

His Kickass 181

Chapter 181

Abby

I walk into my restaurant the next morning, the scent of fresh coffee and baked bread filling the air. The morning sun casts long beams of light through the windows, but the atmosphere inside feels oddly electric, tense yet filled with a strange and unexpected kind of exhilaration.

It's the day after last night's events, and I'm running on a blend of excitement and worry, my thoughts a toss-up between optimism and that gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Did I make a mistake with Anton? Was it all an elaborate con for free food and a hotel room, or perhaps even a bizarre dream? Most importantly, what if he never actually shows?

As I head toward the kitchen, though, it quickly becomes apparent that something is off. My staff are gathered around the kitchen door, oohing, aahing, and giggling at something going on inside.

"Ethan, what's going on?" I ask as I see my restaurant manager limping his way towards me, his face a mixture of concern and bewilderment.

"Abby, who is this strange French man you've brought into the kitchen? The staff are all worked up," Ethan mutters, leaning against the counter and rubbing his forehead as if trying to make sense of

My eyes light up, my heart racing at the realization. "Yes, Ethan, that's Anton. He's our new temporary hire. A trial run to see how he fits in. Maybe he'll stay

Ethan gives me a wary look but doesn't press further. He knows me too well to question my instincts outright, at least not until we're in

Brushing past Ethan, I make my way through the maze of excited staff. I reach the kitchen doors and push them open, and that's when the tantalizing aroma of something sweet and creamy fills

And then I hear it—laughter. Real, genuine laughter echoing through the air, and I can't help but

“Ah, John, I told you, if your batter has more lumps than a teenager's face, your cheesecake will turn out as uneven as a poorly laid tile

There it is. Anton's thick French accent, which sounds even more delightful in the light of day.

John's almost abrasive laughter booms across the room. “Anton, you have a way with words, man. But watch me—this will be the best damn cheesecake you've ever seen!”

Slipping into the room, my eyes light up. There's Anton, standing near the counter with John while all of the servers watch in awe. They're like a comedy duo, like two puzzle pieces that fit perfectly.

Anton's eyes meet mine, and his face lights up in a brilliant smile. I almost don't even recognize him at first because he's shaved his beard, showered, and someone has given him new clothes, but it's him alright. “Abby! I bet you thought I wouldn't show, hm?”

I can't help but grin back. “It may have crossed my mind, but I've never been more glad to be wrong.”

Anton looks back at the mixing bowl, his hands gracefully twirling the wooden spoon through the batter. “So, are you ready to be dazzled by my culinary expertise? Or should I say, continue to

I chuckle, thoroughly enjoying the spectacle before me. “Go on,

In the midst of all this, I glance over to see Karl standing against the stainless steel counter, his arms folded. His expression is a blend of skepticism and wonder, but I can detect the slightest curl at the corners of his mouth—an almost smile. And that's enough for

“John, how're you holding up?” I call out, deliberately raising my voice to break Karl's

John wipes his hand on a kitchen towel and gestures grandly towards Anton. “Oh, the master here is trying to make a ‘true chef’ out of me. Says my cheesecake is too ‘pedestrian.’ Can you

Anton interjects, "Pedestrian isn't bad, John. It just means you've got room to stroll into something

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I can already taste the financial stress paying a professional like him would put me in if I hired him for good, but I'm already thinking of ways to foot the bill. I still need to give Anton time to prove himself, but if he does, I know I want him to stay. And I think everyone else does, too.

Even Karl, maybe.

"Anton, you promised me a cooking lesson. How about now?" I ask, leaning against the counter and trying not to seem too eager.

He looks up, his eyes twinkling. "Ah, Abby, I was hoping you'd remember," he says in that signature accent of his. There's a newfound sense of excitement in him, and I can tell that the kitchen is really his home. "Yes, yes, of course!"

Within moments, he's setting up the ingredients on a clean countertop: farro mafaldine pasta, assorted mushrooms, various cheeses and spices, and of course the coveted black truffles.

