

His Kickass 221

Chapter 221

Abby

It takes a moment for me to process John's words. I'm standing here, on the subway platform, with my phone in my hand and my coffee in the other, feeling like my life is spiraling out of control.

The buzz of the city, the sleepy commuters shuffling past me, and the distant clatter of subway cars fade into the background as I realize my situation is getting desperate.

"Okay, okay. Don't panic, Abby," I mutter to myself, opening my contacts to find Anton's number. Anton is a skilled chef, and he's been working with me for a little while now. He could fill in for John in a heartbeat, I'm sure of it.

My thumb hovers over the call button for a second, considering, but then I tap it. I've got no other options right now, the clock is ticking, and Anton will be a shoe-in. The line rings, and with each passing second, I can feel my nerves becoming even more tightly wound.

Finally, Anton answers. "Abby. What's going

I suck in a deep breath. "Anton, are you busy today? Specifically, in the next couple of

"Well... Not really... Why?" He sounds a little off, not quite like his normal chipper self, but I chalk it up to the early hour, and

"Look, Anton, I'm in a bind. John is really sick, like, food-poisoning sick, and he can't be my sous chef for the cook-off. I know it's super last-minute, but can you please step in for him? I-I'll give you a week's

There's a pause on the other end of the line, just long enough for my heart to drop to my stomach. Then Anton coughs. It's not a casual, just-woke-up kind of cough. It's a deep, guttural, I've-been-sick-all-night-puking-my-brains-out sore throat kind of cough.

“Anton, are you okay?” I ask, my eyes widening, my voice tinged with disbelief and a sudden spike of dread.

He sighs. “I, like John, have been throwing up all night, Abby. I can barely get out of bed.”

“What? You too?” My voice rises with each word, high-pitched and incredulous. “How is this even possible? What the hell did you guys eat?”

“If John is also sick, then it must have been something we both ate,” Anton muses. “You think it could be from last night? At your good-luck party?”

The mention of my party sends a ripple of disbelief through me. I can’t even fathom that my innocent party could be the cause of all of this. “But... But you and John cooked everything yourselves! In my restaurant kitchen, which, I might add, is

“I know, I know. We cooked everything with the same professionalism as we always do,” Anton assures me with

“So, what the hell happened? Are we talking about cross-contamination, bad produce,

Anton coughs again, and I can hear the strain in his voice. “Honestly, Abby, if I knew, I would tell you. All I can say is that I followed every procedure perfectly. It had to have been a freak

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“I just can’t believe this is happening,” I say, my voice breaking a little. “This is like some sort of nightmare.”

“Yeah, it is,” Anton agrees, the exhaustion evident in his voice. “The timing couldn’t be worse.”

The timing is beyond terrible; it’s catastrophic. I close my eyes for a moment, taking in the sounds around me—the muffled chatter of people on their morning commute, the distant laughter of a group of teenagers on the way to school, the soft cooing of a baby.

Life is moving on, unfazed by my little disaster. I wish I could say the same for myself. Because right now, I feel like I'm trapped in a motionless void of suffering.

"Well... you need to rest, Anton," I finally say, resigned. "Focus on getting better. This... this is just one of those things. Bad luck, or fate, or whatever you want to call it."

"Yeah, bad luck doesn't even begin to cover it," Anton mutters.

"Alright," I say, swallowing. "Get better, Anton. See

As I hover my thumb over the red 'end call' button on my phone, a thought suddenly strikes me. "Wait, Anton, how come I'm not sick? I ate the same food everyone else

"You didn't eat the seafood dish, did you?" Anton's voice has a trace of realization

"Seafood dish?" I think back to last night. "Oh right, the one with shellfish. No, I didn't. I'm

Anton's voice tenses. "That must be it, Abby. That has to be the dish that got us sick. Someone should check on everyone who ate

A wave of dread washes over me. "Do you think everyone else is

"Now, let us not panic yet," Anton counters, coughing a little. "I'll send a group text. To check if anyone else is feeling ill."

