

## His Kickass 171

### Chapter 171

Abby

Why did I do this?

My heart is in my throat as I leap towards the waterfall, propelled by some inexplicable force that tugs at the wolf that lives inside of me. The world blurs and turns into a swirling tornado of color and sound, and I brace myself for the icy plunge.

But it never comes. Instead, after a cacophony of cold water and sharp breaths, my feet hit solid ground, jolting me to a sudden stop. I blink, disoriented. Why am I not submerged in water? I thought that I would be swimming beneath an icy current, but I'm not.

I glance up, my eyes widening. I'm in a cave—a secret, hidden cave concealed behind the curtain of water.

Before I can even begin to process this turn of events, a crashing sound erupts from the waterfall, and suddenly, Karl bursts through, stumbling forward and landing right on top of me. We both fall to the ground in a heap of limbs.

"Abby!" he exclaims an instant later, his eyes wide, filled with a mixture of relief and panic. "Why did you do that? I thought you—"

Our faces are inches apart. I can feel his breath on my skin, warm and shaky. His eyes bore into mine, a deep well of emotions that I can't quite decipher. It's a strange, electrifying moment; time seems to stretch, elongating the seconds, amplifying the tension that pulses between us.

"I'm okay," I breathe, unable to tear my gaze away from his. "I'm fine, Karl."

He takes a ragged breath, his eyes searching mine as if looking for confirmation, for some kind of reassurance that I'm really not hurt. "I thought you were crazy, jumping through the waterfall like that." He shakes his head in disbelief, swallowing. "I thought I was going to lose you."

The words hang in the air, heavy and thick. I can feel his body pressed against mine; he's tense and trembling. My heart pounds so loudly in my chest that I'm sure he can hear it. And then, as if pulled by the same magnetic force that led me here, our faces draw

But we stop, frozen just before our lips meet.

The moment lingers, a silent eternity filled with what-ifs and almosts, until Karl slowly pulls back, his gaze dropping from my eyes to the cave floor.

"We should—um—figure out where we are," he stammers, awkwardly extricating himself from me and rising to his

"Yeah," I reply, my voice filled with a combination of regret and nervous excitement. "We should."

Karl offers me a hand, and I take it, letting him pull me to my feet. For a second, our hands linger, fingers intertwined, and I feel a surge of something warm and confusing rush through

Then we let go, and the moment is gone, dissipated as if it was never even there to begin

I look around the cave, my mind spinning. How did we end up here? What is this place? And, most importantly, why did my wolf feel so inexplicably pulled toward this hidden

I push the questions aside for now, locking them away in a corner of my mind to ponder later. Right now, I'm just grateful for the odd twist of fate that brought us here, to this sanctuary behind the water. Grateful for the mystery that saved us from capture, that gave us a moment to breathe, to exist, away from the prying eyes of guards and the unblinking gaze of cameras.

"So," Karl says, breaking the silence that has settled between us. "This is unexpected."

"Unexpected indeed," I echo, my mind still racing, still trying to catch up with the whirlwind of events. "That's one way to put it, I guess."

My heart is still pounding from the almost-moment that took place between Karl and me. But there's no time for romantic distractions right now. We're in a cave—a secret cave that we stumbled into through sheer dumb luck or fate or whatever else had a hand in the events of the past two days.

“Well then. Let's see where this leads,” Karl suggests, his eyes scanning the darkness ahead.

I nod, pushing aside the emotional rollercoaster of the past few minutes. “Yeah. We need to figure this out.”

“Most importantly, how to get out,” Karl says.

We proceed cautiously, our footsteps echoing eerily between the calls of the cave.

The path is treacherous, littered with rocks and unexpected dips in the pathway. The cave's walls drip with cool water, which is oddly refreshing after the hike through the forest. Surprisingly, there are no guards and no cameras, although we keep our eyes peeled the whole time.

Something tells me, though, that the people who run this operation have to know that this cave exists. It's too big to ignore. Maybe there's an entrance here somewhere to the building.

