with the cold feeling settling in my chest.

I've been up all night, haunted by Karl's confession, the unending complications it brought into my life, and the dilemma of Adam's unknown intentions. Now, packing my bags feels like I'm folding away pieces of a life that's no longer within reach, no matter how close I almost came to trying to take it back.

I'm dressed in jeans and a hoodie for the train, and I'm almost done packing when the door swings open. I glance up, startled, and there he is—Karl, his eyes puffy and bloodshot, a day-old stubble darkening his jawline. It's clear that he didn't sleep much last night, either.

For a moment, he seems like a stranger, but the heartache I feel tells me he's anything but.

"What do you want?" I snarl, unable to hide my disdain. "I'm almost done packing, and I'm about to call my Uber. So if you have something to say, don't waste my time."

"Abby, let me take you to the train station," he

I roll my eyes, zipping my suitcase shut with a little more force than necessary. "That won't be necessary."

"But it's the least I can

I cut him off, my voice tinged with bitterness. "The least you could have done was not interfere in my life. Look where that got us. But it's too late now, so if you'll excuse me, I'm leaving."

He flinches as I try to pass him with my bag in hand, but then he steps forward and grabs my suitcase before I can stop him. "I'm taking you to the train station, Abby. You don't have to talk to me, but I'm taking

I want to argue, but the defeated look on his face gives me pause. Do I have the energy for another confrontation? Sighing, I grab my handbag and follow him out of the room.

The car ride is tense, each passing mile stretching the silence taut like a tightrope between us. Karl attempts small talk, but it's in vain.

"So, you want some music, or..."

I don't answer. However, unperturbed, Karl points at a cafe along the side of the road.

"Can I at least get you some coffee for the trip home? Some breakfast, maybe? You can eat on the train—"

"I'm not hungry."

Karl pauses. "I'm sure you'll be hungry in a little while, and you'll wish you had something."

Part of me wants to agree, and another part of me wants to tell him to screw off. But when it comes down to brass tacks, I can't bring myself to respond at

Instead, I keep my gaze firmly fixed on the passing scenery outside the window, a dull blur of colors that matches my mood perfectly. Karl's voice fades into the background, overshadowed by the clamor of my own thoughts, and he eventually gives up

We arrive at the train station after what feels like an eternity, and Karl pulls into a parking space. I make no move to get out, my fingers clutching my bag tightly. He turns off the ignition and looks over at me, his eyes searching for something I don't want to give him.

“Abby, can we talk? Before you go?” he asks, his voice laced with a desperation that would have moved me

“I think we’ve said enough, don’t

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“You don’t have to do this,” he says softly, as if finally realizing the finality of this moment.

“I know. I want to.”

He steps back, giving me space to walk away. For a second, our eyes meet, and in that moment, I see a flicker of the man I once knew, the man I once thought was changing for the better. But it’s too late for that now.

I turn away, and without another word, I make my way into the station. I hand my ticket over to the attendant and find my way onto the train, settling into a seat that offers a clear view of the platform.

Karl’s there, standing in the same spot, watching me with his hands in his pockets. Our eyes meet one last time through the window as the train starts to move. His figure grows smaller and smaller, a shrinking outline of past mistakes and broken trust, until he’s just a blur in the distance.

I lean back in my seat, close my eyes, and exhale a breath I didn’t know I was holding. I don’t know what comes next, but one thing’s for certain: I can’t let Karl in again. Not now, not ever. And honestly, it’s my fault that I ever let him back in to begin with.

The train lurches forward, gaining momentum as it pulls away from the platform. I can’t help but glance out of the window one last time. Karl still stands there, his figure becoming a mere speck in the distance. A twinge of guilt tugs at me, but I push it aside. This is the path I’ve chosen; there’s no turning back now.

Just as I’m settling into that thought, a sudden rush of sensation floods me—a pulse of energy, a primal awareness that jolts my senses

My wolf. After all these years, she’s back.

“What the hell are you doing?” I can feel her thoughts meshing with mine, both familiar and foreign after all this

I’m too shocked to formulate a coherent response. “You... You’ve been dormant for years, and now you decide to show up? Why?”

“I was heartbroken,” she replies. “When you chose to move forward without me, without us, I retreated. But I never lost hope. I thought maybe one day the two of you would work it out, and we could be whole again.”

Her words are laced with a bitterness that stings. “And you chose to come back now? When I’m leaving Karl?”

“Exactly. You’re leaving our fated mate, Abby. Do you not realize what you’re doing right now?”

“Karl hasn’t been our mate for years. And besides, that ship has sailed. I thought that there might be the tiniest chance of us working things out, but not now. Not after what he did.”

My wolf lets out a low growl. “And what exactly did he do that’s completely unforgivable?”

“He manipulated my life, bribed someone into leaving me. He tried to control me, just like old

For a moment, there’s silence. Then she snarls, a ripple of anger that races through me, electrifying and terrifying all at once. “So you’re giving up. You’re not giving him a chance to explain?”