"You don't have to do that, Anton. You're sick."

"It's the least I can do, Abby, especially since I cannot be your sous chef. You're screwed, aren't you?" Anton's voice is filled with guilt.

"Pretty much, yeah," I admit, forcing a laugh. "But it's not your fault. Get better, okay?"

“Will do. Good luck finding someone.”

I finally press the ‘end call’ button and stand here for a moment, shaking. Then, it finally comes

“Shit!” I yell, chucking my coffee and croissant into the nearest trash can with as much force as my arm can muster. I ignore the puzzled looks from commuters walking by as I huff angrily, gripping my hair. It feels as if the universe is playing some sort of cruel joke on me, and I’m not

I pace back and forth for a few moments, thinking about who might not be sick. But then, my phone starts to buzz. Group texts start

Ethan: “Feeling like crap. Threw up twice

Chloe: “Same here. I’ve never felt so

Leah: “I can barely get out of bed. What happened

Chapter 223

Karl

The incessant buzzing of my phone’s alarm is drowned out by the pounding inside my head—a lingering reminder of last night’s... festivities.

Why did I think that having one more whiskey was a good idea? I was already pretty drunk last night by the time I got home, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Abby.

In a feeble attempt to drown those thoughts out and get some sleep, I guess I thought one more drink was the way to go. I still remember raiding the minibar in my apartment and pouring a rather tall glass of whiskey—no ice—which I proceeded to knock back while giving half of my attention to a crappy movie I found on N*****x.

Oh, how I wish I didn’t drink that whiskey. I feel like shit, and I’m not even fully awake yet.

When I finally crack open my eyes, the red digits of the bedside clock glare back at me: 7:15 a.m.

“Shit,” I groan, rubbing my eyes and yawning. “I’m never

My wolf grumbles inside of me, equally as perturbed by my laziness. “You always say that, and then a week from now, you’ll be saying that a ‘little whiskey never hurt

I roll my eyes, running a hand through my unkempt hair. “Thanks, Captain Obvious. I swear, it’s like drinking a sleeping pill or something. I can never get up early enough when I drink, and yet I also feel like I didn’t sleep

My wolf chuckles softly. “Maybe so, but you should get up. You might want to check on Abby before the

Abby. Just the mere mention of her name sends a weird tingle down my spine. Memories of last night come flooding back in. She looked so beautiful standing next to me in the alley, leaning against the brick wall, her blonde hair awash like the sunset in the light of

I wanted to kiss her so badly, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Not after what happened last time, and especially not when she has this competition to worry

“Yeah,” I say, although hesitantly. “But I don’t think it’s a good idea to bug her right now. She’s probably already at the studio, caught up in a whirlwind of preparations for the competition. I’ll see her later while I’m watching the competition from the audience.”

Ah, the audience. I wanted to give Abby a little surprise, so I bought a front-row ticket. Actually, I bought tickets for everybody. I figure she will be looking for a familiar face when she steps off the stage, crystal trophy in hand—because she’ll be winning first place, I’m sure of it.

“Yeah, well, it wouldn’t hurt to send a text,” my wolf says. “Something nice to wish her luck before the competition. Then you can focus on seeing her in person at the event. It’s a nice gesture, and she might appreciate it. Especially since you’re leaving soon...”

I consider my wolf's words, agreeing inwardly. I am going to be leaving soon, so leaving a good impression before I go might be a good move. Who knows, maybe I can convince her to come back with me. But I'm not holding my breath.

"Just think of it this way," my wolf continues, "if you show your support today, she'll be so grateful for you. And maybe, after the cook-off..."