“Watch your step,” Karl warns as he helps me over a particularly tricky spot, his hand steady on my arm.

I almost lose my footing at one point, my boot slipping on a wet patch of moss. Karl grabs my hand, pulling me back to stability. My heart does a strange flip, but I quickly glance away. Now is not the

“Thanks,” I

“No problem,” he replies, his brown eyes locking onto mine for a moment before he looks away.

We continue, growing more confident with each obstacle that we overcome. But then, I spot them—spiders. Big, black, eight-legged monsters clinging to the walls like grotesque ornaments. I shudder, my skin crawling at the

“Ugh, spiders,” I mutter, feeling the color drain from my face.

Karl looks at me, then back at the spiders. “You want to go

I shake my head. “No, we’ve come this far. I can’t let a few spiders stop me. But maybe...”

Karl seems to understand because he reaches out and takes my hand, leading me carefully past the spiders without saying a word. I can feel the warmth of his hand, solid and comforting, as if assuring me that everything will be

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Abby

“Oh my god, Abby... could it be?”

Karl’s eyes widen next to me. I crouch down to get a closer look at the dark mushrooms nestled in the dirt at our feet.

“Yes,” I breathe, reaching out to run my finger along their tops. “This is it. Black truffles.”

This is exactly what we've been searching for, but something feels off, discordant in a way that pricks at my senses.

Karl crouches down beside me, his fingers gently touching the truffles. “They look genuine. But how is this even possible? All these truffles growing this far from sunlight? I knew they needed low light, but this...”

His words are mirroring my thoughts exactly. "I don't think they're growing naturally," I murmur, my eyes scanning the cave, landing on something that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I point upwards, my finger shaking slightly. "Look."

Karl's eyes follow my finger to the ceiling of the cave. Artificial lights hang overhead. They're turned off right now, likely to simulate a day/night cycle for the mushrooms that are growing here. That's why there are so many mushrooms in this cave; they're being cultivated.

"Oh, shit," Karl whispers, his voice tinged with disbelief and a hint of dread. "You don't think—"

"That these truffles are being cultivated? By the poachers?" My heart sinks as I complete his thought. I should have known sooner, but I guess it never occurred to me until just now. "Yeah. I do."

Karl rises to his feet, his face flushed, his eyes widening. "So should we take any?" he asks, glancing around nervously. "I mean, what if they

It's a fair question. We came here to pick mushrooms, not to steal from illegal poachers. Not like this, at least. If they somehow found out that we stole from their stash, what would be the

"There are so many, Karl," I say, struggling with the conflicting emotions that are growing inside of me. "If we take just what we need, they could easily chalk it up to animals or something. And besides, we're not the ones exploiting nature for

Karl's eyes search mine, perhaps seeking reassurance, perhaps questioning the fine line we're toeing between right and wrong. Finally, he nods. "Okay. Let's do it. But like you said, we'll just take what we need; just enough so you can practice for the

Getting to work, we kneel back down beside the truffle patch. My satchel lies open between us, ready to hold these precious fungi that could potentially change the tide in my quest to win the cook-off.

My hands tremble slightly as I pluck the first truffle from the ground and place it into the satchel. Karl follows suit, his own movements hesitant but growing steadier with each truffle he

Finally, my satchel is sufficiently filled, a lump of dark truffles gathered at its bottom like some sort of illegal contraband. I pull the flap over and fasten it, looking up to meet Karl's

"We've got enough," I say, the words sticking in my throat. "Let's get back to the car, and quickly, before we're caught."

We walk in silence back the way we came, finally stopping a little while later at the mouth of the cave, curtained by the waterfall. I can see the sunlight through the loud, rushing water now; it's much brighter now than it was earlier this morning, which will make camouflaging ourselves a fair bit more difficult.

But there's no turning back now. We gather ourselves, I sling my satchel over my shoulder, and together, we bolt through the cave's hidden mouth, leaping through the cascade of water that covers the entrance.

We hit the ground running, boots slipping on the wet rocks as we aim for the path leading back to the car.

