

His Kickass 211

Chapter 211

Abby

The knock on the door interrupts my pity party, and for a split second, I debate whether or not to even answer it.

But before I can make up my mind, the door creaks open and I catch the sight in the vanity mirror—Karl, his blue surgical mask lowered, his brown eyes shining and a bouquet of flowers in hand.

“Karl?” My voice trembles. Seeing him makes my guard lower, and I can feel my shoulders relax. “I saw you in the audience, and I—”

He steps further into the room, letting the door close softly behind him. “I bought a ticket secretly. I hope you don’t mind, but I wanted to surprise you,” he says, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror.

I feel a smile spreading across my lips. “Thank you. But...” I pause, taking in his appearance. “What’s with the surgical mask?”

Karl chuckles and tugs on the blue mask. “This? Don’t take it the wrong way, but I didn’t want anyone recognizing me. I’m supposed to be an Alpha, you know? Not hanging out in my ex-wife’s city and helping with her restaurant.”

I nod, recalling one of our first discussions when he came to help me. Even most of the staff at the restaurant doesn’t know about our

“You were fantastic out there, Abby,” he says, taking another step closer. “And that last thing you said about the staff? It was really touching.”

Warmth spreads through me at his words, the tenderness in his voice acting like a balm on my raw emotions. “Thank you. I didn’t expect you to be in the audience. It means a lot that you’re here,

He starts to walk over, probably to hand me the bouquet, but then he notices. The red-rimmed eyes, the streaked makeup—undeniable signs of

Instantly, the flowers drop to the floor, abandoned, and he's in front of me in two strides. His hands grip me by both arms, his eyes searching my face.

"Abby, what happened? Why are you crying?" Concern fills his eyes, shadowing the happiness that was just there a moment ago.

For a moment, I consider sticking with my initial impulse to downplay everything. I know Karl, and I know how he'll react if he finds out what Daniel said.

"It's nothing," I say, taking a step back. But the way Karl looks at me, with such heartfelt concern and confusion, breaks down my feeble barriers.

He steps closer, the air between us thickening, charged with a mix of emotions. "Nothing doesn't make you cry, Abby. Please, tell me."

My eyes dart around the room—past Karl, to the wilted flowers on the floor, to the empty chairs—as if they might offer some form of escape. But in the end, it's the look in Karl's eyes that makes me break down.

"It was Daniel," I finally admit, my voice no more than a whisper. "I overheard him talking about me, saying that I'm not a real chef, just a fangirl and a homemaker who relies on male chefs to get by."

Karl's face hardens. "He said what? That's

I let out a humorless laugh. "I don't know. Is it really? Or don't you think that he might be onto

His eyes widen in shock. He reaches out, his hand cupping my face gently, the touch light but infinitely reassuring. I find myself leaning my cheek into his palm, as though the barriers between us are nonexistent now.

"I'm just so tired of it, Karl," I murmur into his chest, a sob quaking my body.

Karl holds me for a few long moments, his hand rubbing my back as I sob into his chest. But when the sobs finally subside, and I slowly lift my head to look up at him, his gaze is fixed sternly on the wall behind us.

"I'll handle this," he says, his eyes narrowed and jaw set in a way that sends a jolt of worry through me.

"No, Karl, don't—" But it's too late. Extricating himself from me, he tugs his mask back over his face. Then he's out the door, the bouquet of flowers still lying forgotten on the floor.

My heart pounds in my chest as I race after him, my feet barely touching the carpet. I round the corner to see him already confronting Daniel, who's standing near the food table in the main room where the other contestants, their friends and families, and various staff are milling about.

There's a plastic smile frozen on his face, but it fades as Karl storms up to her.

"What gives you the right to badmouth Abby?" Karl's voice cuts through the air like a knife, and everyone, contestants and crew alike, turns to look.

"Excuse me? And who might you be?" Daniel sneers, taking in Karl's surgical mask and casual clothes.

"This isn't about who I am; this is about you and how you treat others," Karl says, his voice laced with disapproval.

Daniel laughs, a hollow sound that does nothing to hide the edge in his voice. "I think everyone would like to know who's hiding behind the mask before we can take him seriously."

Karl takes a step forward, undeterred. "Seriously? Maybe you should be taking your rivals more seriously. Abby is a brilliant chef, and what are you? A high school bully?"

Daniel rolls his eyes, but there's a flicker of uncertainty there. "Well, if she's so brilliant, why isn't she defending herself?" he asks, his gaze sliding coolly over to me. "Why does she need a man to come to her rescue?"

