

His Kickass 201

Chapter 201

I swallow. So this is it: the article. They had said it would be a surprise last night, and I didn't know what that meant at the time. I couldn't be there for the interview because of the fire, so I have no idea how it went.

"Go on," Ethan says. "Read it."

My heart hammers in my chest as I pick up the paper. Unfolding it, my eyes lock onto the headline: "Rising Star Chef Abby Reinvents Culinary Arts." Below it is a picture of me in the kitchen, captured mid-laugh, looking genuinely happy.

"Hey," I laugh, holding it up. "Who took this picture?"

"Oh, I did," Daisy says, checking her nails nonchalantly. "Snuck it a couple weeks ago, actually."

"Why?" I ask, laughing.

Daisy shrugs. "Ethan asked me to take some pictures for the website. Turns out this one had a better use

I scan through the paragraphs, my eyes soaking in each word. The journalist has painted a vivid picture, not just of me, but of my entire team and how we work together to create

There are quotes from Leah about my leadership, and from John about my innovative dishes. Chloe's snarky wit is captured in print too, adding humor and liveliness to the

Finally, the article comes to a close with a final line that sets my heart on

"All in all, Abby's restaurant—La Belle Vie Bistro—is more than just a restaurant. It's

As I finish reading, I feel tears brimming in my eyes. It's better than I could've ever hoped for. My eyes lift to meet my team, and I'm shocked to see that more have gathered: John, Anton, and yes, even Karl. They're all standing around me, expectant looks on their

"Oh my god, guys, this is incredible," I say, my voice wavering. "Did you all really say these things about me?"

Chloe shrugs, a soft smile on her lips. "Well, someone had to tell the world how amazing you are."

John adds, "And it's all true, Abby. We couldn't let those lies that those other 'journalists' wrote be the only thing that people see about you. They should see the truth."

"We all chipped in," Ethan chimes in. "Little things. Tidying up, making sure the kitchen looked extra clean, giving the journalist the best food we've ever made. We wanted this to be perfect for you."

I can't help myself. I stand up and hold my arms out, tears streaming down my cheeks unabashedly. Everyone piles in for a big group hug, and in this moment, I feel my heart do a flip. "I don't know what to say. I'm just so grateful to have all of you in my life. Thank you for making this so special."

When we all pull apart, I wipe the tears from my eyes. When I lift my gaze again, I'm met with Karl—he's standing there, his hands in his pockets, a soft look in his brown eyes. I feel like I could melt, and I have to quickly look away to hide the blush creeping into

"Really, guys," I say, addressing the group. "Thank you. You know what? Free meals on me tonight. We can all go out."

My announcement is met with cheers. In this moment, I feel so light, like I could float

But as the team scatters and returns to their work, I'm quickly grounded again as my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and feel myself grow pale. It's a call from Mr. Thompson. Did he like

Stepping into my office, I

“Mr. Thompson,” I breathe, clutching my necklace with one hand. “How

Chapter 202

Abby

It’s halfway to closing time, and my desk is scattered with index cards. My computer is open to an email from Mr. Thompson outlining some of the potential questions I may be asked during the interview. I’ve written them down, along with my potential responses on the back of each card, so I can practice.

I want to be prepared. I have to be prepared. This interview is the beginning of everything; it’s the deciding factor behind whether I’ll garner positive or negative attention.

And although the article went well in the end, I need to play it safe. I’ve already got enough trouble when it comes to my restaurant’s reputation, and I want to make sure everything runs smoothly.

Taking a deep breath, I pick one of the index cards up. “What inspired you to become a chef?” it reads. I turn to face the mirror hanging on the wall, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

“Growing up,” I start, talking to my reflection, “my mother’s kitchen was always the heart of our home... No, that’s not right.” I pause, flipping the card over to read my pre-written response. “My mother’s kitchen was my favorite room in the—”

Just then, the door bursts open. I jump, a startled gasp escaping my lips as the index card slips from my fingers and flutters to the floor.