That's when we see them: guards, three of them, standing in a line like they're part of some twisted welcoming committee. They're just as shocked to see us, but that doesn't stop them from raising their guns.

"Hands in the air!" one of them barks, his eyes locking onto my mud-streaked satchel and my dirt-covered fingers.

Karl and I slowly raise our hands, glancing at each other as one of the guards slowly and cautiously begins making his way closer. The moment stretches thin, and I feel like I can barely breathe.

But then, the moment snaps as Karl mutters, "Abby... run."

With a swift, almost practiced movement, he shoves the guard on the far right, throwing him off balance. The surprise registers on their faces a split second before they react, guns firing into the air as we turn to sprint away.

“Get them!” one of the guards yells, and suddenly we’re running for our lives, a barrage of shouts and bullets propelling us

Karl grabs my hand, pulling me along the uneven path, our breaths coming fast and harsh. We’re both running on adrenaline and fear, but also an exhilarating kind of hope. The path ahead is a blur, but I know we need to reach the top of the ravine to have any chance of

“They’re not far behind!” Karl shouts over his shoulder. “Just keep going,

I don’t need to be told twice before pure survival instinct takes over. Our footsteps pound against the earth in a frantic rhythm, the sound of our boots and our labored breaths echoing through the once-peaceful

Just when I think we might actually make it, a new sound slices through the air—dogs, their barks vicious and close.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” I gasp, urging my legs to move faster.

Karl leads us off the path, veering sharply to the right, crashing through a dense wall of underbrush. Branches whip against my skin, leaving shallow cuts, but I hardly feel them. We emerge into a clearing, and for a second, we’re exposed,

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Abby

Karl and I burst into the restaurant, a gust of fresh air sweeping in with us as the door swings shut behind.

Our clothes are still wet, covered in mud, and clinging uncomfortably to our skin, but the euphoria coursing through my veins easily overcomes any discomfort that I might be feeling. The kitchen, already in full swing for the day, is a cacophony of noise.

John looks up from behind the line, his knife poised mid-air over a bunch of fresh herbs. His brows knit together as he takes in our disheveled state.

“Where the hell have you both been?”

Without uttering a word, I slide my satchel off my shoulder and set it onto the counter with a triumphant grin. My heart pounds in my chest as I untie the flap, feeling a surge of triumph course through my veins.

Turning the bag upside-down, I silently let the truffles tumble out in a glorious

John’s eyes go wide, giving him a comical look. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this shocked, except for the one time that one of the waitresses dropped his prized braised lamb all over the floor before the plate even made it out of the kitchen.

He rushes around the counter, hands trembling slightly as he picks one of the mushrooms up, bringing it closer to inspect it carefully. “Is this... a black

Tears spring into my eyes as I nod. “Yes, John. Black truffles.”

He’s still holding the truffle, but now he’s also holding his breath and staring at us, clearly waiting for an

“We, uh... had to go off the beaten path,” Karl starts, a tremor in his voice from the lingering adrenaline of our escape. I can tell he’s reliving it all, just like me. “Through poacher territory, believe it or

“We found a waterfall, and behind it... a cave,” I continue, feeling a chill run up my spine as I recount the experience. I’ll probably be reliving it for a long time to come. “A cave full of these bad boys. Artificial lights, the whole setup.”

John’s eyes grow wider with each passing second that I tell the fragments of our story.

“So you... stole from poachers?” he asks once we’ve finished.

I nod, maybe a little more excitedly than I mean to. “Look, I know it’s bad,” I begin, “but—”

“Bad?” John interrupts, his voice incredulous. “You guys could’ve been caught! Or worse!”

Karl nods with a grave expression on his face. “And we almost were. They had guards. With guns. And dogs. We had to run like our lives depended on

“Because our lives did depend on it,” I add, the words heavy but true. “We ran up the ravine, through the woods, across clearings, through thickets. We were followed, we heard the dogs. I thought we were gonna die, honestly. But we made it. We got to the car and drove

Silence envelops the kitchen for a few moments as John absorbs the gravity of what we’ve just told him. Then, finally, he exhales. His voice is shaky.