"Abby doesn't need me to defend her," Karl counters, "but when someone as unprofessional and rude as you starts slinging mud, it becomes everyone's problem. Even during your interview, your self-absorption shined through like a spotlight. You're a narcissist."

A hush falls over the room, so heavy it's almost palpable. I can feel the weight of everyone's eyes on me, and my cheeks flush in humiliation. Then, just as I think I might drown in the deafening silence, another voice speaks

"Actually, I'm with Abby and the mystery man," Vanessa suddenly says, rising from her chair. Her voice is calm but firm, like the eye of a storm. "As contestants, I expect all of you to treat each other with respect."

The room remains silent, everyone now turning their eyes toward Vanessa, who has somehow become the new focal point of the room. She walks over to where Karl and Daniel are standing, effectively placing herself between them, as though forming a

"And frankly," she says, staring pointedly at Daniel, "you're lucky I don't give you a formal warning for gossipy behavior."

Chapter 213

Abby

Vanessa walks up to me, her heels clicking softly on the tile floor. The room slowly begins to pick up its volume again, but I feel lost in a giant void.

"Are you okay, Abby?" Vanessa asks, her voice pulling me back to the present.

"I-I'm fine," I murmur, although the words feel like a complete and utter lie. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause a scene." I glance at Karl, who's standing a few feet away, watching intently.

Vanessa smiles, a soft, empathetic curve of her lips that immediately puts me at ease. “Don’t be sorry. The culinary world isn’t exactly a bed of roses for women, you know? We’re already at a disadvantage just by being female

“That shouldn’t be the case,” I find myself saying, a hint of bitterness in my voice. “Skill and talent should be what matters, not gender.”

Vanessa nods, her eyes meeting mine with a look that speaks volumes. “You’re absolutely right. But sometimes the world doesn’t operate the way it should.” She hesitates for a moment, as though contemplating whether to continue, then seems to make a decision. “Let me tell you a

She leans against a nearby table, crossing her arms as she gathers her thoughts. “Years ago, when I was climbing my way up the ladder, there was a male chef—I’ll call him Mark—who couldn’t stand me. Not because I was better or worse than him in the kitchen, mind you, but simply because I was a woman. And a black woman at that.”

“That’s horrible,” I say, my heart sinking at the thought of facing such blatant discrimination.

“Oh, but that’s not even the beginning of it,” Vanessa says, her voice taking on a grim tone.

“One night, during a critical review from a food critic, Mark sabotaged my dish. He swapped the fresh herbs I’d prepped with ones that had turned, ruining the entire dish. The critic got sick. It was a whole thing.”

“Oh, no,” I gasp. “Did he get away with it?”

Vanessa nods. “He did. At the time, nobody believed that he could do something so petty, and I didn’t have the evidence to prove it. No one wanted to listen to me, the black female chef. I was a nobody, a woman in a male-dominated field. But you know what? In the end, it didn’t matter.”

“How can it not matter?” The words tumble out before I can stop them. “He sabotaged your career!”

“No, Abby,” she says, shaking her head. “He tried to sabotage my career. There’s a difference. What he did was a setback, no doubt about it, but it wasn’t the end of the world. I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and got back to work. And today, I’m far more successful now than he ever became.”

Her words hang in the air between us, heavy but also strangely uplifting. For a moment, I’m speechless, too caught up in the raw emotion of her story to formulate a response.

Chapter 214

“Thank you,” I finally manage to say, my voice so low it’s almost a whisper. “I... I think I needed to hear that.”

“We all do, from time to time,” she says, her eyes softening as she reaches out to squeeze my arm. “So, whenever you find yourself doubting your worth or questioning your place in this world, remember this: You belong here, just as much as anyone else. And no amount of criticism, sabotage, or petty rivalry can take that away from you.”

I nod. “I’ll try to remember.”

Vanessa’s eyes then flit between me and Karl. “And, I must say, it’s a wonderful thing to have a boyfriend who stands up for you like that,” she says.

Both Karl and I sputter almost in unison. “Oh, we’re not—”

“—together. We’re not together,” Karl finishes, his eyes darting nervously over to me. I’m aware of how red my cheeks are, and I quickly look

Vanessa’s mouth twitches into a knowing smile, her eyes glinting with a kind of playful mischief. “My apologies, then. It’s not my place to make

“Still, it’s pretty awesome to have such a good friend,” she continues, looking squarely at Karl. “Someone like that is hard to come by. Hold onto him.” She winks at me, her eyes

As Vanessa starts to drift away, I find myself looking up at Karl. He's staring back, and there's a softness in his eyes that makes my heart melt even though I was on the verge of scolding him for causing a scene like

"I'm sorry, Karl," I find myself saying for reasons unknown to me.