“Abby, I was wondering if you—” Karl stops mid-sentence, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror. “Am I interrupting something?”

A blush instantly colors my cheeks. “No, no, not at all,” I stammer, hurriedly snatching the fallen index card from the floor and hiding it behind my back, as if that would somehow make the situation less

Karl arches an eyebrow, his eyes dropping to my hands, now awkwardly positioned behind me. “Hiding something?”

“Me? Hide something? Never!” I force a chuckle, my face heating up even more.

For a moment, he just stands there, eyeing me curiously. Then, in one fluid motion, he steps forward, snatching the hidden index card from behind my back.

“Ah,” he says, reading the question out loud. “‘What inspired you to become a chef?’ Preparing for the interview, are we?”

I groan, rolling my eyes dramatically. “Give that back, you thief!”

He chuckles, holding the card just out of reach, his eyes lighting up with mischief as I try and fail to jump and grab it from him. “So, what’s the answer?” he asks. “I’m curious.”

“Fine,” I huff, my face redder than a beet. “I was practicing, okay? I want to be prepared for all of the questions, no matter how trivial.”

He grins, a teasing glint in his eyes. “Oh, I see. You’ve always been a

“Maybe I am,” I retort, feeling a sense of playfulness wash over my initial embarrassment. “What’s wrong with being prepared?”

Karl finally hands the index card back to me, his eyes softening. “Absolutely nothing. Your preparedness is something that I’ve always admired, actually.”

The blush creeps back into my cheeks. It’s only now that I realize how close we’re standing, and how our fingers brush when I take the card back from him. It sends a shiver through my body, and for a moment, I can pick up his scent. It makes me feel weak.

“Um, thanks,” I murmur, tucking the card back into the pile.

Chapter 203

My eyes sparkle with intrigue. “Okay. You’re on.”

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Eventually, the last of the staff say their goodbyes, flicking off the lights and turning over chairs on tables. I'm almost tempted to do the same, to call it a night and retreat into the comfort of my home, but then Karl re-enters my office, holding two wine glasses and a bottle of my favorite Merlot in his hands.

"Ready?" he asks, setting the bottle down on my desk with a soft thud.

I glance at the bottle, then back at him. "Wine? Are you trying to get me drunk before my big interview?"

Karl chuckles, pulling the cork out of the bottle with a satisfying pop. "Of course not. Just thought it'd help you relax, get you into the right mindset. Besides, I'm thirsty."

"I don't know about you, but alcohol doesn't exactly help me think clearer," I say, but I'm already reaching for one of the glasses he's filling."

He hands me the glass, our fingers brushing briefly. "And that's why it's just a glass. Or two."

"Fine," I say, sipping the wine. "So how does this work? You ask me questions, and I pretend like it's the real

"Exactly," he confirms, taking his own sip. "Ready for your first

I nod. "Fire away."

He picks up one of the index cards from my desk, skimming it before looking back at me. "Alright. Tell me about a challenging situation you've faced in the kitchen and how you handled it."

I'm halfway through my answer when he interrupts me. "Wait. You're not taking this seriously enough. Stand up. Pretend like you're actually at the interview."

I set down my glass, a little exasperated. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” he insists.

With a sigh, I stand, suddenly feeling like I’m on a stage. Karl also stands, a serious look on his face. He pauses for a moment, chewing his lips, before grabbing a lint roller off of a shelf and holding it out to me like a microphone. “Better,” he says with a smirk.

“Seriously, Karl? A lint roller?”

He chuckles. “Trust me, when a microphone is being shoved in your face, you’ll be glad you had the practice.”

I huff. “Fine,” I say, starting over, detailing a kitchen crisis involving a burnt turkey and a vegan substitute. He listens intently, nodding every now and then.