"So, watch closely. First, you want to get the water boiling like it's a hot spring in Iceland," Anton instructs, setting a large pot on the stove.

"Icelandic hot springs, got it," I nod, not really sure where Iceland comes into the picture, but willing to go with it.

We move through the steps. Anton's hands are precise, his instructions detailed yet straightforward, and also oddly couched in every metaphor and analogy possible. I can see John and Karl peeping over from their stations, curious but not wanting to intrude. They pretend to be absorbed in their tasks but I can tell that they're

"A touch of salt in the water," Anton says as he sprinkles it into the pot, "makes it as salty as the sea. Or at least, that's what my grandma used to say. She drowned in a freshwater lake, which I always found

My eyes widen. “Anton...”

“Kidding, kidding,” he says, flicking another pinch of salt into the water with a flourish. Behind me, I can hear John stifle a laugh, and it comes out like he’s being

After we add the pasta, Anton guides me through the delicate process of making the sauce. He sautees the mushrooms carefully. “Treat them like you would a first date, gentle yet with intent,” he says, and now I’m the one who can’t contain my

“How many first dates have you had

“Ah, a gentleman never tells.”

Finally, it’s time to add the part that I’ve most been dreading: the black truffle butter. After carefully simmering almost microscopic pieces of black truffles with lard, Anton slices a small piece, letting it melt into the pan, and the aroma is heavenly.

“So you use lard instead of butter,” I murmur, jotting on my notepad.

Anton nods. “Lard has so much more flavor. Just pray that none of the judges for your competition are vegetarians. Ha!”

After the truffle butter has melted, we combine the pasta with the sauce, stirring it gently until it looks as mouth watering as any dish I’ve seen prepared in this kitchen.

“Et voila! It’s done. Go on, plate it.” Anton steps back, handing me the reins now.

My hands are slightly shaky, the anticipation mingling with a tiny stream of self-doubt. What if I ruin it at the last step? I glance over at John and Karl; they’ve put down their tools now, their full attention

No pressure, right?

I take a deep breath, spoon some pasta onto a dish, and top it off with a sprinkle of parmesan cheese and a sprig of basil. Anton hands me a fork with a

“We should all taste it,” I declare, twirling a piece of pasta around

John and Karl come over, and the three of us dig in. The room falls silent for a moment, and the only sound is the clinking of forks against

The flavors explode in my mouth—earthy, rich, with a hint of decadence from the truffle butter. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever tasted

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Abby

It’s been a few days since Anton first stepped into my restaurant, and already Anton is fitting in perfectly with the team.

That morning when I walked into the restaurant, not knowing whether I had been taken for a fool or not, now seems so distant. Anton and John are running like a well-oiled machine, and the customers have never been happier. I’ve decided that today, at the end of the day, I’m going to offer Anton a full-time position here.

“Abby, table six wants to know if we can make the duck confit gluten-free?” Daisy asks me.

“We can do that. Just make sure to mention it might take a bit longer,” I reply, jotting down an order for the kitchen staff.

Daisy pauses, and I sense she’s gearing up for something more than a simple question about dietary restrictions. “Hey, um, I just wanted to say, Anton’s pretty awesome, isn’t he?”

I glance toward the kitchen, where Anton is in full chef-mode, effortlessly instructing John on how to sear a filet to perfection. His transformation still surprises me—a clean-shaven man in crisp chef whites, as if the person who first walked into my restaurant was a distant relative and not the same

I smile. "Yeah, he is. How's he fitting in

Daisy grins. "I know it's only been a few days, but we all really like him. He's so friendly, and such a gentleman, too. I'm glad that he's a part of our little family

Daisy's words make me grin. "That's fantastic to hear, Daisy. I'm really glad you feel

As if on cue, Karl walks out of the stockroom, his arms laden with bags of flour that seem like they weigh nothing to him. At first, Karl and Anton were like oil

I was surprised that Karl was even willing to entertain the idea of letting Anton work here, let alone going so far as to pay for Anton's lodging. But these past few days, I think that has

"Karl, can you put those down for a sec?" I catch his eye, and he obliges, dropping the bags onto a nearby table with a quizzical look on his face.

