

His Kickass 231

Chapter 231

Abby

Duck. Pork. A flaky pastry dough.

It should be easy. I've practiced it a hundred times, tasted it a thousand. It's one of my favorite French dishes to make, and yet, as the stage descends into organized chaos...

I'm frozen.

My eyes are wide like a deer in headlights. The deafening roar of the crowd, the sound of voices and cooking utensils, the movement of the cameras and the announcer's voice booming over the microphone—all of it is too much.

Suddenly, I feel as though I'm being transported back in time, back to a time when I was much younger...

It was my first year of culinary school, the end of my first semester. For our final project, we were supposed to compete in a style not all that much unlike the cook-off, minus the sky-high stakes and the television production of it all.

The class was gathered around our stainless steel tables, dressed in our fresh white chef's uniforms, as our professor—Chef Andrews—paced back and forth in front of us, announcing our task for the

"Today," he announced, "you will be preparing beef stroganoff. A simple dish but one that demands attention to detail. I expect each and every one of you to utilize the techniques we have been practicing all semester. You may

As the class launched into action, I felt my hands go clammy. I was at my station, my ingredients in front of me, but my mind went blank.

How could I forget something as basic as beef stroganoff? I had made it a dozen times before, but at that moment, it felt as though someone had wiped my mind clean.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember how to get it started. The ingredients in front of me felt foreign, and I felt utterly lost.

My classmates seemed to be taking on the task just fine, dicing, searing, and seasoning as if they were born with a skillet in their hand. Then there was Michael, the guy who treated every class like a personal performance.

He sauntered over to my station, an unpleasant grin on his face.

"Hey, Abby, what's the matter? Cat got your tongue or did you forget how to cook?"

I looked at him, struggling to muster a response.

"No, I... I know how to make it. Just... taking it all in," I stammered, my face turning red.

Michael chuckled as though he was savoring my discomfort. "You women just don't know how to act under pressure. Maybe you'd be better suited for office work or something more..."

Before I could answer, Michael walked away, leaving me astounded. That day, I managed to scrape together a haphazard version of the classic dish, and I just barely passed. I never forgot the words he said to me... that women couldn't act under

Was that true? Was I one of those 'women' who couldn't act under pressure? Was I doomed to give up on my dreams, all because of performance anxiety?

...Out of seemingly nowhere, a nudge from Karl snaps me back to the present, pulling me out of the dark haze of my distant memories. I'm not in culinary school anymore; I'm here, on this stage, surrounded by frantic movements of my contestants and the roar of the crowd.

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“On it,” he responds, jogging toward the pantry. He returns a few moments later, and we swap places.

“Make sure to turn the duck and sear it evenly,” I call out as I begin to mix the ingredients together to make the dough. “Use the red wine for moisture. Yeah, just like that, perfect...”

...

When the buzzer blares, signaling the end of the round, I step back and take a look at my dish.

It’s beautiful—each element perfectly executed, just like I rehearsed a million times in my head. The plate practically glows under the stage lights, and I can’t help but feel a surge of pride course through my body.

The judges make their way around, forks poised, eyes narrowed in concentration. I watch as they reach Daniel’s station. He stands tall, his chin held high, as they taste her creation. My heart pounds in my chest, each thud echoing my mounting

Finally, they come to my

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen,” I say, pushing my plate forward. “I hope you enjoy my rendition of duck pâté en croûte. I incorporated a hint of black pepper into the pastry, which I believe adds a savory kick in a subtle way.”

The first judge takes a bite and nods approvingly, her eyes meeting mine in a silent communication of respect. The second judge, too, gives a

But then, there’s Logan—the Logan—chef extraordinaire and owner of some of the most renowned restaurants in the world. His gaze is piercing, almost disconcerting, as he takes a bite of my

The seconds stretch out like hours as he chews slowly, deliberately, his face unreadable. And then, a small grimace. My blood runs cold.

“The texture’s off,” he says, setting down his fork. “And you could have used more seasoning. The black pepper isn’t hiding your inadequate flavor.”

I feel like I’ve taken a punch to the gut. The judges move on, but I feel like I’m stuck in a haze, my throat collapsing in on itself. This is only the first round, and yet I already feel like I’ve been tied to the whipping post, and Logan is doling out punishments over black pepper and texture.

Karl, sensing my disappointment, gently squeezes my arm. “Hey, it’s just one judge. His opinion doesn’t define everything,” he whispers as we return to our station.

“I know, Karl,” I whisper. “But what if I make it to the next round and he hates my food again? It’ll only get harder from here.”

Karl’s eyes lock onto mine. “Abby, you’re a brilliant chef. One comment doesn’t erase all the work you’ve put into this. Don’t let it mess with your head.”

Despite his comforting words, the worry clings to me, sticky and persistent. What if Logan’s opinion sways the others? What if his critique is just foreshadowing the rest of the competition?

We return to our station, the tension in the room almost palpable as the judges convene for a final discussion. I find myself absentmindedly rearranging utensils on my workspace, my hands trembling. All I can think about is that little girl up there, her spirits fading as her so-called ‘hero’ gets eliminated on the first

But then, finally, the judges return.

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Abby

“And the contestants moving on to the final round are... Abby, Bryan, and Daniel.”