“I can’t believe you two idiots did that. But I’m just glad you’re okay,” he says, setting the truffle down like it’s a rare artifact, and I guess it sort of is.

I feel a warm sensation spreading through me, mingling with lingering feelings of adrenaline. I glance at Karl. His eyes meet mine, and through the exhaustion and the dirt coating his face, I can see something else there. Something softer, something that makes me soften a little,

“I... I couldn’t have done it without Karl,” I find myself

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“Okay, Abby. Let’s get everything in place. Farro mafaldine, black truffle butter, and the mushrooms,” John says, his hand passing over each individual ingredient—and lingering over the coveted black truffles—as he speaks.

I nod. My body feels like it’s about to burst, I’m so excited. “I can’t believe we’re finally doing this,” I say. “If we can just nail this dish, the cook-off is ours.”

Karl chuckles from the sidelines. “No pressure, huh?”

John and I share a quick glance and a collective breath before diving in.

He works on preparing the handmade pasta, expertly feeding the farro mafaldine through the machine. I focus on the mushrooms, slicing them with surgical precision before turning to the star of our dish: the black truffles.

Carefully, I shave thin layers of the truffles, letting them fall into the small pot of melted butter on the stove. The aroma is intoxicating, filling the room and making my stomach growl with anticipation.

After what feels like an eternity, the dish is finally complete. John and I step back, looking at the steaming bowl of farro mafaldine, black truffle butter, and mushrooms sitting on the countertop.

“Well, here goes nothing,” I say, scooping a generous portion onto three plates for taste testing.”

We each pick up a fork, the atmosphere between us thick with anticipation.

But the moment the pasta touches my tongue, I know something is wrong. The flavors clash horrendously, causing my palate to wince in response. The black truffle butter, rather than enhancing the dish as it should, is instead overpowering the dish with a dirty, murky

I spit the food out instinctively, my eyes going wide as I chug a glass of water sitting beside me to wash out the taste of soil. “Oh, this is bad. This is really, really

John’s face mirrors my sentiments, his eyes widening as he puts his fork down and swallows harshly. Karl doesn’t say anything, but the slight grimace on his face speaks volumes.

“We can’t serve this,” I mutter, already dumping the disgusting dish into the trash. “I’ve never cooked with black truffles before. I didn’t realize they could overpower a dish so easily.”

“Me neither. But let’s try again,” John suggests, surprisingly lighthearted despite the failed attempt and our limited supply of black truffles.

Once again, we get to work. We start by making adjustments to the recipe, cutting down on the truffle, changing the ratios of spices.

But the result is somehow even worse than the first attempt. The three of us almost spit out our bites in unison, John's face paling to a sickly hue.

"Good god!" I exclaim, clutching the edge of the counter with a grimace. "What are we getting wrong?"

Karl mumbles something to himself, poking at the pasta with his fork. "Maybe... too much

I shake my head. "Can't be. If anything, it was

"And you're sure these are black truffles, and not some... I don't know, hallucinogens or something?" John spits out.

"No, they're definitely black truffles," I say. "We just need to keep trying. God, I wish I could just get some help from someone with experience in cooking this sort of thing. Then it wouldn't be so bad."

Frustrated and verging on desperate, I take the bowl of the failed second attempt and march towards the dumpster

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Abby

A sudden jolt of fear seizes me as I lock eyes with the man at the far end of the alley.

"You there!" he repeats, taking another step closer. "What are you—"

"Um... Karl? John?" I call out, mainly out of instinct. If there's one thing that living in the city over the past few years has taught me, it's not to trust strange men, especially not in the middle of the night.