“Good,” he says when I finish. “Next question. What inspired you to become a

This time, my answer flows easily. I talk about my mom, the smell of cinnamon and sugar filling our home every Sunday, the sense of family and togetherness that came from simple meals shared. When I’m finished, there’s a warm smile on my face, and it’s not even

Karl smiles, clearly pleased. “See? You’re a natural at

Chapter 204

Abby

My cheeks flush a deep shade of scarlet as Karl’s question hangs in the air, an unspoken tension filling the room.

I suddenly feel very aware of every minute detail: the way the soft glow from the desk lamp casts a shadow on his face, the almost-empty wine glasses on the edge of my cluttered desk, the nervous drumming of my own fingers against my thigh.

“Um... Wow,” I stammer with a wry chuckle, my tongue suddenly feeling thick in my mouth. “That’s quite a loaded question, Karl. I’ll admit I haven’t even thought about it. I’m sorry.”

I half expect him to get upset again like he did the last time, but much to my surprise, Karl’s lips curl into a slight grin, a glimmer of amusement dancing in his eyes. “Oh, come on, Abby. I was just teasing you. You know, putting you on the spot. That’s what interviewers do, isn’t it?”

He picks up his wine glass and takes a casual sip, as though he hadn’t just completely thrown me off balance.

“I know, I know,” I murmur, reaching for my own glass. The wine feels warm as it trickles down my throat, loosening a knot of tension I didn’t even realize was there. “But you know what? It’s not just any date we’re talking about. I did promise you, after all. I lost the bet, remember?”

His eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, the playful mask he wears slips, replaced by genuine surprise. “Did you just—?”

“Yes.” I cut him off, a sudden burst of courage—perhaps fueled by the Merlot—filling me. “Look, if by some miracle I win this competition and have to cater the Alpha party, and that keeps me from being your

I hesitate, weighing my words carefully before letting them spill out. “So, I’ll go on a real date with you. A full, real date, Karl. Anywhere you

The room falls silent, save for the ticking of the wall clock and the distant hum of the city outside, still lively as

Karl looks genuinely taken aback, his eyes widening for a fraction of a second before his ever-present composure settles back in. But it’s enough for me to know that my words have had an impact, and for the first time tonight, I feel like I’m the one who has managed to catch him off

“Abby, you don't have

“No,” I interrupt, placing my glass back on the desk with more force than necessary. “I made a promise, Karl. And maybe it's the wine talking or maybe it's the fact that my life is one big ball of chaos right now and I just need something stable to hold onto. But I want to keep that promise.”

I look him square in the eye, my gaze unwavering. “So, there it is. A real date, anywhere you want. If I win the

Karl shakes his head. “Abby, listen—”

“No, you listen,” I say, feeling invigorated by the wine or maybe by the electricity running through my veins. “I made a promise. I plan on sticking to it.”

But the look on Karl's face gives me pause. There's a long silence before he finally speaks, and when he does, I feel my heart wrench in ways that I never expected in a million years.

“Abby, I...”

Another silence falls over the room. This time, I feel like I'm turning upside down; I know this look. It's a look I've seen a thousand times. A look that comes right before he's about to drop a bomb.

“Actually, there's something I need to talk to you about,” he starts, setting his empty wine glass on the cluttered desk. He looks at me intently, and I can tell that whatever he's about to say is serious.

“Alright, lay it on me,” I say, forcing a smile and trying to lighten the mood. He doesn't return the grin. In fact, his expression grows more somber.

He takes a deep breath. “Listen, um... After the Alpha party, I have to go back. To my pack,” he says, looking down for a moment before meeting my eyes again. “I've been away too long. There's a sense of dissatisfaction growing among my pack members. I can't ignore it anymore. I have responsibilities, Abby.”

I feel my mouth open in shock, then quickly close it again. I know Karl's first and foremost responsibility is to be an Alpha, that his pack needs him, but I guess in all of my selfishness over the cook-off, I never really considered the implications. That he'd have to leave. That he wouldn't always be here, in this restaurant, with his sleeves rolled up and his eyes ablaze with the fire of the kitchen.

"You're leaving?" The words escape before I can stop them, tinged with a sadness I wasn't expecting to feel.