"What's up?"

"There's something I think you should do," I say, glancing back at Anton, who is at the moment engrossed in a playful argument with Daisy over the correct pronunciation of 'croissant'.

Karl arches an eyebrow. "And what would that be?"

I nod my head toward Anton. "An apology, maybe?"

Karl looks confused for a second, then his eyes soften with realization. "Ah, right. The whole 'chasing him away like a stray

I nod. "Exactly."

Karl blinks at me for a few moments as though he's about to refuse my request, maybe even tell me that he's done enough by paying for Anton's lodging. But he

Instead, he takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, and walks up to Anton

"Hey, Anton," Karl says, his voice softer than I had imagined. "Can we talk for a

Anton turns around, placing his knife down with a flourish. "Ah, Karl! What can I do you

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"No hard feelings," Anton adds. "Besides, you gave me the fire I needed. Every kitchen needs a little heat, oui?"

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The evening rush is in full swing, and I'm feeling that exhilarating mix of adrenaline and contentment that comes from seeing the restaurant function like a well-oiled machine. The clinking of silverware, the murmur of customers, and the sizzle from the kitchen—it's all music to my ears.

I'm busy updating the specials on our chalkboard when Daisy rushes over, her eyes as wide as saucers. "Abby, there's a guy here. Says he's a journalist? He wants to talk to you."

My gut clenches. "A journalist? Now? Why?"

Daisy shrugs, looking just as confused as I feel. "I don't know, but he's asking some really specific questions. I didn't know what to say."

Taking a deep breath, I put down the chalk and head to the front of the restaurant, where a man with a five o'clock shadow and wearing a crumpled suit is flipping through a notepad. He looks up, his eyes sharp, and extends a hand before I even have the chance to

"Richard Kohler. I'm with the Daily Dispatch. You're Abby,

“Yes, that’s me. What can I do

Richard glances around, his eyes taking in the interior of my restaurant, the pristine table settings, the wall decor, the soft lighting. It feels like he’s trying to see through the walls, and I’m not sure if I like

“So, Abby, word has gotten out that you’ve hired a homeless person as a chef in your kitchen. Care to

His tone is casual, but his eyes are predatory. Suddenly, all of this feels like one big trap.

“Yes, I hired Anton,” I say cautiously. “And he’s been an excellent addition to the team. He’s more than qualified for the job.”

Richard scribbles something in his notebook, not breaking eye contact. “Interesting choice, don’t you think? Hiring someone off the streets. Doesn’t that concern you, in terms of hygiene and the like?:

I feel my face flush. This guy’s getting under my skin, but I have to keep it together. “Anton is fully certified and has been trained in food safety. He’s as professional as anyone in this industry.”

“But still, a homeless man, working with food. What will your customers think?”

My heart starts to pound in my chest. This is getting out of control. “I would hope my customers trust my judgment. After all, the quality of the food and service speaks

Richard raises an eyebrow, clearly not satisfied. “And what about the other staff? How do they feel about working with someone who was, quite literally, a...

My mouth opens, but words escape me. He’s hitting me from all angles, and I can feel the room

Just then, Karl appears from the kitchen, apron dusted with flour, eyes sharp as a hawk’s. He’s been watching from the sidelines, and I can tell he’s had

“Alright, that's enough. Time for you to leave,” Karl says, his voice

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Abby

The restaurant door clicks shut behind Karl, sealing off the outside world and its nosy journalists. Karl brushes off his hands as if he's just dealt with a minor annoyance, but his eyes meet mine, full of concern.

“You okay, Abby?” he asks, walking over to where I'm standing.

“I'm fine,” I say, even though my pulse is still racing. “Just a little shaken up. I didn't expect that.”

Karl sighs and leans against the counter. “Welcome to the future, Abby. The more successful you become, the more people will come after you, trying to crush your spirit and ruin your reputation.”

