

His Kickass 151

Chapter 151

Abby

The restaurant has long since closed, but the aroma of sauteed onions and garlic still lingers in the air. The sound of sizzling oil on the stove and the faint melody of a song that I don't like wafting from a speaker in the corner mix together to create a tense symphony that I absolutely don't need to be hearing right now.

I'm stressed, to say the least. Really stressed.

John stands next to me, his eyes focused as he skillfully dices tomatoes. His posture is rigid, the tension between us as palpable as the texture of the dough I'm kneading for our homemade pasta.

"How's the dough coming along?" he asks, throwing a quick glance my way.

"It's fine. Just needs a bit more kneading," I reply, my palms pushing and folding as I get lost in the repetitive

John grunts in acknowledgment and moves on to chop basil. There's an air of seriousness around him, an unwavering concentration that should make me feel reassured.

And yet, it doesn't.

Instead, I'm hyper-aware of the disconnect, the invisible yet unignorable gap between us. It feels like we're reading from different recipes, never quite

"Could you pass me the olive oil?" he asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I hand it to him, our fingers brushing for a moment, but there's none of the warmth or understanding that I used to feel when Karl and I worked side by side in the kitchen.

I can't believe I'm thinking this, but with Karl, it was natural to work together. Sure, we had our moments, but we worked well together. I like John and he's a good cook, but we just don't have that same chemistry in the kitchen. What should feel effortless instead feels like a chore.

John drizzles the oil over the tomatoes, then hesitates, looking at the array of spices laid out in front of him. "I think a touch of paprika would give the sauce a nice kick."

"I don't know," I say, biting my lip. "The recipe is already pretty balanced. Adding more spices might throw it off."

I'm being polite so as not to rock the boat, but in reality, I'm thinking to myself: "Paprika? Seriously, John? Are you crazy?"

He looks up, eyebrows furrowed. "We're not following the recipe to the letter, are we? I thought the whole point was to make it our own."

"Yes, but making it 'our own' shouldn't mean ruining the integrity of the dish," I retort, a little more sharply than I intend to.

John puts down the paprika and takes a deep breath, visibly trying to rein in his frustration. "Abby, you asked me to be your sous chef for this competition. If you don't trust my judgment, then why am I even

The words hang heavy in the air, and I can't look him in the eye. Because he's right. Why is he here? Why is he not Karl? My hands grip the edge of the counter, my knuckles turning

"John, it's not that I don't trust your judgment," I finally say, my voice tinged with remorse. "It's just that I want this to be

Chapter 152

We both dip spoons into the sauce, tasting it simultaneously. It's... alright. The paprika adds an unexpected depth of flavor. But it's just not what I wanted. None of this is what I wanted. I had really thought for a while that Karl would wind up being my sous chef for the competition, but that had turned out horribly.

“Tastes good to me,” John says gruffly, breaking the silence.

“Yeah. It’s fine,” I half-agree, setting my spoon down.

John lets out another groan. “Fine?”

I nod and meet his annoyed gaze. “Yeah. It’s fine, John.”

That’s when John rips his apron off and tosses it down on the counter. “Whatever, Abby,” he groans. “I’m going home.”

“Wait, John—” I call out as he storms over to the door, but even as the words leave my mouth, I know he’s made up his mind.

“I’ve had enough for one day,” he says, his eyes meeting mine for a moment over his shoulder before he reaches the door. “See you tomorrow.”

And then he’s gone, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

In his wake, I glance around at the chaotic landscape of our practice session—the used utensils, the half-chopped vegetables, the splattered sauce—and my heart sinks.

John has left me with the mess again. I mutter a curse under my breath and start attacking the kitchen with a vengeance, scraping pans and banging dishes into the sink.

As I work, my thoughts drift back to last week, the moment of optimism when I had asked John to join me for this competition.

The staff had decided to stay at the bar for a while after closing to celebrate someone’s birthday, and John and I were sitting beside each other, chatting.

“Hey John,” I’d said, my finger running around the rim of my glass. “So, the cook-off is coming up, and I could really use a sous chef. Would you be interested?”

His eyes had lit up faster than I expected. “Really? You want me?”

“Yeah.” I smiled, suddenly relieved. “I think we could make a great team.”