"Okay, okay, I get it," I growl, pushing my fists lightly into my eyes. "Fine, I'll

My wolf bristles with

Sighing, I roll over and reach for my

But before I can even unlock my phone, which is lying face down on my nightstand—left purposely on 'Do Not Disturb' mode to avoid middle-of-the-night interruptions—there's a sudden knock at my door. Not just a knock, but several bangs, frantic

I squint at the clock. 7:30 a.m. Who in the world would be knocking on my door this early in the

"Who the hell..." I sit up, rubbing

Chapter 224

"Abby? What's going on? Shouldn't you be at the studio?" I ask, blinking in confusion. Did I sleep through the whole day or something? Did I miss the cook-off?

She pushes past me, her eyes scanning me from head to toe like a worried mother as she makes her way into my apartment. "Karl, you're not sick, are you? Please, for the love of god, tell me you're not sick."

I close the door behind her, my brows knitting in confusion. "Sick? No, I'm just a bit hungover, but other than that, I'm fine. Why? What are you doing here?"

"You're sure you're not sick?" Abby presses, leaning in, her eyes still wide but now tinged with a sliver of hope.

I throw my hands up in the air. “Would I lie about that? No, I’m not sick, just hungover, Abby. Now will you tell me why you’re here looking like the world’s about to end when you’re supposed to be heading to the competition?”

She sighs, the tension leaving her shoulders, but only for a second. “Karl, both John and Anton have food poisoning. They can’t even stand, let alone be my sous chefs for the cook-off today!”

I stare at her, my eyes wide with shock. “Food poisoning? From

“Most likely from that seafood dish we had at the party last night,” Abby responds, her voice tinged with a mix of worry and annoyance. “You didn’t eat it,

I shake my head. I don’t like seafood very much, so I

Abby huffs. “Can you believe it? Of all the days for something like this

I look at her, then glance over at my reflection in the mirror hanging on my wall. I look like a disheveled mess, not at all like the Alpha I’m supposed to be. “What can I do, Abby?” I find myself asking, my gaze sliding back

Abby looks me dead in the eyes, her gaze piercing. “I need a sous chef, Karl. And you’re the only one I can think of who might be able to help me out. So, please, will you be my sous chef

Abby

Karl’s eyes go wide as I drop my bomb on him.

“So, please, will you be my sous chef today?” I ask, the question hanging in the air.

There’s a long moment of silence, filled only by the sound of my heart pounding out of my chest, before Karl finally speaks.

“No. Absolutely not. I’m sorry, Abby.”

My jaw drops. All at once, I feel like I’m about to scream and cry and throw up. Karl was my last viable option. I can’t show up to the competition without a sous chef, and I can’t pull out of the

“But... Why?” I ask, my

Karl sighs and runs his hand through his hair. “Look, Abby, I really would love to, but... I just can’t. I’m not suitable in the kitchen, not like that. I’d just ruin your chances

I’m completely taken aback. “Karl, are you being serious right now?” The words erupt from me, unable to be contained any longer. I’m desperate. “How can you say you’re not good enough in the kitchen? You’re good at

He grimaces, crossing his arms. “It’s not about being good at things, Abby. It’s about being good at the right things. I don’t think I’d be any help to you in the kitchen, especially not to

“But, Karl, I’m desperate here. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. You know how much this competition means to me.” My eyes plead with him, taking in the stubble on his jaw, the dark circles under his

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“Look, I know how you feel,” he says, growing exasperated himself. “But with the way my approval ratings are dropping right now in my pack, if word got out that I was working as ‘just a sous chef’ for my ex-wife, people would go feral. It would be a nightmare. For both of us.”

“You’re overthinking it,” I retort. “Trust me, Karl. We’ll keep your identity hidden. I promise.”

He sighs deeply, a troubled look crossing his face. “Look, why don’t you just call Adam? He could help you. And honestly, he kind of owes you.”

The name hits me like a bucket of cold water, instantly raising my hackles. “Adam? Really, Karl? Is that your solution?”

He looks confused, taken aback by my sudden vehemence. “Why not? He’s in the same field; he has the skills. You two know each other well.”