His words, although harsh, are true. I should have expected that something like this would happen if I hired a homeless person. Not everyone is as understanding as the people who work in my restaurant, I guess.

“Yeah,” I admit, playing nervously with the edge of my apron. “I just hope it doesn't affect the restaurant. You know how easily people can be swayed.”

He nods, his gaze still intently on me. “But you also know that people are already talking about how much better the food is, all thanks to Anton. You're just getting started, Abby. You're gonna knock 'em

Something in the way Karl says it, the sincerity in his eyes, washes over me. I want to believe him. No, I need to believe

“I hope you're right, Karl. I really

Karl nods and offers me a slight smile. I pause, my eyes lingering on him. “And, um, thank you for apologizing to Anton earlier, by the way. It means a lot to

His eyes soften, just a little, enough to take the edge off his usually stern gaze. "I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy, Abby. You know

My cheeks flush; I can feel the warmth spread across my face. Karl saying that, in that tone, with those brown eyes locked onto mine, brings back a rush of memories

Suddenly, it's just the two of us, and we're married again, standing in our old kitchen. Back before all of the appointments and the Alpha duties, back before the black hair and the modest clothing and the arguments.

Back when things were simple. Back when things were easy.

"I appreciate it, Karl," I manage to say, clearing my throat. "But promise me something?"

Karl smirks. "Anything."

I pause for a moment, hoping that he doesn't see the blush that's creeping into my cheeks. "Just promise that you'll be kind and willing to make amends with people. Not just for me, but because it's the right thing to do."

He looks at me like he's trying to read the layers of meaning behind my words. After a moment, he nods, seeming to understand. "I promise."

For a fleeting second, I wish he could make up with Chloe, but the thought slips away as quickly as it comes. Chloe made her choice, too. She chose to walk away, to not give Karl

Relationships are a two-way street, and you can't force someone to walk down a path they've chosen

I watch as Karl walks away. His fading form holds my attention, the way that his arms bulge against his sleeves, the way he strides so confidently back into the kitchen as if he's been doing this

For a moment, just a moment, I picture the two of us together again. More thoughts flood into my mind, thoughts that I probably shouldn't be entertaining, and I have to busy myself with wrapping silverware to make them go

God, I think to myself, shaking my head. It's been too long since I got laid. I'm starting to go off the deep end

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"Here we are," I announce, gesturing at the controlled chaos around me.

Mr. Thompson steps in, his eyes moving critically from the prep stations to the line cooks and finally to Anton, who is still engrossed in his soup. His gaze lingers on the French chef for a few moments, hesitating, before landing on me. "Busy today, huh?"

"Yes, very," I respond. "Business has been good, and we aim to keep it that way."

"I see cleanliness is a priority as always," he observes, his gaze lingering on Anton once more.

I can't shake the feeling that I—or rather, Anton—am being tested, but I plaster a smile on my face and nod. "Of course, Mr. Thompson. We always get top ratings on our health reports."

After a few more moments of looking around, Mr. Thompson nods in a satisfied manner and follows me to the door. But once we're in the hallway, alone, his facade seems to drop ever so slightly.

"Abby, I'm sure you know that I'm not just here for a visit," he says, his voice low."

I swallow, deciding to feign ignorance.

Mr. Thompson sighs. "Listen, I disregard tabloid journalism just as much as the next guy," he says gently. "But that article... Well, it's stirring the pot, to say the least. Is it true? Your new chef

My heart sinks a little at his words. This was exactly what I feared, but I'm not about to lie. "Yes," I say, holding my chin up. "Anton is homeless, but he's an excellent chef. We're happy to have him. He's passionate, not just about the kitchen, but about getting his life back in order. And I'm glad to serve as a stepping stone for him in that

Mr. Thompson pauses for a moment, clearly moved by my little speech. But there's also something else behind his eyes, something that smacks

"That is very sweet, Abby," he says. "But also a liability. I hope you

"How so?"