He tilts his head, his eyes searching mine. "Why are you apologizing? You did an amazing job today, Abby. You were professional, articulate, and honest. Everyone at the restaurant was watching, and they're just dying to see you."

His words help to soothe away my unease. But still, I can't shake the feeling that I've inconvenienced him—and everyone in this studio, for that matter.

"You didn't have to confront Daniel. I didn't want to drag you into my petty drama."

"It's not 'petty drama,'" he says. "And besides, I wanted to. You think I'd just stand around and let some dollar-store chef bad mouth you?"

"Thanks," I say with a soft chuckle. "But you really don't need to do stuff like that. I'll try to handle my own emotions in the future."

Karl rolls his eyes, a playful gesture that sends an unexpected ripple of warmth through me. "Well, too bad. I'll do it anyway. Until the day I

His words send a pleasant shiver down my spine, and I find myself looking away again to hide the blush in my cheeks. From across the room, Vanessa's eyes meet mine, and I almost think I see her wink.

"C'mon," Karl says, gesturing for me to follow. "Let's head back to the restaurant. There's a surprise waiting for

I nod, and begin to follow him toward the door. But then, I freeze, remembering something.

“Wait here,” I murmur, turning on my heel. Suddenly I’m running, running down the hall, back toward the greenroom. I burst in through the door, and there they

Chapter 215

Abby

“What’s going on?” I ask Karl as we approach the restaurant, checking my watch. The lights are off and it’s an hour before closing. “Why is it so dark?”

“Um, actually, I wanted to tell you earlier but I figured you’d rather see it firsthand,” Karl says, looking a little embarrassed. “So, the power went out…”

My eyes widen. “You’re joking. Seriously?”

Karl nods. “Yeah. We closed the restaurant early. The electric company said it’s a power grid issue.”

I sigh and pass my hand over my face. “Geez. Alright… It’s fine, I guess. Where is everyone? I thought you said there was a surprise.”

Nodding again, Karl gestures for me to follow. We open the front door and walk in. “They’re in the back,” he says, clearing his throat. “Just lit some candles and ordered some

Suddenly, the lights flick on. My eyes haven’t even adjusted to the sudden brightness when the room erupts into cheer, and I quickly realize that this entire spiel about the electric company was completely made up.

“Surprise!” My friends shout in chorus, their faces lit up in glee. A banner hangs above the bar, reading ‘Good Luck,

I’m speechless, my eyes scanning over each one of their excited faces. The grins that they shoot back at me erase any annoyance over the fake electric outage or the fact that they clearly closed the restaurant early for this.

“You guys did this for

“Of course!” Anton exclaims, emerging from the kitchen, a chef’s towel slung over his shoulder and a tray of delectable hors d’oeuvres balancing on his hand. “It’s your big day tomorrow! How could we not celebrate you?”

I feel tears prickling my eyes, but I blink them back. “Thank you, all of you. This means the world to me.”

Soon enough, drinks are handed out and music begins to play. Hors d’oeuvres are served, candles are lit, and the air becomes filled with the scent of good food and the sound of laughter. I’m sitting at one of the tables, a wine glass in front of me, laughing at Ethan and Daisy as they argue over who gets the last Bavarian pretzel bite.

Just then, Anton sets a dish in front of me. My eyes widen as I recognize the aroma—truffles. “Anton, is this...?”

He grins. “Indeed. Farro mafaldine...”

“With black truffle butter,” I say with a giddy smile. I take a bite, the explosion of flavors hitting my tongue and practically sending me to heaven. “This is divine,” I murmur. “You’ve outdone yourself as always, Anton.”

The night carries on for a while longer. All at once, it’s going too slow and too fast. It’s hard to believe the cook-off is tomorrow; right now, this moment feels like that’s all that exists. Just us, this restaurant, good food, and good

Eventually, I find myself leaning over the bar while Chloe meticulously crafts three cocktails. The others are playing an animated game of cards at one of the tables behind us. Leah is perched on a barstool beside me, and we’ve stolen Chloe’s phone to scroll through her Tinder

“Ooh, he’s cute,” Leah says, holding the phone out to show a picture of a muscular guy with a football jersey on.

I make a face. “Ew. Football guys.