I shake my head, my eyes narrowed. “Adam and I could never work together in the kitchen. We’re like oil and water. Plus, he has his own restaurant; how would it look if he[s my sous chef?”

“What do you mean?” Karl asks,

“Imagine the gossip that would start if Adam helps me win this competition. People will think we’re colluding, or worse, that he’s got ulterior motives. That maybe he would be trying to secretly cater the Alpha party on his own. My sous chef can’t have any strings attached, Karl,” I say, staring at him, willing him

Karl seems lost, his eyes

“I...” he begins, but then stops,

I sigh, passing my hand over my face. The clock is ticking: 7:45 a.m. I’m running out of time. I need to be at the studio by 9 at the latest, and it’s all the way on the other side of the city. It’ll take me a solid 45 minutes to get there on foot, even with the help of the

Then, suddenly, I have an idea.

“Karl,” I say, taking a step closer to him, “do you remember that time four years ago, when we were still married? We had to prep for Leah’s surprise birthday party. You jumped in to help me last-minute, and we were like... a well-oiled machine,” I say, pleading with him with my eyes.

He looks up at me, his eyes searching mine, and for a second, I can see what looks like recognition flash through his gaze.

“Yeah, I remember,” he says softly, dropping his eyes, “but Abby, we’ve been broken up for three years. A lot can change in three years. You’re different. I’m different.”

“Chemistry doesn’t change, Karl. Skills may get rusty, but the way we worked together? That was magic, and magic doesn’t have an expiration date. Hell, think back to all of the times we’ve worked together recently. The kitchen fire, the truffles, all of the dinner rushes...”

He stares at me, and I can see the gears turning in his head. “Do you really think we still have that sort of... chemistry?” he

“Of course,” I say, nodding. “Of course I do. In fact, I almost asked you to be my sous chef before I asked John. But I chickened out, and now I wish I had asked you weeks ago, so we wouldn’t even be here

His eyes lock onto mine, a world of unspoken words reflected in their depths. “Really? You were going to

I nod, my mind flashing back to those days. There was a lot of uncertainty then, and I didn’t know if I could trust Karl. But I’ve grown to trust him more than I ever thought I

“Yes, I was,” I say. “I second-guessed because... well, because we’re not together anymore, and I didn’t know how you’d feel about it. But now, with everything going on—” I gesture toward my phone, which is still open to the group chat, “—I wish I had

Chapter 226

Abby

Five minutes feels like an eternity. I pace Karl’s kitchen as he quickly gets ready in the other room, not even taking a moment to take in the fact that this is Karl’s apartment, and I’m here for the first time ever. The whole place is awash with his scent in an almost intoxicating way, the leather chairs and brick walls a perfect representation of his taste: dark, understated, and professional.

Finally, after what feels like hours, Karl finally steps out of his room. Surprisingly, despite the time crunch, he looks... good.

His hair is combed neatly, and he’s wearing a professional button-down shirt with black slacks and a pair of loafers. Somehow, even in his haste, he always manages to look put-together. I wish I could say the same; I feel like a trainwreck right now.

However, as he puts on his blue surgical mask, I glance at the clock. My eyes widen in horror.

“Oh my god, we have only fifteen minutes to make it!” I exclaim, my throat feeling dry from the hectic morning.

“We’ll make it, Abby. Trust me,” he says, his words muffled behind the mask.

I swallow. “We have to run to the subway. Maybe we can still—”

Karl holds up his car keys with a chuckle that says he has everything under control. The keys jingle against each other as he wiggles them back and forth. “Who needs a subway when you have four wheels?” he asks.

“Drive? Through morning city traffic?” My voice leaps an octave. “Karl, we’d be stuck forever! We’re not making it if we drive. We’re better off on foot.”

He gives me a look that I’ve seen so many times before. It’s his ‘trust me, I got this’ look. “Just trust me, Abby.”