He sighs. "You're a finalist for the competition, which puts you under our brand. An incident like this reflects not just on you, but on the competition itself."

His words make my stomach lurch, but all I can do is keep holding my chin high and hope for the best: that I won't be disqualified, not just over Anton, but also over the emails that I was privy to, which Mr. Thompson thankfully hasn't mentioned yet.

"I understand that, Mr. Thompson."

"So you see why it's crucial for you to maintain not just a clean kitchen, but a clean image. I recommend you publish an article to clear the air. Make a statement before anything else can escalate."

"I've been considering that," I admit. "It's just—"

"Just what?"

"Well, the situation is delicate, Mr. Thompson. I'm afraid that a journalist might portray it as something that

“The complications of fame,” he says, smiling wryly. “You wanted success, and all the challenges that come with it. This is one

“I understand, Mr. Thompson, and I’ll address

“See that you do. The competition cannot afford a scandal, and neither can you, I

“You’re right.”

“Excellent,” he says, satisfied. “Then, I’ll be looking forward to reading your

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Abby

The restaurant is closed for the evening, and it’s about time that I gather my team for an impromptu meeting.

“Listen up, everyone. I know it’s been a long day, but we need to talk about something important.”

My eyes scan over the faces of my staff: Anton, the homeless chef who turns out to be a culinary genius; Daisy, our beloved waitress who once worked the streets; Ethan, a war veteran with a limp who has become my trusted restaurant manager; John, a single father with a past alcohol problem; and finally Karl, my ex-husband turned line cook.

Anton sets down his ladle and wipes his hands on his apron. “Is everything okay, Abby?”

“It’s about that article,” I hesitantly begin, fully aware that I’m opening a can of worms. “People are talking, and we need to be prepared for whatever comes next.”

Daisy looks up, her eyes narrowing. “So what are you saying? We should prepare for

“Not exactly, but I think we should be cautious,” I say. “I mean, come on, let’s be real: Anton, you’re homeless. Daisy, you have a past you’re trying to move away from. Ethan, you’ve got your own set of scars,

Ethan suddenly cuts me off, a fierce look in his eyes that I’ve never seen before. “Are you trying so say that you’re ashamed of

“No!” The word bursts out of me, and I feel my face flush. “I’m not ashamed. You all are the best team I could’ve ever asked for. But I have to publish an article before the

Daisy leans against the counter, shooting me a sideways look. “What are you suggesting? That we put on a show? Make the place seem more ‘normal’, like we’re not a bunch of

“I don’t know,” I admit. “Maybe it would be good to be proactive about it, control the narrative a bit.”

Ethan chuckles darkly. “What are we gonna do? Put out a press release saying, ‘Hey, come to our restaurant; our staff is just as messed up as you are?’”

I laugh despite myself. “Well, when you put it that way, it does sound terrible, doesn’t it?”

Karl steps forward, locking his eyes on mine. “So what’s the real issue, Abby? Are you scared of losing business, or are you scared of what people will think of you?”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. Am I trying to protect my business, or my reputation?

“Both,” I finally confess. “But mostly, I’m scared that if people label us as haphazard or unconventional right off the bat, they won’t give us a chance. People are judgmental. And all your talents—your gifts—will be overlooked.”

Anton nods slowly, taking my words in. “Miss Abby has a point. A restaurant is still a business. But perhaps there is a way to have the best of both worlds; to have our cake and eat

John nods, adding, "We've all fought hard to be who we are, to get to where we are. Let's not lose that now. Not for

"I agree," Daisy says, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes. "People will talk no matter what. We can't control that. What we can control is the quality of our work, our food, and

I look at each of them, and as I do, I realize that they're right. Nothing will ever convince people that we're perfect, and why would we want it that way? Why would I want it that

My eyes finally land on Karl, and the sparkle in his eyes steels my resolve. "So we're all in agreement? We stay true to ourselves, come what

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The meeting disperses, and my staff go their separate ways. Karl lingers, shuffling his feet in a way that makes me think he has something on his mind.