“Yeah,” Chloe adds, putting the finishing touches on the cocktails. “He was weird, too. Wouldn’t stop talking about how he likes when girls wear a jersey and nothing else. I was like, ‘and hide my figure? Um, I don’t think so, pal.’”

Leah and I both laugh. When the cocktails are finished, Chloe distributes them.

Chapter 216

“Did you mean it?” Chloe asks, her voice quieter than before. “What you said on TV today? About everyone here?”

I reach out and take both of their hands in mine, aware of how clammy my palms are but not caring in the slightest.

“Every single word,” I assure her, my eyes flicking between Chloe and Leah. “You both have been with me through thick and thin. I couldn’t have asked for better friends.”

Leah’s eyes glisten, a testament to the emotional weight of our journey together. “And we couldn’t have asked for a better friend than you, Abby. You make this place feel like home.”

“I second that,” Chloe says, squeezing my hand.

“No matter where life takes us,” I continue, “know that nothing—no cook-off, no restaurant reviews, and definitely no drama—will ever come between us again.”

‘We’ll hold you to that,’ Leah says with a playful wink.

“We don’t have to,” Chloe counters. “Because I know she means it.”

There’s a pause as the three of us blink our tears away and take another sip. Then, with a grin, Leah leans on my

“Man,” she says, letting out a sigh. “Maybe I should work here. I feel left

Chloe chuckles. “Yeah, like you wouldn’t cry if a customer is mean to you.”

Leah giggles. “You’re right. I think I’m better suited in an office, tucked away from the general

I’m just about to open my mouth to say something else when the music suddenly becomes almost deafeningly loud. The three of us turn to see Anton standing by the stereo, swaying back and forth to the music.

“Abby! Come show us how you move!” Anton shouts over the music, beckoning me toward the makeshift dance floor between tables.

I laugh, setting down my glass. “All right, you asked for it!”

Anton grins, his eyes twinkling in the dim light. “In France, we have a saying: ‘Life is a grand dance, and we’re all just trying to keep up.’ So let’s dance!”

“I’ll do my best!” I promise, stepping into the open space.

We both get into it, the spirit of the night giving permission for unfiltered joy. Anton kicks up a leg and then twirls dramatically, his chef’s apron swinging around him like a matador’s cape. I mimic him, throwing in a few silly moves of my own—a mix of the robot and some awkward moonwalking.

“Oh my god, what is that?” Leah asks, doubled over with laughter as she captures the whole thing on her phone.

“It’s the ‘Abby Shuffle,’ patent pending!” I shout over the music. Chloe is laughing so hard she nearly spills her drink.

Anton and I finish off with a mock bow and curtsy, soaking in the applause and laughter from our friends. It’s silly, it’s fun, and it’s the kind of thing that makes life worth savoring.

But as the night wears on, my eyes keep drifting to Karl. He's across the room, talking with John, his expressions animated and passionate. There's something about the way he carries himself, the seriousness that balances my spontaneity, which has always drawn me to

And then, as if on cue, I see him slip away, heading towards the back alley. He doesn't look back, but something in the way he exits the room gives me pause. It's a kind of quiet retreat, a brief withdrawal from the whirlwind of socializing.

The urge to follow him is too strong to

Chapter 217

Abby

"Need some company?"

Karl's eyes slide over to the bottle in my hand, and a slight smirk tugs at the corners of his lips. He scooches aside and nods for me to join him. "Sure."

I join him as he leans against the wall. Our shoulders brush as we stand beside one another, a familiar yet bittersweetly nostalgic current of electricity running up my spine. I tilt the bottle up to my lips and take a swig, then hand it to him. He does the same.

"So..." he starts, but then hesitates, the words hanging heavily in the air.

"What's up?"

"We have a lot to talk about," he says, peering down into the bottle as he swirls the wine around.

"Like what happened the other night?" The words escape before I can rein them in. A hot flush of embarrassment immediately rises into my cheeks; the alcohol tonight has made my lips looser than usual, and I hate to admit it, but I've been thinking about our kiss in the pantry a

A beat of silence passes

“You mean the kiss,” he says softly, looking up at me, his eyes intense and unreadable.

“I want to apologize,” I interrupt. “I shouldn’t

“Stop,” he says. “Don’t apologize. I’m the one who should be apologizing. I shouldn’t have done that. It was insensitive and

My eyes widen slightly at Karl’s words. I didn’t expect him to apologize like that. Apologizing isn’t exactly something that the old Karl ever liked

I find myself turning toward him, taking the bottle from his hands. I take a big swig, then hand it back. Our fingers brush and our eyes

“Karl, I...”