“Okay, fine,” I say with a sigh. “I trust you.”

With my heart in my throat, we rush downstairs and jump into his car. The engine roars to life, and Karl zips out of the parking space moments later like a man on a mission.

“Seatbelt,” he barks.

I click the seatbelt just in time as he swings into traffic, cutting between a taxi and a delivery van with inches to spare. I grip the edges of the seat, white-knuckled, my other hand clutching the pendant of my necklace.

“Karl, are you trying to get us

“Just trying to get us there on time,” he says, his eyes never leaving the road.

I glance at the clock on the dashboard, my stomach lurching. Thirteen minutes to spare. I can't believe we're really attempting this right now. It's terrifying, and yet I can't help but feel a surge of invigorating adrenaline that I haven't felt since the day Karl and I ran from those poachers through the

We approach an intersection, the light teetering dangerously between the edge of yellow and red. Karl pushes the pedal to the floor, and I swear time slows. The light flips red, and another car enters the intersection, horn blaring, coming straight at us.

“KARL!”

He swerves, tires screeching, missing the other car by a hair's breadth. We come to a screeching halt, the other driver laying into his horn and shouting obscenities from his window.

“Go, Karl, just go!” I urge, my eyes widening even further as other drivers begin laying on their horns.

Karl speeds off, and once we're out of the intersection, I punch his arm with a force that surprises even me. “Are you insane? Be more careful! Nothing is worth risking our lives

He looks at me, his eyes meeting mine through the rearview mirror. “And if we didn't make it on time because I didn't take that risk?” he asks.

“What if we got hit?” My voice is a shaky mess, but I can't help it.

“But we didn't,” he says. I groan.

But then we turn a corner, and suddenly, there it is—the TV studio. Karl pulls up to the front, and I glance at the clock again. Five minutes to spare. My heart is racing and my body is trembling, but we made it.

“You’re insane,” I breathe, my fingers still gripping the seat.

“Maybe insane is what you need,” he says.

A few moments later we’re bursting through the double doors, out of breath from sprinting up the steps two at a time.

Inside, it’s like stepping into another world—a world that doesn’t appreciate tardiness. People stare. Whispers fill the room.

The other contestants are already in their uniforms, milling around their stations to familiarize themselves and begin prep work before the show begins. They all look up as we burst in the doors, and I can see it in their gazes, especially Daniel’s: judgment.

“Abby!” The voice booms from across the studio. It’s Mr. Thompson. “What on earth—”

He quickly strides over to us, his eyes squinting in disbelief. When he’s close enough, he yanks us aside like we’re kids caught doing something we shouldn’t.

“Where the hell have you been?” He hisses, his eyes drilling into me. “And where’s your sous chef?”

“John got sick,” I stammer, “so Karl’s stepping

“Sick? Now?” His eyes narrow further, if that’s even possible.

“It was an emergency,” I quickly explain. “He got food poisoning, of all

“Food poisoning?” Mr. Thompson’s eyebrows leap up. “And you’re telling me this now?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice, did I?” I reply, my own frustration bubbling over. “We didn’t exactly have time for

Mr. Thompson glances at Karl, who's still breathing hard from our sprint. "And what about you?"

"Call me 'Ken' today," Karl blurts out, his voice

"'Ken?'" Mr. Thompson repeats incredulously, staring at Karl's blue surgical mask. "Is that going to stay on?"

"Yes," Karl affirms. "For personal reasons, if that's

Mr. Thompson's flicker back and forth between us, and for a second, I think he's going to implode. "You expect me to introduce a masked sous chef named 'Ken' in a live show? What's next, Abby?"

"Look, I know it's last minute," I admit, "but I'm here, despite the circumstances. Isn't that

Chapter 227

Abby

We exit hair and makeup, and I can't help but feel like an impostor beneath this mask of perfectly-caked makeup. Just like yesterday, it feels like an uncomfortable facade, a porcelain mask covering the real Abby. I can't help but wonder to myself: why is this amount of makeup necessary for a cooking show? Shouldn't my abilities be judged, not my face?