"Abby, do you have a moment?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"If you're worried about the article, I can help you find a good journalist. Someone who can capture the essence of the place, the people," he says.

I'm touched by his offer. "That's really kind of you, Karl. Thanks."

He clears his throat. "I could walk you home. We could talk more about it."

I hesitate for a moment, considering. Then, I nod. "Alright, let's walk."

We leave the restaurant, locking up for the night. The street is mostly quiet, a few cars passing by, and a low buzz of activity from the nearby bars. The air is cool, a bit crisp, but

“You know, I’ve been really impressed with how the restaurant is doing,” Karl says, breaking

“Oh?” I can't keep the surprise out of my

“Yeah. I mean, I remember being so pissed off when you entered that cook-off. Thought you were going to ruin our chances of going to the Alpha party together. But look at you now, making headlines. I’m sorry that I ever acted like that. I should have been

I look at him, shocked and a bit touched by his candidness. “That’s really sweet of you to say,

He shrugs, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Just stating facts. I’m proud of you, Abby. Really, I

“You have no idea how much that means to me,” I reply. “And I’m glad you came back, after everything that happened. So I guess in a way, I’m also sorry—sorry for storming out on you back at the house.”

He sighs. “I’m more surprised you let me back, especially after what happened with Adam. Thanks for forgiving me.”

I stop walking, looking him square in the eye. “Let’s get one thing clear: I haven’t entirely forgiven you for that. And I don’t know if I ever will. But I do understand that your intentions, misguided as they were, came from a place of caring.”

Karl nods, solemn. “I get that. And I mean it when I say I’ll never pull a stunt like that again.”

“I’m glad to call you my friend, Karl, after everything we’ve been through,” I say, extending my hand.

He looks at me, then down at my hand, and for a moment, I think I see a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. But then it’s gone, and he takes my hand, giving it a firm shake.

“Me too, Abby. Me

We resume our walk, nearing my apartment building. "Speaking of friends," Karl says, "Have you talked to Chloe

My face falls. "No, I haven't. She won't return my calls. I've pretty much given up at

"Don't give up," he says firmly. "Chloe will come around. If I have to, I'll make sure of

We pause outside my apartment building. There's a silence between us, neither of us knowing what to say. But then, out of nowhere, I find myself lunging toward him. I wrap my arms around him in a tight hug, burying my face in his chest. He stiffens beneath my touch at first, clearly just as surprised as

"Thank you, Karl. For

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Abby

It's a short walk to Chloe's apartment, but it seems to drag on forever as my mind whirls with possibilities. What will I say to Chloe? Will she even want to speak to me? What if this truly is the end of our friendship?

When I finally reach her door, my hand hesitates in the air, hovering over the doorbell. This needs to be done, I remind myself, and I press the button.

The door swings open, and I'm met with Chloe's look of surprise. There's a glass of wine in her slightly shaking hand, and her eyes are wide.

"Abby? What are you doing here?" she asks, her voice as cold as ice.

"I know it's late, but I needed to talk to you," I respond. "Please. Are you busy?"

Her eyes flicker. There's a flash of hesitation there. "I'm not sure if I want to talk, Abby."

“It’s important,” I insist. “It’s about the restaurant, the cook-off, everything. I need

She opens her mouth, maybe to say something, maybe to invite me in, but then her eyes narrow. “Are you still talking to

I blink. “Yes, Karl’s been helping me

“Then this conversation is

The door starts to close, but I wedge my foot in the gap, a sudden burst of desperate courage. “Chloe, please. Can’t you just hear

Chloe looks down at my foot, then back up at me. “You should leave,

“No,” I say firmly. My voice shakes, but I lock eyes with her. “I won’t go. Not until we’ve talked this through. We owe each other that much, don’t we?”

There’s a long pause, and for a moment, I think she’s going to slam the door on my foot. But then she sighs, steps back, and pulls the door open wider. “Fine. Come in.”

As I step inside, the smell of Chloe’s apartment envelops me—vanilla-scented candles and the lingering aroma of dinner. It’s familiar, comforting, and utterly gut-wrenching, given the circumstances.