“Absolutely. I’m in,” he had answered, clinking his beer bottle against my wine glass. “This is going to be amazing, Abby.”

I snap back to the present, staring at a greasy pan that’s proving to be a challenge. Amazing? Yeah, right. More like a disaster waiting to happen. I scrub harder, as if I can erase the tension of the last few days with enough elbow grease.

John’s enthusiasm was short-lived, and it’s only been a week and yet I already don’t know what I’m gonna do. He seems to resent the extra hours, the hard work, the relentless pursuit of something extraordinary.

I can’t reconcile the John from that night at the bar with the man who just walked out on me. And that terrifies me. How can we go on national television like this? How can I trust that we won’t blow up on each other on live TV? We’re supposed to be a team, and yet every day feels like a battle.

Chapter 153

Abby

“Need a hand?”

Just as I’m about to toss the greasy pan into the soapy water to soak overnight and call it a night, I hear the all-too-familiar voice call out from behind me, and everything seems to stop. It’s all I can do to stiffly turn around, my eyes widening and my heart pounding.

There he is, standing in the doorway, his hands in his pockets and his hair slightly tousled. I should be excited to see him, but I’m not.

The nerve of him, showing up like this, after everything.

“Karl?”

“Hey, Abby.” A soft smile graces his lips, but instead of charming me like it used to, it just fills me with rage.

“Karl, what the hell are you doing here?” My voice comes out so low that it’s hardly more than a growl.

He pauses, as though searching for the right words. Finally, when he speaks, it somehow fills me with even more rage than before. “I miss you, Abby. Let’s work this out.”

“Work this out?” I think to myself. The thought of it almost makes me laugh, but at the same time, I can’t hold in my rage anymore. In a knee-jerk reaction, I rip off my apron and hurl it at him, although I would really prefer to hurl the frying pan

“Get out, Karl!” I spit the words out like venom, my voice laden with a mixture of anger, surprise, and a hint of betrayal. “You have no right to be here! I’m not working anything out with you!”

Karl, calm and collected as ever, dodges the flying apron. His eyes never leave mine, and his expression remains surprisingly level and open. He steps forward, cautiously, as if approaching a wounded

“Abby, please,” he begins, his voice tinged with an emotion I can’t quite place. “Just hear me out, okay?”

“I said, get out!” My voice booms across the kitchen, but there’s a wavering sense of emotion in its underlying tone that I can’t quite hide. Seeing him makes me want to cry, laugh, and scream all at once.

It’s only been a week since I last saw him, and yet somehow it feels like an eternity. Even now, as we stand across the room from one another, I can feel my wolf stirring ever so

Karl seems unperturbed by my demands and takes another step forward, his eyes wide with what could look like sincerity if I didn’t know

“Please, Abby, I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh, you wanted to talk?” I scoff, my voice failing to hide the unmistakable waver in it. “You lost your talking privileges when you did what you did with Adam. Leave. Now.”

But, ignoring my icy reception, Karl steps closer. In fact, he does more than that. In a few long strides, he closes the distance between us, backing me up against the wall. I feel myself stiffen as his arms wrap around me, pulling me into the warmth of his chest.

I should push him away. I should scream and tell him to get the hell out of my life, my restaurant, my kitchen. But I can't.

As much as I hate to admit it, his arms around me feel like a missing piece snapping back into place. I feel the wolf inside me stir, her senses heightening at his touch, her anxiety ebbing away. The burden of tension that's been accumulating inside me starts to lift, ever so slightly.

“Karl, you can't just walk in here like you still belong,” I say, finally mustering up the strength to shove him away. It's my way of trying to put some semblance of distance between us, both physical and emotional, but I'm not sure if it works. “Not after what you did to me.”

“I know,” he concedes, his arms loosening around me but not entirely breaking our contact. “I can't change what I did, Abby. But I had to see you.”

I can't believe Karl's audacity, standing here like he still has a right to be a part of my life. I'm holding back a tsunami of emotions, wrestling with anger, confusion, and a haunting sense of longing.