He nods, his eyes apologetic but resolute. "I'm sorry, but I have to. I can't be an absentee Alpha. It's starting to affect how my pack sees me, and that's not something I can afford. Plus, I miss it. I miss the responsibilities, the connection, the sense of

"But what about the restaurant? What about helping me?" My voice sounds needy even to my own ears, and I cringe, but I can't help it. The idea of navigating this chaos without Karl suddenly feels more overwhelming than I ever thought it would be. God, how did I let it get to this point?

He leans a little closer, placing his hands on my shoulders. "I think you're ready, Abby. You've always been ready. You just needed a little push, that's all."

My eyes meet his, searching for any sign of insincerity, but all I see is genuine feelings. And it both warms and breaks my

Chapter 205

Karl

I was sitting in my apartment one night after work, flipping through N****x with a glass of whiskey in my hand, when my phone buzzed on the coffee table. Picking it up, I let out a soft sigh. It was Marcus, and it was late. It wasn't like him to call this late at night. We had only just spoken a couple of days ago, at Abby's clean-up party, too.

"Marcus, what's the matter?"

I could hear him sigh through the phone. "Karl, you might have to pack your bags and come home. Sooner rather than later."

I frowned. "Last week you told me things were stable. What changed?"

"It's your brother. The doctor came by. He's showing signs of improvement, Karl. Doc says it might be just a matter of weeks before he wakes up."

My eyes widened slightly, and I sat up. I knew that he was improving, but I didn't think it would happen so soon. "Weeks? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I asked him twice to confirm. He's showing responses, moving in his sleep. Vital signs are improving. It's not certain, but it's possible."

A long pause filled the air. I wasn't sure what to say. My brother waking up should have been good news, but Marcus and I both knew the implications; that my brother might want to take back control of the pack when he woke up. And I wasn't about to give up so easily.

"Is that it?" I asked, maybe a little more bitter than I intended.

He sighed. "Listen, the pack is restless, Karl. Your absence is making people question your leadership. And your brother waking up? They're saying maybe it's time for the 'true Alpha' to come back

Anger shot through my veins. "The true Alpha? Are you kidding me? I've been leading the pack in his

"And I've been defending you, Karl, but I'm just one guy. With you gone, people are talking. You've been chasing after Abby and they think you're neglecting your pack. You know how gossip

His words stung, but the shame that followed hurt more. I had been preoccupied with Abby, I knew that. Marcus was just voicing what I had been ignoring for too

"So what are you suggesting, Marcus? Should I abandon everything here and come

"I'm suggesting that you think about your priorities, Karl. Your brother's recovery could be a game-changer. If he wakes up and you're not here to navigate the transition, the pack's loyalty might

"I get it. I really do. I've been neglecting my duties. But I've got commitments here too, Marcus. Abby has the cook-off next week and I need to be here

Marcus sighed. "The cook-off?"

"I know how it sounds," I said, "but she's important to me, too. I can't just

"Karl, listen," Marcus said, "I'm not trying to sway you one way or the other. I'm just telling you the news."

"I know," I murmured. "I'm grateful for your honesty, though, Marcus. You know you're a good Beta to me."

"Thanks, Karl," Marcus replied.

I sighed then and passed my hand over my face. "Alright. Here's what I'll do: I'll finish the cook-off, and then I'll come back home. One week. I won't make any more commitments here until everything's settled with the pack. How does that sound?"

"Sounds like a plan," Marcus said, though he still seemed skeptical. "Just remember, Karl, the clock's ticking."

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Abby and I are standing in her office, and I've just broken the news. Her wine-stained lips twitch into the slightest frown, and I can tell that she's on the verge of tears. She quickly looks away, not realizing that I can still see the reflection of her face in the mirror.

"Alright," she says quietly. "So, after the Alpha party, you'll go home."

“Sort of,” I answer. “I’ll be heading home right after the cook-off, actually.”