I glance over at Karl as we walk out of the hair and makeup room. He's still wearing his blue surgical mask, but the makeup that I can see on his face is much lighter than mine.

"Geez, Abby," he says as he looks at me. "You like like a..."

"Don't," I hiss. I don't want to think about it, not now. Instead, I focus my attention on my chef's jacket. The fabric is stiff and a little itchy from the starching they put it through to look 'camera-perfect', much unlike my own uniform, which is comfortably worn down after years of use.

"Need help with that?" Karl offers, his own jacket already perfectly buttoned.

“No, I’ve got it,” I snap, my nerves fraying. But after another failed attempt, I relent. “Okay, maybe I don’t ‘got it’. Please help.”

Karl moves to button my jacket with a precision that borders on surgical. “There,” he says, stepping back to examine his handiwork.

But I don’t feel perfect; I feel like I’m about to come apart at the

“Three minutes!” a production assistant yells from down the hall, waving a clipboard

Three minutes. The weight of the entire morning—the mad dash, the almost-car crash, the last-minute change in sous chefs—crashes down on

My hands are shaking and my heart is pounding, this damn makeup is too thick and cakey, and this stupid uniform is too stiff and itchy. I feel like a prisoner in my own body right now.

“I can’t do this, Karl,” I say, my voice quivering. “I’m not ready. I didn’t even get to familiarize myself with my station yet like everyone else. How am I supposed to compete?”

“Abby, look at me,” Karl says, taking my trembling hands into his. His grip is firm, grounding.

I look up, and even with the mask, I can feel the intensity of his gaze, willing me to listen. “You’re one of the most—no, you’re the most—dedicated, passionate people I know. You’ve been through so much already just to get here, Abby. You can do this.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” I shoot back, pulling my hands away. “You’re not the one whose career is on the line. If I fail today, it might destroy my restaurant’s reputation.”

“You’re right, I’m not,” he says gently. “But I know what it’s like to have everything riding on one moment. Trust me.”

“How? How can I trust everything will be fine when the whole morning has been a complete

Karl sighs. “I wish I had an answer for you, Abby. I really do. But I don’t. You just need to trust that, no matter what, it’s just one day. One competition. Maybe things won’t go perfectly, but it’ll all be over

His words, in an odd way, make me feel at least a little bit at ease. He’s right; it is just one day. All I have to do is do my best, get through it, and whatever happens, happens.

Right?

Chapter 228

Karl chuckles. The production assistant is waving her clipboard frantically, checking her watch like we’re about to count down to an explosion. Karl takes my hand and we run down the hall, bursting through the doors to the stage. The assistant gestures to where our station is, all the way on the other end. Composing ourselves, we walk stiffly onto the stage.

As we walk into the blinding lights, I can see the other contestants—waiting, watching at their stations. Vanessa is watching from the judges’ stand, and for a moment I expect her to shake her head with disappointment. But instead, she shoots me a subtle wink and a thumbs-up. That alone is enough to make me feel more at ease.

But then, just as we’re passing by the other stations, I hear it: Daniel’s voice, a venomous whisper that cuts through the air, low enough so only Karl and I can hear.

“Just look at her,” Daniel mutters to his sous chef, not even attempting to be subtle about it. “She can’t even get her morning straight without her boyfriend stepping in. Honestly, she has no business being in a professional kitchen.”

My face burns hot, a bristle of indignation bubbling beneath the surface of my skin. I feel Karl tense beside me, his eyes narrowing as he registers Daniel’s words.

“I should say something,” he growls, ready to pounce, but I grab his arm and squeeze, signaling him to stand

I can't let Karl step in, not now. Not when it would only prove Daniel's point that I'm just a homemaker with no place in the kitchen, who needs a man to take care of

"No," I say firmly. "Just ignore her."