My wolf almost seems to pace restlessly inside of me, equally agitated and conflicted, although I have a suspicion that she's more agitated at me right now than at him, as angry as it makes

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” I finally snap, glaring at him with unrestrained fury. “You gave Adam those rare ingredients, knowing fully well what they would mean for us—what it would mean for me. You manipulated the man I loved into leaving

“But Abby,” he says, “He was—”

“I don’t care about his orientation, Karl,” I hiss. “What matters is that you decided to take it into your own hands to bribe him into leaving behind my back. Do you have any idea how despicable that is? Who even does something like that?”

Karl pales, his face turning a shade that stands in stark contrast to his usually warm complexion. He steps closer, taking my hands in his. His skin is warm, and for a fleeting second, it’s like a time machine transporting me back to a past life, a past

“Let go,” I hiss, pulling at my hands, but he doesn’t release

“Abby, I am so, so sorry for what I did,” he says, his voice quivering ever so slightly with a vulnerability I’ve never heard before. “I messed up, and I hurt you. If I could turn back time and undo it, I would. But I can’t, and I have to live with that shame every

His eyes lock onto mine, and there’s a sincerity there that shakes me to my core. For a moment, I feel myself soften, my anger fading into something a little more complex. And all at once, I hate myself for even allowing him to change my opinions about him, even if it’s just for a moment.

Chapter 154

Karl

Abby’s face is a picture of complete and utter betrayal as she looks at me from across the metallic countertop.

“Why are you really here, Karl?” she hisses, her voice wavering ever so slightly. “What else could you possibly want from me?”

For a moment, I almost consider telling her that there’s nothing else, that I just wanted to apologize. But then there’s my wolf in the back of my mind, always the more logical one, pushing me to be truthful.

She deserves to know the truth, the whole truth behind what happened. Not just what happened over the past week, but what happened three years ago.

“Alright,” I murmur, nodding. “Let me tell you...”

...

A week ago, Gerald stood in front of my desk, his face like stone. “If you’re planning to fire Gianna, then I’m afraid you’ll be losing more than just a secretary,” he states flatly, his gaze unwavering. “I’ll have no option but to resign as well.”

I sighed, passing a hand over my weary face. “Gerald, I’m sorry, but I can’t discuss this with you,” I said. “My reasons for the decisions I make are mine and mine

Gerald stood rigidly, a wax figure in his impeccable butler attire, his eyes refusing to meet

“Very well then,” he said. “But my point stands: if you fire Gianna, then I must resign as

His words still confused me. “Why, Gerald? You’ve seen people come and go in this house for years, and you’ve never even batted an eye. What’s so special about my

Gerald paused. “We’re... friends, sir. I can’t in good conscience remain here if she’s fired

His voice, usually controlled and even, wavered ever so slightly. I scrutinized him closely, the age lines on his face more pronounced than ever.

“But Gerald,” I repeated, “you’ve seen dozens of employees be let go or quit over the years. This isn’t like you. Are you romantically involved with her?”

The words were out before I could weigh them, hanging grotesquely in the air. He was far too old for Gianna. Gerald’s face went ashen, his eyes wide.

“Gods, no, sir. That’s not it at all.”

My eyes narrowed. “Then what is it, Gerald? I’ve known you for decades. You’re not a man prone to rash decisions or sudden attachments.”

Gerald sighed, the weight of the world seemingly on his shoulders. “Very well, sir. Gianna is my daughter. My illegitimate daughter.”

I shut my eyes wearily for a moment. “Why now, Gerald? Why did you never mention this before?”

“I only discovered that she was my daughter five years ago, sir. By that time, she was already working for you. I didn’t want to cause a disruption, so we kept it a

My mind raced, stumbling through a maze of confessions and betrayals. I thought about the longevity of Gerald’s service, his steadfast loyalty, and juxtaposed it against the deplorable conduct of Gianna.

“I appreciate you coming clean, Gerald. But you must understand that this is a lot to

“Of course, sir. I didn’t expect you to make a decision right away.”

“Give me some time to think about

Chapter 155

I found myself sitting at my desk, a weighty leather bound folder sitting in front of me. “Gianna, Gerald, come in,” I called out, prepared to reveal my discoveries and see how it all unfolded.

They walked in, and it was then that I saw it: they really did look like father and daughter. I was surprised that I had never noticed it before, but now it was clear as day. They had the same eyes, the same nose, the same lips.