Her eyes widen in the mirror. She still doesn’t realize that I can see her, she’s too busy staring down at

“But you just told me it would be after the Alpha

“I’ll come back for the Alpha party. But after that, I have to go home. Permanently. I’m

A flicker of what looks like despair crosses her face, but she quickly hides it with a tight-lipped smile and turns back around, her posture stiff. “I understand, Karl. Being an Alpha comes first, and you have responsibilities. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me and

Her words are laced with sincerity, but my wolf senses the thinly veiled disappointment that she’s trying to hide. I know it hurts her, and it’s short notice. My chest tightens at the thought of leaving her, but I have no choice. I’ve been shirking my duties for too long now. Marcus was right; I need to go home. I need to be

I only came here to get closer to her, to show her that I’ve changed. And I think I’ve accomplished both of those things to a certain extent. But I’m still an Alpha. I’ve been irresponsible, and it’s time for me to focus on my

Abby’s eyes soften as she looks up at me finally. “You know, I’ve always admired your dedication to your pack. I hope you

Her words make my stomach feel lighter. “Thanks, Abby. That means a

There’s a charged silence between us. For a moment, I want to kiss her. But then the night of the party flashes through my mind, and I know I can’t. I can’t be rejected again,

Chapter 206

Abby

It's been raining cats and dogs all morning, but I'm too excited to care. All I can think about is the anticipation buzzing in my chest as I make my way up the walkway to the upscale studio where the interviews for the cook-off are being held.

"Hello," I say from under my umbrella to a security guard leaning against a post, looking bored. "Is this the right entrance for the interviews?"

"Yup," he says, nodding, and gestures to a set of double doors behind him. "Head in there, take a left, and follow the hallway to the end."

"Thank you."

As I step through the doors, my heart rises into my throat. It's all I can do to swallow it and force my feet to carry me forward.

I've never been on television before. This is going to be both exciting and terrifying, and probably more terrifying than the former. But, thankfully, I've arrived early and I feel prepared. I've spent the past week practicing for my questions, and I have my answers ready to go. All that's left now is to get this interview over with, and then tomorrow is the

The cook-off.

I can't believe it's already almost here. In less than twenty-four hours, I'll be walking into another television studio where I'll be competing in front of a live audience. Am I just as prepared for that as I am for this interview?

I really, really hope so.

But at the same time, aside from the interview and the cook-off, there's another knot of dread forming in my stomach—this time, thanks to Karl.

He'll be leaving after tomorrow, only returning in a few weeks for the Alpha party, and then leaving again.

I think, in a weird way, I took his presence for granted. I feel a little selfish because of that. All this time, he's been putting aside his extremely important Alpha duties for me. And I have so much to show for it. But what does he have? Wasted time? I hope it's been more than that for him, but I have no way of knowing.

Suddenly, I'm pulled back to reality. Crisp lighting, a monochrome palette, and a faint scent of hairspray fill the air as I walk down the hall, my heels clicking on the marble floor—everything about it screams professionalism.

I'm then greeted by an assistant and directed to a waiting area that looks more like a beauty salon, complete with hair and makeup stations.

I glance around and spot the three other contestants—a tall, rugged man with a European air about him, an older-looking man who doesn't even glance my way, and an impeccably dressed man with black hair and a disdainful expression that seems glued to his face. They're both in the process of having their hair done, and a makeup artist waits nearby.

I sit in the empty chair next to the black-haired man introducing myself with a polite smile. "Hi, I'm Abby," I say, holding my hand

"Daniel," he says, holding his hand out without lifting his gaze from the magazine in his lap. I shake it, feeling all too awkward as his hand practically crushes mine. When I pull away, I feel oddly violated in a strange sort of

I clear my throat. "Nice to meet you. I'm the owner of La Belle Vie Bistro in

Daniel smirks as if he just heard a good joke. "La Belle Vie Bistro? Isn't that the place that got famous for hiring a homeless man?"

My eyebrows shoot up involuntarily. "You mean Anton? Yes, he's an incredible chef."