"Wait, I—"

The back door slams open before the man can finish, spilling yellow light from the kitchen out into the alley. John and Karl burst outside, alarmed by the commotion.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” John asks, his eyes widening as he spots

Karl, not waiting for an answer, storms toward the man, his face twisted in anger. “Hey, what do you think you’re doing here, bothering a woman in the middle of the night?” he growls, grabbing the man by his tattered jacket and pulling him away from

The man doesn’t resist, but he does point a trembling finger at the bowl in my hands. “I just wanted to know if you were gonna throw all that away,

I glance down at the bowl in my hands, feeling my stomach sink just a little bit. He’s just hungry, and saw someone throwing away what looks like perfectly good food. My heart’s still pounding from the sudden scare, but something inside me

I lift my gaze and look at Karl, who is still clutching the man’s tattered jacket and driving him

“Karl, wait!”

Karl hesitates, looking at me questioningly. There’s an incredulous look in his eyes, and for good reason. But I choose to ignore it and instead turn to the homeless man, holding the bowl out slightly.

“Was this what you wanted?” I ask.

The man nods. “Yes, please,” he says, sounding more than a little desperate. “That’s all. I’m really sorry; I didn’t mean to frighten you, miss.”

With a sigh, I exchange glances with John and Karl. John’s face is unreadable, but Karl’s is a mask of anger and worry.

“But it’s a failed dish,” I say, glancing down at the bowl again. “Trust me, it tasted really bad. You probably won’t want to eat it.”

“I don’t care, miss,” he says, his voice hoarse from thirst, and it’s then that I notice that he’s got a heavy French accent, which is rare around here. “I have eaten far worse. I’m just

Our eyes lock, and I see something there—an unspoken understanding, a shared human moment. It stirs something in me, a mix of empathy and shame. I look at Karl and John, who both seem uncertain, their faces unreadable. Karl’s face has shifted to the slightly more understanding side, but I can sense that he’s still a little

“You can have it,” I finally say, offering him the bowl. “Please, take

The man’s eyes widen, and for a brief second, I see a glimmer of something—relief, maybe even gratitude. He takes the bowl from me cautiously, as though he’s afraid that I’ll suddenly snatch it

“Thank you, really,” he murmurs. “I am sorry for scaring

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, casting him a gentle smile. “I’m sorry for

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Karl’s eyes narrow. “Are you serious, Abby? We don’t even know this guy.”

“I know. And I promise, if anything happens, you can kick him out. But I have to do this, Karl. I just have to.”

Karl searches my eyes, and I can see him wrestling with his judgment. He sighs, defeated by whatever it is he sees in my expression.

“Alright, but I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“Me, too,” John chimes in, although I can sense that he’s somewhat more open to the idea than Karl.

My heart feels lighter, even as the weight of what I'm doing fully sets in. I step back out into the drizzling rain, motioning for the man to come inside.

"Come on," I call out, offering the man another gentle smile. "You can come inside, out of

The man looks up, his eyes widening. "Sorry?" he calls out,

"Come inside," I repeat. "Come out of the

He stands and slowly walks over to me. I open the door a little wider. He hesitates on the threshold, like he's doing something utterly forbidden. "I can come in? Are you sure about this?" he asks in his thick French accent, his eyes

"Yeah, come on in," I assure him, stepping aside to make room. He walks in cautiously, eyes darting around the kitchen like a bird sizing up

I guide him to a stool in the corner. "Sit here. You want something else to eat? I can whip up something fresh if you're really hungry. And something that doesn't taste bad."

The corners of his mouth twitch upward, forming the shadow of a smile. "Fresh food?" he asks. "I haven't had anything fresh in a while now. Mostly just scraps and moldy bread for me. But you really don't have to go to the trouble, miss."

My heart sinks a little. I glance at John and Karl, who are observing the interaction, a mixture of wariness and curiosity on their faces. "Well, let's change that," I finally say. "It's no trouble."

Swiftly, I grab ingredients from the fridge and the pantry. My hands move on autopilot, chopping and stirring the pasta and sauce. Within minutes, a hot dish is ready. I even pack some extra in a tupperware, which I put it in a bag and set down beside him. "You can keep this for a couple of days. Just don't let it go for too long."