“Thank you for coming,” I said, gesturing to the two chairs across from my desk. “Take a seat.”

With looks of mild surprise and confusion on their faces, they sat. Leading up to this point, I had kept up an air of benevolence; and yet, all the while, I had been doing my own detective work. I gestured to the leather bound folder sitting on my desk, and cast my eyes on Gianna.

“You’ll want to read what is inside,” I said.

Gianna hesitated, then slowly reached across the desk. My heart almost seemed to stop momentarily as she opened the folder. Her eyes widened, her mouth a small ‘o’ of

“What is this?” she asked, her eyes slowly raising to meet mine.

I sneered at her. “You see, I got a little suspicious about the other night,” I said, standing. “So, I decided to do my own digging. You really shouldn’t be sending such incriminating emails over your work email, Gianna. Did you think I would never exercise my right to

Her face went ashen, the blood draining away like water down a

The emails were damning—countless emails from Abby, begging my secretary to fit her into my schedule. My own wife, being forced to make an appointment to see me?

But that wasn’t the most damning email by far. No, it got much worse than that.

Among the emails was a proposition to our gardener, back when Abby and I were still together. A proposition to take a pair of Abby’s underwear, violate them, and leave them in the garden for everyone to find, all in return for a sum of money, with the most recent email from the gardener:

“Gianna, I did it. I expect the payment in my account by tonight, as promised.”

And then, from Gianna, dated just five minutes later: “Of course. I just sent the payment. Thanks for your help. When I become Luna, I’ll send you a little extra for your trouble.”

“This isn’t true,” Gianna stammered, but her eyes betrayed her.

“Oh, but it is,” I cut in. “And let’s not forget the other night. Those incriminating emails just miraculously appeared on my computer screen, right when Abby ‘found’ them. A distraction, perhaps, while you attempted to kiss me and make Abby out to be the villain. Well done.”

I shifted my gaze to Gerald, then back to Gianna. “So, how long exactly did you plan to usurp Abby? To become the next Luna?”

That was when Gerald suddenly stood and stepped forward, placing himself protectively in front of his daughter. “It was my idea, Karl. All of it. I’ve always felt Abby came from dirt. My daughter deserves to be Luna.”

My nostrils flared, my fists clenched. “You, of all people, Gerald? You dare to judge Abby? To plot against her?”

Gerald’s eyes were ablaze. “You’re a fool, Karl. Ruining the family name. If your adoptive brother wasn’t in a coma, you’d never even be Alpha.”

Chapter 156

Abby

The room is dead silent when Karl finishes telling his story. I’m in utter shock, and I think he is, too. In a way, now that I think of it, it all makes sense. And yet, all these years, neither of us ever saw it coming.

“So your butler...” I pause, swallowing. “Conspired with your secretary to sow discord between us?”

Karl nods quietly. “It appears so,” he murmurs.

In a way, I feel a sense of understanding wash over me. And yet, it doesn’t completely absolve Karl of his sins. No matter how much Gianna sunk her claws in over the years, he still did what he did by giving those rare ingredients to Adam. And for that, I still don’t know if I can ever forgive him.

As though reading my mind, Karl’s eyes lock onto mine, and there’s an intensity in them that I haven’t seen in years. His gaze is heavy, but it’s also completely genuine.

"I know that I never should have gone against you, Abby. I've messed up, and I'm sorry," he says quietly. "And I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you if you'll allow me."

My chest feels like it's been hollowed out, replaced with a cavern of disbelief and mistrust. Could this really be the man who turned my life upside down?

"Sorry?" I find myself hissing. "You really think a simple apology can make this right? Regardless of what Gianna and Gerald did, you still gave my ex rare ingredients behind my back to make him leave me, Karl. That can't be forgiven."

His jaw tightens. "No," he admits, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I know that there's no way I can undo the past, but I can try to make the future better. For you, and for your career."

A part of me, a part I don't want to acknowledge, wants to believe him. But the other part, the part that remembers every night I spent alone, every tear shed in solitude, screams at me to keep my guard up.