Chapter 207

He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Frederick. Pleasure."

“Same to you,” I respond with a smile.

Frederick pauses, then licks his lips and speaks. “It’s making some waves, you know. Your reputation about your staff. You should consider yourself fortunate if it doesn’t affect your ratings.”

My fingers curl around the armrests of the chair. “If it comes to that, I’ll deal with it. But honestly, I’m not worried.”

Daniel arches an eyebrow. “You must be quite brazen, then, to not worry about such things.”

I grind my teeth, forcing a smile on my face. “And what about you, Daniel? Where’s your restaurant?”

Suddenly, the older man who has been silent all along speaks up, still not looking my way. “Daniel owns a two-star restaurant. I’m Bryan, by the way.”

Daniel smirks, and I feel a twinge of envy. In the culinary world, there are three star ratings: one being a basic restaurant, two being an Alpha hotspot, and three? Well, those are reserved for the best of the best.

La Belle Vie Bistro’s reputation has been slowly climbing lately, but we’re still one star. Becoming a two-star restaurant feels like a distant dream right now, and it’s something that only one woman chef has ever accomplished in this country. I have faith that it will come eventually, but not for a while. Star ratings aren’t handed out like

However, I manage to shake my envy off quickly. After all, stars aren’t everything. Daniel’s attitude, on the other hand, leaves much to be desired.

I guess I expected rivalry in this competition, but not like this. I feel the intense need to prove him wrong—to show him that I deserve to be here as much as anyone else, if not

The makeup artist gestures for me to come over, and I willingly oblige, giving myself a chance to be separated from Daniel and his needling comments. As I walk away, I feel Daniel's gaze on me, as if he's sizing up his competition.

Well, let him look. Let him underestimate me.

I sit in the chair and the makeup artist gets to work, but my mind is racing. Daniel's snide comments have lit a fire in me, and I'm more determined than ever to give this cook-off everything I've got. After all, I've faced worse adversaries, and I've always come out on top.

Frederick's words are also ringing in my ears. Waves? What did he mean by that? Is hiring Anton—someone who deserved a chance—really something that could backfire on me? The thought makes me grit my teeth.

If doing the right thing is going to bring me criticism, then so be it. I'll face it head-on, just like everything else.

I look at my reflection as the artist applies the finishing touches. My eyes meet my own, and for a moment, I hardly even recognize myself. My hair is curled into perfect waves rather than its usual bun, my face is perfectly blushed and contoured, and my eyelashes are longer than ever.

Is this what it's like to be a female chef in the public eye? A doll to be made up whenever I need to get people to like

The makeup artist leans back, admiring her work. "You're all set," she says, nodding more to herself than to me. "You can head to the

I force a smile and stand, smoothing my shirt down. "Thank

Just as I'm turning around to leave, though, the door opens. "Sorry I'm late!" a breathy voice calls out. A black woman with a curly afro steps in, shaking her umbrella.

My eyes

Chapter 208

Abby

My heart feels like it's doing somersaults in my chest as I stammer out my words. "You're—you're Vanessa Greene. The Vanessa Greene."

"The one and only," Vanessa says, her voice as soft as a gentle breeze. She offers her hand, and I feel the warmth of her skin as our palms meet. My hand trembles, and I'm embarrassed but can't help it.

Vanessa Greene is literally the most renowned female chef in the country. Aside from being a bestselling author, she also owns an entire chain of three-star restaurants called 'The Greene Plate', which specialize in organic, farm-to-table, gourmet vegan dishes. It's something that no female chef has ever accomplished.

Aside from that, she's the host of her own cooking show, 'Brunch with Vanessa,' and has won countless awards.

It goes without saying that I didn't expect her to be here. Is she one of the contestants, or one of the judges? Surely she's a judge. Why would they have the most successful female chef in the country competing against amateurs like us?

I apologize, flustered. "O-Of course, sorry. I didn't mean to hold anyone up. It was so nice to meet you, Vanessa." I pull away, my legs carrying me past Vanessa, though it feels like I'm leaving behind a moment I've dreamt of for years.