“There’s nothing to explain,” I say, stifling a scoff as I stare out the window at the passing scenery. “He meddled in my life. He lied.”

“You’re making a mistake, Abby. A huge

“And what?” I ask. “You’re the authority in my life now? You’ve been gone,

Karl

As I watch the train speed away, a new form of emptiness settles in my stomach.

Abby is pissed at me; I know that. I know that what I did with Adam was messed up, and I guess I hoped in some sort of naive way that she would never find out. Well, she found out. And she's furious. Hell, she might not even want to see me ever again.

"You've got to fix this," my wolf growls, his voice stern in the back of my mind.

"You think I don't know that?" snap back internally as I begin to make my way back to the car. "But at this point, I don't even know if Abby will listen to me anymore. You saw how pissed she was this morning."

"Make her listen, then. She'll cool off and will be more willing to hear you out with time."

"And what until then?" I ask. "What the hell am I supposed to do while I wait for her to miraculously 'cool off'?"

My wolf pauses for a moment. I put the car in drive and pull out of the parking lot, and that's when he speaks up again.

"You can start with that awful secretary of yours," he finally says. "Show Abby where your loyalties lie. That secretary has been a point of contention since the beginning."

As much as I hate to admit it, I know that my wolf is right. Gianna has been a problem, even more so now that I know what her true motives are. If she really has had feelings for me all these years, I would have to wonder whether these feelings of hers ever impacted certain

In fact, I remember Abby mentioning on multiple occasions that she had to make an appointment with my secretary just to see me; which, now that I think about it, was never true.

At the time, I thought that Abby was just misremembering things, or maybe exaggerating because she was angry. But now I know better. Gods, I should've listened to Abby from the beginning.

Was Gianna trying to sow discord in little ways like that, even back then? Trying to make Abby unhappy with me?

There's no way of knowing now. But, this thought has given me a new resolve, and I swerve the car onto a side road toward Gianna's house.

We need to have a chat.

...

I can almost feel my wolf nodding in approval as I knock on the door to Gianna's house. The door opens slightly beneath my hand, never having fully latched after its last use. I decide to poke my head in, only to halt in surprise.

Gerald, my ever-reliable butler, is sitting there, casually chatting with her at the kitchen table. They both jerk their heads up, Gianna's eyes going wide while Gerald plasters a friendly smile on his

"Ah, Mr. Karl," he says, standing. "How nice to see

"What are you doing here, Gerald?" I ask. I didn't know that the two of them were so friendly.

"Just a friendly catch-up," Gerald replies, his face not giving anything away. He grabs his coat off of the back of the chair and smiles. "Actually, I was just leaving. I'll see you at the house later, sir."

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She looks at me, her eyes filling with tears, and for a moment I think she's going to argue. But then she just nods, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

"Very well," she murmurs, looking down at her desk to avoid meeting my gaze.

I don't wait for her to say anything else. I turn on my heels and walk out of the room, leaving her to grapple with her own guilt.

I make my way back home, ascending the grand staircase that leads to my office. The air feels heavier with each step I take, laden with a mixture of dread and regret.

"Now, onto the next step," I think to my wolf. "I've decided that I'm going to write Abby a letter. A heartfelt, genuine letter that's going to make her see exactly why I did what I did."

I settle into my leather chair, then open up a new document on my laptop. My fingers hover over the keys, but as it turns out, it's much more difficult than I thought to draft the perfect

"Dear Abby," I begin, then pause, staring at the blinking cursor on the screen. It feels too formal, too

"You really think that'll win her back?" my wolf asks with a scoff. "Try

I press the backspace key until the screen is empty again. "Alright, let's try something else. Abby, I please hear me

"Way too desperate," my wolf interrupts again. "No woman wants a man who begs like that."

With a frustrated growl, I delete the sentence. My mind feels like a scrambled mess, thoughts and emotions colliding in a chaotic jumble. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, I've fully exhausted all of my ideas and yet the page is still blank.

"I can't capture this in a letter, can I?" I sigh under my breath, pushing the laptop away. "This isn't the sort of thing that I can convey over text."

My wolf agrees silently, a sense of resolution settling between us. "Actions speak louder than words," I say. "I'll go back to the city in a few days, give her some space to cool off. She's going to need help with that cook-off competition, and who better to assist her than me?"

Feeling somewhat reassured by this plan, I start to gather some paperwork that needs my attention. But just as I'm about to dive into the first report, there's a soft knock on the door.

"Come in," I call out, not looking up from the stack of

The door creaks open, and Gerald walks in, wearing an expression I've rarely seen on his face—stern, almost

"Gerald? What brings you here at this hour?" I ask, sensing the tension in the room.

"Sir, we need to talk," he starts cautiously, "regarding your ultimatum with Gianna—and its

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Abby

I push open the door to the restaurant, the soft chime signaling my unexpected entrance. I feel the weight of curious gazes on me—Daisy, Ethan, a few waiters. They're all surprised to see me back so early.

"Abby, what are you doing here?" Ethan asks, a mix of confusion and concern etching his face. "We thought you weren't supposed to be back from your vacation until tomorrow."