"You've made a mess, Karl," I say, controlling the tremor in my voice. "A mess that you expect me to clean up. What about Adam? What about your scheming secretary and butler? You think just because you've fired them, everything's just going to be

"No," he says, shaking his head. "I don't expect you to clean up my mess. But I'd like the chance to help. To be part of the solution, not the

I scrutinize him, looking for the lie, the deceit, but all I see is a man broken by his own decisions, a man yearning for redemption. I sigh. What's the harm in letting him help at the restaurant, especially with the cook-off coming up? As long as I keep my distance, right?

"Fine," I relent, each word heavy with the gravity of my decision. "You can return to the restaurant. But only until the cook-off is over, because I need the extra help around here. And I'll be keeping my distance."

His face softens, as if I've just thrown him a lifeline. "And the Alpha party?"

I scoff. "You really think I'd still go with you if I even had the chance?"

Karl pauses, and I can see a host of emotions flash through his eyes. Hope, dismay, hurt. Finally, he seems to settle on acceptance. "You're right," he murmurs. "I'm sorry."

"Good," I say, turning away to hide the complicated swirl of emotions threatening to spill over. "And Karl?"

"Yes?" he asks, a glimmer of hope lighting up his eyes.

"Don't make me regret this."

Karl nods, his eyes searching mine as if he could find the solution to all his mistakes there. "Thank you, Abby," he murmurs. "I won't let you down. Not this time. Not ever."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. With a last lingering glance, he walks away, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

...

It's been two days since I told Karl he could return to the restaurant. I'm still digesting the weight of my decision to let Karl back into my life yet again—albeit at a distance.

This might just be the dumbest thing I've ever done, and honestly, I'm mostly concerned about how I'll break the news to Chloe when I see her next. No doubt she'll be furious with me, and there could even be a physical altercation between her and Karl. I can still barely convince myself that I'm making the right decision here, so how can I convince her?

Suddenly, the restaurant door chimes, signaling the arrival of a guest. The sound snaps me out of my train of thought. A glance up from the host stand reveals Mr. Thompson, the manager of the cook-off, shuffling his way in.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Thompson,” I greet, trying to mask the turmoil of emotions bubbling beneath my calm exterior. “What brings you

He smiles, his eyes filled with an uncomfortable blend of apology and professionalism. “I hope I'm not interrupting anything, Abby. May I speak with

I nod, gesturing for him to follow me. Once we're in my office, I let him take the chair opposite mine. Mr. Thompson sits down, exhaling as if carrying the weight of the world on his

“Unfortunately, there's been a last-minute change to the cook-off,” he starts, his words measured, but edged with regret.

I feel my heart sink as all of the worst possibilities flash through my mind. “Mr. Thompson, am

He chuckles. “No, no, you're still in the competition,” he says, shaking his head. “Sorry; I should have led with that, shouldn't

Relief washes over me. “Thank goodness,” I laugh, leaning back in my chair. “What is it,

Chapter 157

Abby

The restaurant is buzzing with activity as we prepare for the lunch rush.

Karl's returned to work today, and surprisingly, it doesn't feel as awkward as I thought it would. In fact, there's a sense of normalcy that I didn't expect to find. John, especially, is elated to see Karl back.

“Karl!” he exclaims, throwing his hands up in the air. “Thanks gods! Get behind this line right now and give me a hand, will you?”

Karl smirks and tugs his apron on, nodding. “Sure thing,” he says, crossing the kitchen to the line. “Missed me, huh?”

“Don’t make me admit it.”

For a fleeting moment, I think to myself, maybe this won’t be so bad after all. But before the thought even has a chance to settle in, the person I was truly dreading the most arrives.

Chloe.

Almost as though she sensed that something is off, Chloe bursts in through the front door. Her eyes roam around the restaurant, taking in the staff, the prep work, and then they finally land on Karl. Her expression shifts so quickly, it’s like watching a storm cloud eclipse the sun.

“Abby, can I talk to you? Now?” The temperature in her voice plunges several degrees. I motion her toward my office. The door barely clicks shut behind us before she

“What the hell is he doing here?”

Taking a deep breath, I choose my words carefully. “Look, I know it sounds incredibly dumb of me, but he came clean about a lot of things, Chloe. And he seemed genuinely remorseful.”

“So you just let him back after you just told me that you were done?”

I sigh, passing a hand over my face. “I know. I know it’s stupid. But he wanted to help, and trust me, I’m keeping my distance. I swear.”