Just then, I bump into Daniel as I hurry past. "Watch where you're going, fangirl," he snickers, his words laced with an unbearable

"Sorry," I mutter, mortified and not meeting her

As I escape down the hallway, I can feel Daniel's gaze burning into my back. God, the interview hasn't even begun and I've already managed to embarrass myself beyond all

Chapter 209

The audience murmurs. A smattering of applause ripples across the small crowd.

Sarah flips her cue cards. "And when did you start cooking, Abby?"

"I was eight. My mom loved to cook, and I was her little sous-chef. Cutting, stirring, making a mess mostly," I chuckle. "But the love for cooking stuck, long after I learned to clean up after myself."

People laugh; even Sarah chuckles. And for a moment, the stage doesn't feel too big, the lights not too bright. I can do this.

"So, what would you say is your signature dish?" Sarah leans in, interested.

I feel a flicker of excitement. "Oh, that would have to be my rosemary-infused lamb with a side of garlic mashed potatoes. It's rustic, hearty, and incredibly flavorful. The rosemary and garlic come together to create a sense of home, no matter where you are."

Sarah's eyes light up and she looks over at the crowd. "Doesn't that sound delicious?" she asks, to which the crowd murmurs in response.

"It's a customer favorite for sure," I beam. "It's actually adapted from one of my mother's recipes. I love to give my customers a taste of

"Of course," Sarah says, smiling.

The interview continues in a myriad of laughter, awws, and light applause. With each passing minute, I begin to feel more and more relaxed, like I've done this a thousand times. I almost forget that the audience is even there, and it feels like it's just me and Sarah having a conversation about

But then, Sarah throws me the one question that I was most

"So, Abby, what is your biggest inspiration?"

I freeze. My eyes involuntarily flicker to where Vanessa is seated on the sidelines with the other judges, her afro a glorious halo under the studio lights. It would be so easy to point at her, to say her name. She's the woman I've idolized for years, the dream I've chased in my sleep, and she's right here.

But then, like a flickering montage, faces start appearing in my mind.

John, my sous-chef who's always got my back, even when we have our disagreements; Ethan, my restaurant manager who has never missed a day of work, no matter how many times I've begged him to take a vacation; Daisy, the ever-smiling waitress who uplifts everyone's mood despite the weather; Chloe, my best friend in the entire world; Anton, the homeless man who turned out to be like an uncle to me; and then, finally Karl.

Karl.

My ex husband, the man who I thought I would never see again. The man who almost took a dozen bullets for me, all over a bag of truffles.

Tears begin to well up in my eyes. My crew—my family—who've stood by me, who've celebrated every small win and endured every big loss. How can I not mention them?

I look back at Sarah, then into the camera, into the eyes of whoever is watching this—be it one person or a

“You know, Sarah,” I begin, “I'm tempted to name some of the industry giants, the Michelin-starred chefs, or the food critics. But if I'm honest, my biggest inspiration comes from somewhere much closer to

Sarah's eyebrows go up, intrigued. The audience leans in, as if they're collectively holding their breath. Even Vanessa seems to perk up from her

“It's my team,” I say, my voice tinged with emotion. “My staff at La Belle Vie. Every last one of them. They're the true heroes of every dish that comes out of my kitchen, the backbone of every service we provide. They've been there through thick and thin, through failed recipes and kitchen meltdowns, through stellar reviews and terrible ones.”

Chapter 210

Abby

Applause begins to ripple across the studio audience, but all I see is Karl, sitting in the back, staring down at me. He's wearing a blue surgical mask, but I know it's him. I can tell by his eyes, by the way that my wolf stirs ever so slightly just from looking at him.

"Wow, Abby," Sarah says, drawing me back to the present, back to the interview. "That was lovely. Your staff must be really grateful to have you."

I shake my head. "No. I'm lucky to have them."