Karl shoots me a look as we approach our station. "And just let her trash-talk you?"

"I don't need you to fight my battles Karl."

"I know you don't, but—"

"—but nothing," I cut him off. "Now is not the time."

Karl's eyes search mine for a moment before he finally nods, although I can still sense a stiffness in his posture. "Okay. Fine."

We navigate through the hectic energy of the room, sidestepping frantic production assistants and dodging camera operators with their massive rigs. As we make it to our station, I see Daniel glance my way, his lips stretching into a mean-spirited smirk.

My heart sinks, but I don't let it show. I straighten my posture, lift my chin, and flash a bright, defiant smile. I've worked too hard and come too far to let Daniel or anyone else shake my confidence.

Karl leans into me as we stand by our cooking station, his words just for me. "You

"Of course," I say, the white lie sliding effortlessly off of my tongue. "Why wouldn't I

We spend the next few seconds arranging our knives, aligning our set up, and soaking in the final moments of calm before the storm. It's a calming practice for me, and I allow myself a few moments to familiarize myself as much as I

The air in the studio is electric as the stage crew finishes last-minute preparations and the live audience gets settled. Camera lenses glint in the spotlight, almost blinding

I feel both electrified and terrified at the same time, but right now, I decide to force myself closer to the electrified end of the spectrum. I keep imagining the faces of my friends and staff, the people who matter the most to me, and that keeps me grounded.

Chapter 229

Abby

The stage lights are blinding, but I try to focus on the announcer standing across from me. His voice reverberates through the microphone as he begins his script.

“Ladies and Gentlemen... Welcome to the annual Alpha party cooking competition! I’m your host, Heinrich Williams, and today I’m proud to announce...”

One by one, the contestants and judges are introduced. Their faces are projected onto giant screens that hang above us, and with each announcement, the audience cheers and applauds excitedly. The announcer then asks each person a couple of questions, giving them time to promote themselves before the show begins.

As I’m waiting for my turn, though, all I can feel is crippling, soul-crushing fear. How do I look? How will the audience respond? What will I say when it’s my turn to talk? I wasn’t expecting all of this, and all I can think is that maybe if I had showed up on time this morning, maybe I wouldn’t be feeling so unprepared.

But all the while, Karl stands beside me, steady as a rock. When I glance over at him, I catch his brown eyes glinting in the light of the stage lights, and something about it is grounding.

In an odd way, I’m almost glad to have him here. I thought that it would be a disaster not to have John by my side, but this feels like a happy accident. My wolf roils inside of me at his presence, attracted to his scent and closeness as if he’s a lifeline in a stormy sea.

“And now,” the announcer booms, pulling me back to reality, “a chef who captured your hearts with her interview yesterday. With her unconventional staff and eloquent words about inclusivity in the culinary world—please give a warm welcome to Abby!”

Suddenly, the crowd erupts into cheers, louder and more excitedly than I could have ever imagined.

I blink in surprise.

Signs, actual signs with my name on them, being held up by people in the audience. The word ‘Abby’ is written in colorful letters, hearts dotting the ‘i’ in phrases like “Go Abby!” and “Team Abby”.

I feel Karl nudge my arm gently, a signal for me to step forward. My shoes click against the stage floor as I move stiffly toward the microphone, my heart still racing but now in a different way than before.

Is it true? Do people... really like me?

“Welcome, Abby,” the announcer says with a wide grin as I approach, outstretching his arm. “Say a few words for your fans.”

As I lean in, ready to speak, my eyes drift across the stage and land on Daniel. He’s stationed a few yards from me, and I can see the disdain etched into his features, his lips curling into a sneer.

For a fleeting second, I wonder if I should adjust my speech to throw shade his way. It would be so satisfying, to see his sneer turn into a pout, to see his shoulders slump in defeat as he gets called out publicly for his nasty comments.