"Thank you, miss," he says softly, his eyes a little brighter. He eats quietly, his movements deliberate, as if savoring each bite.

I turn to John and Karl, who have been watching the whole scene unfold. “So, do we want to give that recipe another shot before we pack it in for tonight?”

John shrugs. “Sure, why not? Maybe the third time’s

Karl, still skeptical but also maybe a little mystified, nods. “Sounds good. Let’s do

With our spirits reinstated, we dive back into the mystery of the truffle dish. All the while, the homeless man sits quietly, and every time I glance back at him, he seems to be enjoying his food in peaceful silence. I exchange quick glances with Karl every so often, as if to say: “See? He’s not

However, by the time we’ve finished the dish, it’s a failure

“Ugh,” I whine, throwing my fork down. “Bland. How did we manage

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Abby

My heart pounds as the room goes quiet. What on earth is happening right now?

We’re all looking at each other—me, Karl, John, and the homeless man. His eyes meet mine, full of a sort of knowing energy that leaves me speechless. Is this a joke? He really has experience cooking with black truffles, some of the rarest and most expensive in the world?

“You look confused, so I’ll explain,” he says, smiling through his beard. “I was once a chef in France and Italy. Emphasis on was. But I’ve still got my skills.”

Karl scoffs, breaking the silence. “You’ve got to be kidding me. A chef? You expect us to believe that?”

The man just shrugs, a tiny smile on his lips. “Believe what you want. I know how to cook with black truffles, and you, my friends, are missing a crucial ingredient. That’s all I’m

Karl snorts. "Yeah, right. What's next? Are you a secret millionaire,

I shoot Karl a glance. His skepticism is understandable, but there's something about this man that captivates me. Maybe it's the sincerity in his eyes, or maybe it's the unexpected way that we just met him. But if there's even the tiniest chance that he knows something, then why

"Karl, come on. What's the harm in hearing him out?" I say, finally breaking my silence. My voice is soft but certain, and I hope it conveys how genuinely curious I am. "I mean, we're stumped, aren't

Karl grumbles, clearly not thrilled with the idea, but nods. "Fine, whatever. It's not like we're making any progress on this

John, who's been silently observing the exchange, finally speaks. "I say let's give him a shot. What do we have to lose?"

Karl throws his hands in the air. "My last shred of sanity, probably. But go on, enlighten us, Chef... what should we call you?"

"You may just call me Anton," the man replies, seemingly unperturbed by Karl's skepticism.

John leans against the counter, arms crossed, intrigued. "So, Anton, you were a chef in Europe? Cooked with black truffles often?"

Anton nods, his eyes drifting away for a moment as if he's back in a different time, a different life. "Yes, I worked at a few Michelin-starred restaurants in France and Italy. I have made this dish you're trying to master more times than I can count."

The atmosphere in the room changes. My eyes meet Karl's for a moment; his face is a hard mask of skepticism, but I see a flicker of something hidden behind his gaze—curiosity? Annoyance? I can't quite put my finger

“Look,” Anton says, pulling us back to the present. “I know how this sounds. A homeless guy claiming to be a former high-profile chef? But life has a funny way of bringing us to unexpected places. One wrong turn, one mistake, and here we

I feel my heart swell with an emotion I can’t quite describe. It’s as if a fog has lifted, revealing a landscape I had sensed but not fully seen. I want to know his story, want to understand the path that brought him to our alley, but now is not the

“Okay. So what’s the missing ingredient, Anton?” I ask, my voice almost

Anton smiles at me, and for a moment, he isn’t a homeless man in tattered clothes sitting in our kitchen; he’s a chef, someone who once had a different life, different dreams. And somehow, that thought gives me comfort. It reminds me that we’re all just people at the end of the day, each with our own stories to tell, our own mistakes to

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A few minutes later, Anton’s hands are washed, his long hair is pulled back, and an apron is covering his grimy clothes. Karl, John, and I are sitting on stools on the opposite side of the counter while Anton inspects each ingredient carefully, like he’s preparing to build something magnificent.