She stares at me, her face a mask of incredulity. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Listen, we really need the extra help right now, Chloe,” I plead, my voice tinged with desperation. “I can’t spend my entire day working the line with John while there are managerial duties I need to attend to, and I don’t have the resources to train a new cook right now. I’m keeping my distance from Karl, I promise. I know it’s stupid, but what choice do I have?”

The air between us thickens, electrified by the tension. Chloe's eyes narrow, and her lips press into a thin line.

"You have a choice, Abby. You always do. And if you're telling me that your choice is to keep him around, then my choice is to not work here any longer. Especially not with a man who's proven time and time again that he can't change." Her voice trembles, making her anger and betrayal all the more palpable.

I reach out, hoping to bridge the gap between us, but Chloe steps back. "Please, don't go," I say, almost whispering. "It'll be okay. Trust

But Chloe isn't hearing it. "Call me when you come to your senses," she says, her voice thick with unshed tears.

Without another word, she turns on her heels and storms out, leaving me standing in a room that suddenly feels much too large and excruciatingly empty.

...

The restaurant is in full swing by the time Leah walks in. The sight of her usually brings a wave of relief, a touch of sanity in the midst of chaos. But today, it just serves as a reminder of the mess I've found myself in. I'm sure that Chloe sent her, without a doubt. She catches my eye and motions to a

"Can we talk?" she asks."

Chapter 158

Leah takes a sip of her water, looking thoughtful. "Abby, you might have to make a choice here—between your best friends who have stood by you, or the man who's ruined everything for you over and over again."

"I really think he can change, Leah," I say, my voice tinged with a desperate hope. "People make mistakes, right?"

She puts down her fork, her eyes locking onto mine. “You thought he would change before. Look where that got you. How many more chances are you going to give him? And at what cost?”

My chest tightens, as if it’s being gripped by an invisible hand. I know where this is going. “No,” I murmur, shaking my head as tears threaten to spill out. “Don’t leave me too, Leah.”

Leah glances at her watch and starts to get up. I can see that her eyes have misted over as well, but she’s trying to hold herself together. “I’ve got to go. But Abby, you need to decide. It’s either us or him. You can’t have it both ways.”

And just like that, she’s gone, leaving me alone in a restaurant full of people. The irony isn’t lost on me. I’m surrounded by a team that relies on my guidance, patrons who love my food, and yet in this moment, I’ve never felt more isolated.

...

The last customer leaves, and I lock the front door behind them, flipping the sign to ‘Closed’.

I retreat to the sanctuary that is my office, a small room crammed with cookbooks, invoices, and a computer that has seen better days. My phone’s screen glows accusingly at me from my desk. I’ve tried calling Chloe multiple times, and each call goes straight to

The last message she sent me is pretty clear: “You can leave all of the voicemails you want, but there’s no way to justify this. I’m not speaking to you until he’s gone for good. Consider this your first real wakeup call, Abby.”

I curse under my breath, my frustration peaking as I throw the phone onto the desk.

The impact wakes up my computer screen, bringing back the article about black truffles I’d been reading earlier. I sigh as my eyes skim the text again, discussing the rarity of black truffles and how the harvesting season is just about over.

As if I needed another obstacle.

It feels like I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place.

My friends are turning their backs on me, and I can't say I blame them. Karl, the constant thorn in my side, is back in my life despite my gut screaming it's a bad idea. Meanwhile, my wolf refuses to show herself unless I'm close with him.

And to top it all off, I have this recipe I need to master, one that calls for an ingredient so rare and expensive it's almost laughable.

I curse again, louder this time, and rake my hands through my hair, clutching at the strands as if they hold some magical solution.

Chapter 159

Abby

The weight of the world feels like it's pressing down on my shoulders like a leaden weight, and just when I think it can't get any heavier, Karl appears in the doorway of my office.

"Is everything okay, Abby?" he asks, and there's a genuine concern in his eyes that almost—almost—makes me want to believe in him again.

I hesitate, my eyes darting to my phone with Chloe's unsent text. But there's also a cook-off I need to win, friendships to mend, and a restaurant to run. "I'm fine," I lie, although my voice betrays me, cracking slightly.