But I can’t; that’s not me, and it’s definitely not why I’m here. Why stoop to her

I draw a deep breath and let it out slowly, steadying myself by gripping the mic

“Wow,” I breathe, my voice bouncing back at me from the echo in the room in a jarring way. There’s a bit of mic feedback from standing too close, and the room falls silent. All eyes are on me. I clear my throat, feeling my face get unbearably

Glancing at the announcer, he merely grins and nods, mouthing the words, “Go on.”

I take another deep breath. “F-First of all, thank you...” I pause again, noticing the tremor in my voice. “Thank you... for the amazing welcome,” I manage to continue. “I’m... I’m

Chapter 230

A little girl with a costume chef’s hat on. It’s a little too big for her head, causing it to fall into her eyes. She pushes it up out of her face, shooting me a toothless grin as she holds up a handmade sign that reads, in haphazard crayon...

“ABBY, U R MY HERO!”

Tears come to my eyes, but I blink them away. Suddenly, I’ve found my voice again. I clear my throat, stand up straight, and start to speak.

“I want to say how grateful I am to stand here as a woman in a profession that has long been dominated by men. And not just as a woman, but as someone who believes in the power of diversity, of giving chances to those who are often overlooked.”

I pause, choosing my words carefully. “But it’s not just about me,” I continue, “it’s about all of us here. The incredible chefs who have come to compete, the staff who make this show possible, and you—the audience, who make us want to be better.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Daniel roll his eyes, his scowl deepening. For a moment, I contemplate going further, confronting his negativity right here and now, but that won’t work here. It’s not right. It’s not

“Again, thank you for all of the love,” I continue, “but please, I ask you to extend the same love to my opponents—no, not my opponents, but rather my partners, my fellow chefs—because, at the end of the day, we’re all here for the same reason: to celebrate the art of cooking, to challenge ourselves, and most of all, to engage in a friendly competition.”

A tidal wave of applause and cheers takes over the studio. I lean back from the microphone, my eyes sweeping across the faces of the audience, then to my fellow contestants, and lastly to Karl, who gives me an approving nod.

“No matter who takes home the prize today,” I add, “what truly matters is that we come together as a community, cheering each other on, despite our hang-ups and reservations. That’s the real victory, and it’s one we can all

My eyes meet Daniel’s once more. He’s still scowling at me, but I suddenly don’t care anymore. Because to me, the most important thing is that little girl in the audience—her hat too big for her head, her grin missing teeth, and her heart full of admiration. And even if I don’t win today, I will try my hardest... for

The announcer grins, taking the microphone back. “What a lovely speech,” he begins, to which there’s another round of cheers before he continues. “Abby, the crowd clearly loves you, but we’re all dying to know— who is your sous chef for today?”

My eyes dart to Karl, whose eyes glint in the lights.

“He goes by the name ‘Ken,’” I say. “If you all don’t mind, he has asked to keep his identity private for the duration of this competition.”

A hush falls over the crowd. But much to my surprise, the announcer’s grin only stretches wider, his eyes twinkling with delight. “Ah, a mystery! Our viewers are going to love this. What a fun twist to the show!”

The crowd murmurs excitedly, and I glance at Karl again. He nods subtly, approving of my choice of words. The announcer sends me back to my station, and Karl nudges me, shooting me a thumbs-up under the table.

But I can’t help but wonder... With all of this love, all of this intrigue, what will happen if I disappoint my ‘fans’

However, I have to push these thoughts aside, reminding myself that I need to focus. The show is about to begin, and I can’t be thinking about potential failure. Not

“And now, for the first course!” the announcer booms, opening an envelope with a flourish. “Let’s see here... Ah! Today, our chefs will

The studio seems to fall silent, but my heart pounds so loud I’m sure they could hear it all the way in the back of the audience.

“...A classic first course... Duck Pâté en Croûte!”