Karl clears his throat, clearly itching to say something snarky but holding back for my sake. “So, Anton, are you gonna cook this mystery dish? Or was all that just talk?”

Anton smirks, picking up a chef’s knife with a familiarity to his mannerisms that leaves me somewhat taken aback. “Just watch.”

The room falls silent. John moves closer to get a better view, while Karl and I shoot each other a glance, half out of respect, half out of disbelief. Anton’s fingers fly through the air, chopping onions, mincing garlic, and handling the black truffles with an expertise that makes my jaw drop.

“How did you...?” John begins, but Anton silences him with a raised finger.

“Patience, my friend.”

I've never seen anything like it. He's not just cooking; it's like he's performing in front of an audience, a well-practiced show that he's been putting on over and over again for decades now. It's both fascinating and overwhelming at the same time. I could only ever dream of being as skilled as

The room starts to fill with the scent of garlic and onions cooking in olive oil, intermingling with the earthy aroma of the truffles. My mouth waters uncontrollably, and I shoot Karl a glance. His eyes meet mine, and in that instant, I see the walls of his skepticism crack, if only a

Anton looks up from the stove, his eyes locking onto mine. "Would you pass me the white wine,

I hand it to him, and he pours a generous splash into the pan. The liquid sizzles as it hits the hot surface, and Anton stirs, a hint of a smile gracing

"Always deglaze the pan," he mutters, more to himself than to us. "The real flavor is in the 'fond'—the little bits that are stuck to

Minutes feel like seconds, and before we know it, Anton is sliding the pan off the stove, stepping back as if he's an artist who has just unveiled a masterpiece.

"Et voila," he says with a flourish. "Now, who wants to taste? Karl? Why don't you try first?"

Karl lets out a small huff and stands, although I can tell he's trying not to act too impressed. He steps up to the counter and stabs the fork into the pasta, then lifts it to his mouth and takes a hesitant bite.

His eyes widen, his face softening in a way I've never seen before as he slowly chews the food, raising his hand to cover his mouth. "Oh my god. That's—That's incredible."

John goes next, and his reaction is just as intense. "Excuse the language, but holy shit, man. That's the best thing I've ever tasted. Abby, you've gotta try this."

I'm last, and as I step up to the counter, for some reason my heart is

“Go on, Miss Abby,” Anton says, his voice soft, noticing my trepidation. “I think you’ll like it

The moment the flavors hit my tongue, I’m transported to another world. It’s as if all of the elements—the truffles, the garlic, the wine—have combined into something transcendent, something

I look up to find Anton watching me, a knowing smile on his face. It’s only now that I realize that there are tears in my eyes, and I quickly blink them

“That’s... That’s...” My voice trails off. There are no words to describe it; it’s just delicious, perfect and homey, like something that your mother would cook on a cold and rainy day. That’s what it feels like. Like love

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Abby

My heart hammers in my chest as Anton’s words hang in the air between us. “Everything comes at a price,” he said.

I’m hooked, completely sold on whatever secret culinary world he comes from, but his cryptic statement sends shivers down my spine. What could he possibly mean?

“Alright... what’s the catch?” I finally manage to say, my eyes darting between Anton’s piercing gaze, John’s excited smirk, and Karl’s visibly confused expression.

Anton’s eyes search mine for a long moment. Finally, he sighs and starts to

“I lost everything once, Abby. My career, my family, all because of a decision that sent my life spiraling out of

“What was it?” Karl butts in, causing me to shoot him a warning glare. He shrugs, making a face. “What? Don’t we have the right

I'm about to open my mouth to respond, but before I can, Anton nods and speaks. "He is right. I'll say it plainly: I made a series of bad investments. I stupidly gave away my family's savings, my daughter's college fund, to a bunch of losers claiming to be looking for investors for their new restaurants. I

After Anton speaks, there's a palpable silence that settles over the room. I don't know what to say, but it seems as though I don't have to, because Anton takes a deep breath and continues.