He shakes his head as though reading my mind. “Let’s not talk about it tonight, okay? Right now, you should be focusing on tomorrow. On your cook-off.”

I blink, looking away to hide my confusion. “Okay,” I say, though I can’t deny the ache in my chest, the yearning to press my lips to his again. Maybe it’s the wine talking, or the flowers, or the way his eyes looked when he was in the audience. But I know I have to ignore it, because Karl is right. “Tomorrow. Got it.”

The tension between us eases a little, but the unsaid words still hover over our heads, watching, waiting.

Karl takes another deep swig of the wine, as if fortifying himself for something, then takes a deep breath. “Can I tell you something?”

I nod, turning my head to look at him. The brick wall feels cool against my back. It’s grounding in a weird way. “Shoot.”

Karl sighs. "So, my brother may wake up soon," he says quietly. "From

My eyebrows raise. As far as I know, Karl's brother has been in a coma for a long time. Years, actually. Karl took over as Alpha in his wake. "Is that a good thing?" I

He shrugs, swirling the wine around in the bottle again. "Technically, yes," he says. "But

"Also...??" I push gently, my mind racing through

"He might challenge me for Alpha. Might want to take back what was his. The pack might follow him, too. I love my pack, Abby. I don't want to

His vulnerability strikes a chord in me. "I didn't realize things were so complicated for you. You carry all this weight on your shoulders, yet you never let

He chuckles. "It's part of being an Alpha. Showing weakness is not an

Chapter 218

"I feel a little bit like a failure," he suddenly blurts out. "Like what my pack is saying about me... that I'm a bad Alpha... might be true."

My eyes widen. "Karl! Don't—"

"Abby," he says, tilting his head back to look up at the sky, "I came here—to this city—for you. To win you back. No other reason. And I practically abandoned my pack. I've been dealing with everything over the phone, over email."

His words make my heart sink. I guess I knew that it was true, but hearing it out loud like this kind of hurts, I'll admit, and not in the way I would have thought.

I feel a little guilty—guilty for stringing him along like this, guilty for keeping him here for so long, guilty for allowing him to shirk his responsibilities and lose approval as Alpha, all so I could keep him on a leash in case I ever decided to get back together with him.

And what really sucks is that even now, even as he's telling me this, I'm still not sure what I want. I don't know if I want to get back together, even after everything he's done for me, and it must hurt him more than I could ever know.

We fall into silence, each lost in our thoughts, the wine bottle dangling from his

My eyes keep straying to his lips, remembering the feel of them on mine, wondering if it will happen again. But the gravity of what he's shared holds me back. This isn't the time for

"So," I murmur, wanting to change the subject, at least a little bit, "we won't see each other until the Alpha party?" The words come out softer than I intend, tinged with a sense of loss I never expected to

"That's the plan," he confirms. "Unless you plan on forfeiting your cooking competition and joining me

I force a laugh, even as my heart clenches at the thought. "Tempting. But, you know, pride and all

He looks at me, a soft smile lifting the corners of his mouth. "Of course. Can't have the famous chef bow out, can we?"

His words lighten the mood, but the space between us still feels loaded, every word and glance laden with unspoken emotions. We both take another sip of wine, as if the liquid courage could make this easier.

"You know," I start, unsure of how to frame the words that are clawing at the back of my throat, "even if I lose tomorrow, I'll still be your date for the Alpha party. If you want me to be, that is."

His eyes meet mine, and for a moment, the world around us falls away. "You're not going to lose," he says softly. "But I'm glad to hear you say that."

Something flickers between us then, an understanding, a connection. It's as if, for the first time in a long time, we're seeing each other for what we really are: two lost souls searching for our other half, passing by each other in a sea of blotted out stars and wine.

"We should head back," he suddenly suggests, pulling me back into reality. "People will start thinking we ran

I nod, reluctant to break the spell of the moment.

We start to move, gathering up the half-empty wine bottle, our movements a little clumsier, a little slower, as if we're both hesitant to let this night end. Finally, we step out of the alley, heading back toward

But just as I reach for the door, Karl stops me, his hand catching mine in a

"Abby..." he says, his voice tinged with a seriousness that makes me look

Chapter 219

Abby

On the morning of the cook-off, I'm already awake before my alarm even starts buzzing.

Last night, I hardly slept at all thanks to a combination of excitement over the cook-off and my wine-induced conversation with Karl. All night, his words swirled around my mind: "I'm really proud of you," he had said.