“So?” Chloe says, putting her free hand on her hip and leaning against the wall. “Talk. Now.”

I take a deep breath, gathering my thoughts. “Look, Chloe, I understand why you’re upset with me. And I can’t pretend I’ve made all the right choices. But shutting me out like this—it’s not fair.”

She snorts. “Not fair, Abby? You want to talk about fair? It’s not fair that you’ve put everyone at risk by bringing a... a lunatic into the restaurant!”

“Karl?” I hiss, exasperated. “He’s not a lunatic, Chloe. And regardless, I need you.

“Yeah, friends,” Chloe scoffs, taking a bitter sip of her wine. “You’re right, Abby. We are friends. And sometimes, when your friend keeps making bad life decisions over and over, it’s time for some

I wince. “I know, I know I’ve made bad decisions. But I’m trying to make it right. That’s why

Chloe shakes her head. “Clearly you’re not actually trying to make it right if you’re still

I sigh. “Karl has made mistakes, and I’m not defending that. He was truly awful for a long, long time. But you need to understand that we all make mistakes, Chloe. And we’re all trying to get better, day by

“Oh, is that so? And your way of ‘getting better’ is to stick by your horrific ex-husband?” she

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“You both need to listen to me,” I begin, and instantly, Chloe’s eyes flash.

“No one is going to listen to you,” Chloe hisses. “You need to leave.”

“Let her talk, Chloe,” Leah interjects, her voice softer than I expected.

Shooting Leah a thankful look, I take a deep breath and steel myself. “Guys, you need to give Karl another chance. He’s helped me so much lately, and I’m tired of pretending that he’s still just some jerk with no feelings.”

Leah raises an eyebrow. “Helped you? Abby, the guy’s trouble. He’s toxic. He’s—”

“He’s also put his life on the line for me,” I cut in, my voice urgent. “He almost got himself shot, multiple times, over some stupid truffles I needed for the competition. He’s been here through it all, putting aside his own

Chloe's eyes flicker, but her voice is unyielding. "That doesn't even begin to excuse everything he's done. He divorced you over bullshit, Abby. And he bribed Adam into breaking up with you. Hell if Adam was gay! Karl would have done it

"Yes, maybe he would have," I agree. "And yes, maybe it doesn't excuse everything. But it adds layers, Chloe. Layers to a person you've filed away as a simple problem. We all have our baggage, our bad decisions. Lord knows I've made mine, and you've

The room goes quiet, the tension so palpable I could cut it with a knife. Then Leah speaks, cautiously, as if testing the water. "So, you're saying we should just accept Karl because you think

I shake my head. "No, Leah, I'm saying that it's my choice to spend time with him, to see if he's really trying to change or not. What I can't accept is an ultimatum from my best friends because they disagree with my life. That's not friendship. That's control."

Chloe's face is unreadable. "And if your choices put you at risk? What then, Abby? Do we just stand by and watch?"

"Would you rather cut me out?" I retort. "Would that make it easier for you? Friendship isn't just about the easy times, the wine nights and the double dates. It's about the messy parts, too. It's about standing by each other, even when we don't always agree with each other's choices."

Chloe looks down, her eyes tracing the reddened rim of her wine glass. "This is different, Abby. This isn't just us disagreeing with your life choices. This is us being genuinely worried for you and feeling like there's no other way to make you see logic."

"If you're so worried," I say, "then ditching me when I need you the most isn't going to help anything."

Leah sighs, stepping closer. "But you can't blame us for wanting to distance ourselves," she says, although I can sense in her voice that she doesn't even fully believe her own words. "We have our own lives to

“That’s true,” I admit. “I never meant to put your mental health in danger. But don’t make me choose, guys. Don’t make me choose between my best friends and a life I need to figure out for myself. And if you can’t do that, then maybe we shouldn’t be

For a moment, nobody speaks. The room feels frozen, but the ice might just

Finally, almost imperceptibly,