"I don't expect you to understand, but to teach you, to be part of this kitchen—even temporarily—means a lot to me. It's not just about the food; it's about regaining something I lost, something immeasurable. I want a chance to piece my life back together, to win back my family."

My gaze instinctively slides over to Karl, and for a moment, I can see something behind his eyes. Recognition, maybe. Perhaps there's a bit of kindredness between the two men; Karl, just like Anton, is trying to win something back.

John clears his throat, clearly uncomfortable but equally moved by Anton's candidness. "Look, Anton, that's a compelling story, but running a kitchen is a business. We can't just bring someone in based on a touching tale. And no offense, but we have no proof of who you say you are. Sure, that dish was incredible, but—"

"I know. I know it's a risk," Anton interjects, cutting him off, his voice tinged with desperation but also a strange kind of confidence. "That's why I'm willing to show you. Give me a chance. Let me prove myself in this kitchen, and if I'm as good as I claim to be, then consider keeping me on

I feel everyone's eyes on me. Karl's got that look in his eyes, the skeptical but cautiously hopeful one that I've grown all too used to. John's face is unreadable. I know the decision rests with me. After all, it's my kitchen, my restaurant, and my place in the cook-off that's at

Finally, I find my voice. "Alright, Anton. I'm willing to give you that chance, a probationary period to showcase your skills. We'll figure out the details and the logistics, but the essence is this: Show us you're really the chef you claim to be, and there'll be a place for you here. For good, if you

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I see Karl's face shift through an entire host of expressions. Shock. Disbelief. And finally, a kind of

I look into Karl's eyes. "What, like I did with you?" I murmur.

Karl's eyes widen for a moment. His expression shifts from skepticism, to anger, and finally to understanding before his gaze drops to the floor. I can tell I struck a chord with him, and maybe it's for the best; to remind him that I let him come here, let him walk back into my life, against all odds.

"I know it's a risk, Karl, but what if it's worth it?" I continue. "What if he's exactly what we need? His cooking is transformative, and you know as well as I do that the dishes he could help us create could be a game-changer. I don't just want to win the cook-off; I want to leave the judges stunned. I want them to remember my food for the rest of their lives."

Karl is silent for a few moments, his eyes darting back and forth as though the gears are turning in his head. Finally, he sighs and meets my gaze again, and there's more understanding there than ever before.

"Alright," he says, nodding. "If this is what you want, Abby, then I'll support you. No matter what."

Relief floods through me, warm and reassuring. There's a hint of something else there, too, and suddenly I feel like we're in the cave again, too close for our own good. I have to quickly look away to hide the blush that's creeping into

"Thank you, Karl. I knew you

"More than that," he continues, "I'll even pay for a hotel room for Anton temporarily until he saves up some money. It's the least we can do if we're going to upend the man's life with a

My eyes widen in surprise. "Karl, that's incredibly generous of you. But you don't need to

He shrugs, but I see the glint of something warm and tender in his eyes. "But I do need to do it, Abby. Not just for him, but for you."

I nod, feeling overwhelmed. "Wow... Thank you, Karl. That's..."

Before I can finish, he reaches out and squeezes my arm, a sensation that sends a shiver up my spine. "Come on. Let's talk to him."

We head back to where John and Anton are talking animatedly about different types of heirloom tomatoes, their voices a strange blend of excitement and tension. When they see us coming, they both fall silent, like school kids caught passing notes in class.

"So," I say, "it's settled. Anton, you'll start your probationary period tomorrow. We'll go over the details then, but the essence is simple: impress us and you're in. And, Karl has something to tell you,

Anton's eyes meet mine, and I see a mix of relief and determination there. "You won't regret this," he promises, his eyes sparkling with unshed

As Karl outlines the hotel arrangements for Anton, I can't help but feel like we've just embarked on an unpredictable journey. There's no turning back now, but in a strange way, I don't think I've ever been

As we lock up and head out for the night, Karl sidles up next to me. "You realize we're playing with fire here, right?" he