"Well, that's all, folks," Sarah says, turning back to face the crowd. "Everyone give a big round of applause for Abby, the owner of La Belle Vie Bistro!"

Another wave of applause washes over the room, smattered with a few cheers. The cameraman gives me my cue, and I stand, waving as I jog off stage. Once backstage, the assistant from before gives me a nod and a thumbs-up, then points for me to head back to the greenroom.

As I head down the hall to the greenroom, I feel like I'm floating on air. So that was it; that was the interview. I did it!

The greenroom is a modest room, furnished with a couple of sofas, a coffee table littered with fashion magazines, and a snack bar.

The walls are adorned with photos of previous guests who came on the show, from famous musicians to local artists. There's a bathroom in the back, and feeling like I'll be sick now from the nerves of it all, I head to the bathroom to splash some cold water on

I lock the door behind me and let out a sigh, knowing that this is just one step in the process. Tomorrow, I'll be headed to the cook-off, and that will be an entirely different beast. I feel as though the real fight has only

As I splash some cool water on my face to calm myself, I look up into the mirror. The makeup still jars me, but I can still see myself: just Abby, the small chef, the woman with an army of amazing friends

After a few moments, I'm about to head back out to grab my things when I suddenly hear a voice in the other room, and I

"No, you don't understand, this is a serious competition. I've been training for months, and I can't afford to be distracted by—by

I recognize the voice instantly: Daniel. My ears perk up. Amateurs? In a room full of accomplished chefs, who could she possibly be talking about? I tell myself not to eavesdrop, but then she

"Hah! Abby? She's a complete non-factor. No, seriously, have you seen her so-called 'restaurant'? What a

There's a pause, as though he's listening to someone, likely over the phone. My heart feels like it's about to pound out of my chest as she

"Look, she's nothing but a fangirl with no real experience. You know what she is? She's nothing but a silly little homemaker who can barely cook halfway decent food without the help of her male chefs—one of whom is a dirty homeless man!"

The air in the room gets thick; his words are a punch to the gut.

Here I am, in a field dominated by men, and being beaten down once again. He's attacking not just me, but the essence of La Belle Vie, where everyone, regardless of their background, is part of a community.

Our resident 'dirty homeless man,' as he so insensitively put it, is one of the most gifted chefs I've ever met.

"Oh, please," Daniel continues, his voice fading. "I'm not worried about her. Not in the slightest..."

With that, Daniel's voice fades away. I can hear his shoes clicking on the hallway floor, and then they fade into nothing. Only then do I finally turn the bathroom door knob with shaking hands, letting out a shuddering breath as I slowly step out of the room.

The room, although it's empty, feels like it's shrinking. I stand here for a moment, and it's as though I can still hear Daniel's words bouncing around in my head like an awful, haunting echo.

Fangirl. Amateur. Homemaker. Silly.

My heart feels like it's dropping into my stomach. How can a fellow chef speak about another professional like that? I knew that this was a male-dominated field, but it

For a second, I even consider walking out and confronting him, really laying into him for belittling me and my team

I take a few tentative steps toward the door, my hand reaching for the door knob, but then

My hand trembles, hovers, then drops back to my side. I can't do it. I feel like I've lost my

I'm not entirely sure why I'm hesitating, but it's as if my feet are glued to the floor. Am I scared that confronting him will just prove him right? That in some twisted way, I might actually be the talentless hack that he's making me out to be? That his words actually had an effect on me because maybe, just maybe, they might actually be

"God, get a grip, Abby," I mutter to myself, feeling the hot tears starting to form. I turn away from the door and sink down onto the couch, burying my face in my hands. I can't hold it in any longer, and a couple of tears escape, trickling down my

I know I've faced worse than this. I've dealt with fires, critics, bad customers, the works. I've dealt with divorce, losing friends, gaining friends. Hell, I've dealt with resentful women before, like the Lunas who used to be a part of my circle and now see me as a servant. I've dealt with Gianna, who set up an entire conspiracy to get Karl to break up