Hearing Karl say those words was so unexpected, yet so heartwarming at the same time. I can't get them out of my mind, like a lost puppy who's found her home, or a shipwreck survivor lost at sea who has found a lifeline. It's strange how much of an impact it has had on me.

As soon as my alarm goes off, though, I pop out of bed and thrust myself into cook-off mode. Today is not the day to be thinking about my ex-husband. Today, I need to focus on winning that cook-off, otherwise all of my efforts will have been for nothing.

After a slightly-too-hot shower, I pull my hair back into a neat and tidy bun, then get dressed. I know I'll be asked to change into a uniform for the cook-off, so I opt for something simple: a t-shirt, jeans, and a

"Okay, Abby, this is it," I murmur to myself, checking my reflection one last time in the mirror before I head out. "Today's the day you show them

I rush down the stairs, grabbing the go-bag that I prepared last night and heading out to the cafe down my street for a quick pick-me-up before the day begins. The bell jingles over my head as I step inside, and I'm greeted by the comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee and

The barista, a sweet lady named Carol, is behind

"Morning, Abby! The usual?" she asks.

"Morning, Carol. Yes, please—black coffee, one sugar, and a croissant."

The transaction is brief, and soon I'm sipping my coffee, savoring the bitter liquid as it glides down my throat. It's like a little cup of courage.

Then, with my coffee in one hand and a bagged croissant in the other, I start my brisk walk toward John's apartment. The air is crisp, the sun rising in pastel hues, and I feel optimistic about today.

The streets of the city come alive as I walk, each step invigorating me further. I can already imagine John's surprised face when he sees how pumped I am, and I hope he feels the same.

Speaking of John, I figure I should call him and check to make sure he's awake and ready. Reaching into my pocket, I grab my phone and dial his number, already scripting what I'll say in

I wait. It rings and rings but goes

"That's strange," I mumble, feeling a little bubble of concern rise in my chest. My fingers tap nervously on the screen as I dial his number again, hoping that he didn't forget to set his alarm. Still

“I hope he’s okay,” I whisper to myself, staring at the phone as if willing it to come to life. I leave a voicemail, a twinge of impatience creeping into my tone. “John, it’s Abby. I’m on my way. We have the competition today, remember? You better be up and

Chapter 220

“John, finally!” I call out, stepping through the turnstile. “Are you ready? I’m about to hop on the subway, on my way to your place. I’ll be there in ten minutes, max.”

“Abby,” he croaks, and instantly, I know something’s not right. I freeze in my tracks. The life and vibrancy in his voice are gone, replaced by something that sounds a lot like misery.

“John? You sound awful. Are you okay?”

He coughs. “I... I was up all night, throwing up. I feel terrible, Abby.” His voice sounds like a poker being raked over hot coals.

Instantly, the scolding mom in me surfaces. “Oh my God, John, did you drink too much last night? We talked about this—today is important! I told you we could only have a couple drinks each, no more!”

“No, no, you don’t get it,” he interrupts, his voice shaky. “I only had one drink, nothing more. I swear, Abby. It’s

“What is it, then?” I asked, my heart practically pounding out of my

He sighed. “I think it’s food poisoning or something. Look, I’m really, really sick, Abby. I might even have to go to the hospital if this doesn’t

My blood runs cold, my hand tightening around my phone until my knuckles go white. “Hospital? Are you

“Of course, I’m sure. Do you think I would joke about something like this? Especially today?”

The despair in his voice cuts through me, and instantly, I feel a little bad for scolding him. He coughs again and clears his throat, and I can practically hear him wince from the pain.

“Oh, John,” I murmur, clutching my coffee cup so tight I might crush it. “Shit.”

“I’m really sorry, Abby, but I think it goes without saying that there’s no way I can be your sous chef for the competition today.”

My mind races, flipping through a whole host of emotions—worry for John, frustration at the situation, and fear for what this means for me and the competition. I need a sous chef. All of the contestants have to have a sous chef.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” I call out, more to myself than to him. “What do I do now? I have to be at the studio in

“Listen, why don’t you call Anton?” John suggests after a beat. “He’s really good and he knows the way you operate. He could fill

“I guess I don’t have a choice, do I?” I sigh, my fingers already navigating to Anton’s contact in my phone as I speak. “You’d better get better, John. And keep me updated. I don’t want to spend the whole day worrying about you on top of everything else,

“I’ll be fine, Abby. Just worry about the cook-off,” John’s voice trembles through the speaker. “I’m really sorry,