"Come on, Abby." He steps into the room, closing the door behind him. "You and I both know that's not true."

I sigh, shifting my gaze to my computer screen where an article on black truffles glares back at me. I already promised to myself that I wouldn't let Karl get closer, and everything in my body is screaming at me right now to send him away.

But before I can stop him, Karl moves closer, leaning on the edge of my desk. “Look, if you don’t want to talk about it, fine. But if there’s any way I can help—”

“Help?” I snort, incredulous. “You’ve done enough, don’t you think?”

He winces, stung by the harshness of my words. “Alright, fair point,” he concedes, pausing. “But let’s not pretend that I’m the only complicated thing in your life right now.”

His eyes flicker to my computer screen, then back to me. “Now, what’s this about black

I exhale deeply, a mixture of relief and frustration swirling within me. As much as it pains me to admit it, he’s right; I’m in desperate need of help. “I need them for a dish I’m working on for the cook-off,” I confess. “But they’re rare, expensive, and the season’s basically over.”

Karl glances at the screen again, his eyes scanning the article. “You know, I might be able to help with that. When I was sourcing ingredients for Adam—”

I flinch at the mention of Adam’s name. Every memory of that whole debacle is a stab to the gut, a cruel reminder of not only the breakup, but the fact that Karl played a role in

“I know, I know,” he catches himself, shaking his head. “But Abby, the point is, I have contacts, suppliers who specialize in rare ingredients. If you let me, I can try to secure these truffles for you.”

The thought of accepting Karl’s help churns my stomach. Can I trust him? Should I? But there’s no denying the dire straits I’m in. “Fine,” I finally say. “Give it a

His eyes light up, almost as if he’s been waiting for this tiny chance at redemption. He quickly pulls out his phone and dials a number. I can hear the phone ring, then someone picks up.

“Hey, Jack,” he says. “It’s Karl. Listen, I need a favor.”

My heart pounds in my chest as I listen to him speak to the supplier. There's a hint of urgency in his voice, but also a smooth confidence that I remember all too well. It's the same confidence that charmed me once upon a time, the same confidence that I've been trying to protect myself from.

After what feels like an eternity, Karl hangs up and looks at me, his eyes filled with a mix of regret and disappointment. "I'm sorry, Abby, but even my supplier can't get them. There are none available on the market right now."

My shoulders slump, as if hit by an invisible wave of defeat. "So that's it, then," I say softly, almost to myself. "I'm really on my own with this."

He puts his phone away and gazes at me, a mixture of emotions swirling in his eyes—guilt, regret, perhaps even a flicker of genuine concern. "Abby, I know you have no reason to trust me. And I get that. But sometimes, even when the odds are against you, you can still turn things around."

I look at him, then back at the article about black truffles on my screen, then back at him again.

"I wish it were that easy, Karl," I say, my voice tinged with an exhaustion I can no longer hide. "I really

For a while, we just sit in silence. But the room feels like it's closing in on me with each moment of silence. And then, without warning, I can't hold it in anymore. Tears spill down my cheeks like a dam that has finally burst.

Karl looks startled, his eyes widening as he takes in my sudden emotional collapse. "Abby, what's

I hiccup between sobs, taking a deep breath before I let it all spill out. "It's Chloe," I manage to say, my voice tremulous. "She quit, stormed out. And Leah sided with her; she said it's either you or them. And I can't lose my friends, Karl. I can't."

The weight of my own words hangs heavy in the air. The fact that I let it all out like that takes even me by surprise. Karl jumps up from his seat. "I'll talk to her. I'll fix

But before he can take another step, I'm on my feet too, rushing to stand between him and the door. "No!" I practically shout, my eyes fierce, yet filled with desperation. "You've done enough. I can't let you mess this up even more."

He stops, standing just inches from me. For a few agonizing moments, neither of us says a word. Finally, he breaks the silence. "If you want to cut me off, for the sake of your friends, your restaurant, your peace of mind, I would understand. I'll leave you alone after this, Abby."

Chapter 160

Abby

The weight of failure feels almost physical, like there's something sharp and heavy literally lodged in my chest.

I stare at the computer screen displaying "Truffles Unavailable" in blunt, red letters. I've sent countless emails to suppliers, spent hours scouring online marketplaces, and I've even visited local storefronts to browse their selection, all to no avail.