"I just... wasn't really feeling it," I say, forcing a smile that probably looks more like a grimace. "I decided to come back a little early."

Ethan nods. Maybe he's satisfied with my response, or maybe he just figures that it's not his business. But then my eyes lock with Chloe's. The slight tilt of her head, the thin press of her lips—it all screams, 'We need to talk.'

"As happy as I am to see you home early," Chloe says, lowering her voice, "I think we should talk. Now."

As soon as we're enclosed in the privacy of my dimly lit office, Chloe locks the door and turns to me with an expression that's a cross between a detective and a protective sister.

“Okay, start talking,” she says, folding her arms across her chest. “What happened?”

I let out an almost inaudible sigh, feeling the burden of the past few days settle on my shoulders. But I’ve resolved not to tell her—or anyone, for that matter. It’s too embarrassing. “Nothing happened. I just decided to come home

Her eyebrows lift. “Oh yeah? Just got lonely on your ‘solo vacation’,

I give her a half-smile. “Yup.”

“Alright.” Chloe sits down, leaning her elbows on the desk. There’s an air of annoyance about her. “Tell me the truth, Abby. All of

Part of me wants to keep up the lie, but I know that it’s no use. Chloe has always been too intuitive to believe my lies. Taking a deep breath, I start to recount the events—how Karl and I went back to our old home, the dinner, the email, everything.

“You’re telling me he bribed Adam into leaving you?” Chloe’s voice sharpens, her eyes ablaze with a sort of indignant fury on my behalf.

“Yes,” I say. “Adam is gay. But that’s besides the point...”

Chloe clenches her fists. “Right,” she says. “What really sucks is that Karl was going to bribe Adam to leave you regardless of Adam’s orientation.”

“Yep,” I mutter, running a hand through my hair. “And I really thought that Karl was becoming a better person, too.”

Chloe leans back, sighing as she pinches the bridge of her nose. “It’s just so... shitty, Abby. We’re both fools for letting him manipulate us into thinking he’d changed.”

“No kidding.”

“So, what did he say when you confronted

“He tried to justify it by saying that he could tell that Adam didn’t have the same feelings for me as I did for him. That he was helping me in the long run by doing this in

Chloe scoffs. “He could have just talked to you. Told you about his

I shrug. “I’m not sure if I would have listened to him. But yeah, telling me about it would be something that a normal person would do, wouldn’t

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Chloe rises from her seat and comes around the desk to hug me. “And even then,” she continues, her arms wrapping around me, “maybe you shouldn’t let him back in. This is it, Abby, This is the sign you needed to remind yourself that he’s no good for you.”

I hug her back, finding a semblance of comfort in her words. But the fact of the matter is, it’s just not that simple. I keep thinking back to my wolf’s sudden appearance and disappearance, and what she had said to me. Part of me wants to mention that to Chloe. But for right now, I can’t.

Instead, I gently pull away and smile, grateful for my friend’s unwavering support. “Thanks, Chloe. Thanks for listening to me.”

Chloe grins. “Hey, what else are friends for? And if he shows his face here again, I’ll be sure to give him a piece of my mind.”

“Get in line,” I say, half-jokingly.

“So, what’s the plan now?” she asks, her tone shifting back to seriousness.

“Right now, my main priority is the restaurant,” I

“Good. Focus on yourself and your career, Abby. No one else; especially not men.”

I chuckle. “You’re right. No men. For now, I just need to focus on the cook-off.”

Chloe nods, a grin spreading across her lips. “You’re gonna win,

...

Stepping out of the office, my thoughts still whirling, I make my way back to the kitchen. I tie my apron back on, more to ground myself than anything else. The sizzle of pans and the aroma of cooked herbs and spices fill the air, and for a moment, I feel normal. But just for a moment.

“Ah, Abby, there you are!” John greets me with a puzzled smile. “I thought you were off for another day? And have you heard from Karl recently? When is he coming back?”

I suck in a breath, my stomach knotting. The mention of Karl’s name feels like a shard of glass to my already bruised heart. “Uh, yeah. About that—Karl won’t be coming back to the restaurant.”

John’s eyes widen, visibly taken aback. “Really? But we were just starting to get a good rhythm going. He was shaping up to be a solid apprentice, you

“I didn’t realize,” I murmur, surprised that Karl was beginning to make such an impression here. It just adds another layer of complication, another ripple effect of his betrayal. John was actually starting to like him? I never saw that coming. John rarely takes a liking to people like that, especially not Karl.

“He had a good hand for sauces, and he picked up on the plating techniques faster than I’d expected,” John continues, a note of genuine disappointment in his voice. “It’s a shame he won’t be back. I could’ve used the extra pair of hands around

“Yeah, it is a shame,” I say softly, my voice tinged with regret, not for the lost apprentice, but for the loss of something even more, if things had been different. “Look, I’ll find you another cook to help out, okay?”

John nods, looking a bit forlorn. "Alright, if you say so. Just hope the new one can keep up."