A part of me wants to give up on the recipe altogether, to throw in the towel and declare the universe the winner in this sadistic game it's been playing with me. I could hope that this recipe won't be chosen, or at the very least, that I can read enough about it online to get a good idea as to how to make it.

But another part—perhaps the stubborn or perhaps the hopeful part—won't let me settle for that. What if this recipe is chosen for the competition? What if the online recipes just don't do it justice? I need to be prepared, and this could be my last shot at turning things around.

I close the laptop with a sigh, my eyes drifting to a framed picture of me and Chloe on a past mushroom hunting trip. It's not truffles, but maybe, just maybe, I could find something close, something that'll at least help me practice the textures and flavors.

...

"Going somewhere?" The voice slices through my thoughts, and I turn around to see Karl standing at the doorway, his eyes lingering on my hiking boots and backpack. It's early in the morning, too early for

anyone but me to be here. And yet there's Karl, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, as my grandmother used to say.

"That's none of your business," I shoot back, my voice carrying a sharper edge than I intended. But really, the last thing I need right now is more complications, more entanglement with him.

He steps into the room, the door falling shut behind him. "Abby, don't be like this. I told you that I want to help."

"Well, I appreciate that, but I don't need help," I interject, zipping up my backpack with more force than necessary. "I've been mushroom hunting since I was a kid. I'll be

Karl studies me for a moment, his eyes penetrating, like he's looking right through me. "You're not going to find truffles around here, you know that,

"I'm aware," I snap, "but I need to do something, okay? I need to practice and prepare."

Suddenly, his demeanor shifts, his voice turning stern, his posture more rigid. "Then let me come with you."

I blink, surprised. There's a flash of Alpha energy in his eyes, a silent, commanding aura that's so at odds with the restrained Karl I've been dealing with lately. And in that moment, something in me gives

"Fine," I hear myself say. "You can come."

His eyes meet mine, and for a split second, I see something there, a glint of something like triumph or maybe relief. "Good," he says, his voice softening. "I'll get my stuff."

And then he's gone, leaving me alone in my office, staring at the empty space he just vacated.

Why did I just agree to that?

...

The forest floor is soft beneath my boots, each step muffled by a layer of damp leaves and mossy earth.

A fine mist hangs in the early morning air, casting the forest in surreal grays and blues. I feel like I'm walking through a dream. Or maybe a nightmare, if something were to come out of the mist.

Karl keeps a respectful distance, his footsteps softly echoing my own. We move in a companionable silence, our eyes scanning the ground for any signs of mushrooms.

"Over there." I point to a cluster near a huge oak tree's gnarled roots.

Karl approaches, leaning down to take a closer look. "Are these edible?"

I laugh, brushing away leaves to reveal the reddish-brown caps. "Definitely not the truffles I need, but yes, they are edible."

We continue this way for a while, discovering various fungi scattered throughout the forest floor—some bursting with vivid colors, others more muted but no less fascinating.

Each find turns into a mini biology lesson as I identify them, and the tension that's been clinging to us slowly begins to lift.

"Hey, do you remember that time we went mushroom hunting while we were still married?" Karl finally says, breaking a prolonged silence. "You had to stop me from picking that poisonous

I laugh at the memory, a tinge of nostalgia sweeping over me. "You were so excited, you didn't even check. You would have sauteed it right up and ended up in the emergency room."

Karl joins in the laughter, and for a brief moment, the forest becomes a sanctuary, a place where it's just us, the cool morning air, and nothing else. But then guilt seeps in, muddying the moment. We shouldn't be laughing, not like this, not when I just lost my two best friends because of him.

But then, something happens.

My thoughts scatter as a distant shout cuts through the mist, followed by the disconcerting sound of a gunshot echoing between the trees.

Karl reacts instantly, grabbing my arm and pulling me behind a large oak. His body presses close to mine, an involuntary shield, and every nerve in my body ignites, caught between the exhilaration of his touch and the fear ignited by the unknown

“Karl—”

“Shh,” he murmurs, putting his finger to his lips. “Quiet. Stay still.”

Just as Karl commands, I stay as still as a statue. Aside from the rapid pounding of my heart, I feel like I’m made of