The announcer’s voice sparks an explosion of cheers.

“Abby, you’ve done it!” Karl’s voice carries over to me through the noise, and I turn to face him, my smile so wide it almost hurts.

“I know,” I breathe out, the words barely a whisper. I’ve made it to the next round. I can’t believe it, especially after Logan’s negative comments about my food.

The assistant holds up a sign indicating a fifteen-minute break, which is sorely needed after spending the past hour under the hot stage lights. Karl nudges me forward, steering us through the maze of equipment and fellow competitors, past the spot where Frederick’s station now lies abandoned.

“Don’t let Logan get into your head. You’re in the top three for a reason,” Karl murmurs into my ear as we push through the double doors into the breakroom, a cool breeze from the AC blowing into our sweaty faces.

Karl walks over to the water cooler, grabbing a cup. He fills it and hands it to me, his gaze holding mine.

“Thanks,” I say, chugging the cool liquid in three swift gulps.

“Abby, you’ve done great so far,” he says, taking the cup from me and filling it again. “Despite Logan’s comments. I could tell Vanessa really loved your dish,

“I know,” I say with a nod, taking the cup from him again. Our fingers brush, and there’s a slight static shock that fills me with a combination of confidence and bashfulness. “She really did love it. Logan, on the

Karl shrugs. “He’s just one judge,” he says gently. “Just keep trying your best. Remember, there may be fewer contestants with each round, but there will always be three judges. His opinion only holds one third of

I take another sip, my mind whirring with possibilities. “Yeah, but one third is still a lot,” I

Karl pushes off the counter, his own plastic cup crunching in his hand. “Sure. But you’ve handled a lot more than

A glance at the clock tells me there's still time before we have to head back to stage. I need a moment to myself, a moment to breathe. Excusing myself to the restroom, I step inside and let out a soft sigh

The cool sensation of the marble counter under my fingertips is grounding as I stand in front of the mirror and breathe deeply. My face feels hot, partially from the stage lights and partially from the physical and metaphorical heat of the kitchen, but I

Although, if it weren't for this awful mask of makeup on my face, I'd like to splash some cold water on myself. But I can't. Makeup artist's

I take one more glance in the mirror, my determination resurfacing. Karl is right; Logan's comments couldn't possibly be the deciding factor of the entire competition. If anything, it should serve as motivation to make an even better dish in the next

As I step out of the bathroom a few moments later, Karl is waiting for me, still leaning against "Almost time to head back," he says, glancing at his watch.

"Almost time to win the next round," I correct him.

"Win?" an all-too familiar voice calls out.

Just then, the door swings open and Daniel steps into the room. There's a sneer on his face.

"Looks like Abby is the people's favorite out there," he drawls. "But popularity isn't a skill, is it?"

I freeze, every fiber of my being tightening. For a moment, it feels as though the room's temperature drops a few degrees, and a chill runs down my spine.

Karl's beside me in an instant. "Not that it matters," Daniel continues, inspecting his nails. "Once they see past the sweet facade, they'll realize you're just a girly girl playing chef. We all know how you got your certification, don't we?"

“What are you implying?” I hiss, taking a step forward.

“Oh, as if you don’t know,” Daniel says with that signature smirk of his. “I’ve known girls like you before. You probably slept your way through culinary school, didn’t you? How many of your professors did you have to blow to pass your classes, hm?”

The implication hits me like a punch to the gut. My mind races to Vanessa’s words from yesterday, how women—even ones like her—face discrimination in this male-dominated field. I want to repeat her words, to make Daniel see the error of his views, but my tongue fails me, and I’m left

“Cat got your tongue, Abby?” Daniel taunts, stepping closer. “Or is it too hard for your little female brain to comprehend what

I want to lash out, to defend not just my honor but that of every woman who’s been reduced to such baseless, spiteful stereotypes. I want to shout about the hours I’ve poured into perfecting my craft, the sacrifices, the relentless pursuit of a passion that knows

But this isn’t the time or place. I won’t give him

Instead, I meet his gaze, and in my silence, I feel somehow stronger. I think of Vanessa, of her iron will, of her resilience. I channel it now, my stance firm, my

Just then, Karl steps in, his voice a low growl. “That’s

But Daniel is clearly not willing to back down so easily. “I think miss ‘strong, independent female chef’ can handle herself, don’t you think... ‘Ken?’” he asks, his eyes sliding over to Karl in an almost knowing sort of

Karl’s hand grips my shoulder. “Ignore him, Abby. He’s just trying to get in your

Suddenly, the PA system crackles to

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Abby

The director holds up three fingers, his mouth moving silently as he counts down to live. Three... two... one.

“And... we’re back!” The announcer's voice booms across the studio, and the audience erupts into cheers and applause as an assistant holds up cue cards out of the camera’s view. “What a whirlwind first round, folks! Let’s give a round of applause to our winners so far: Abby, Bryan, and Daniel!”

The announcer’s voice then turns our attention toward the contestant who lost last round. “It was a tough loss for Frederick, but that’s the nature of the game!” he says.

The judges then come into the spotlight, and Logan’s words slice through the warmth of the stage lights.

“The first round was child’s play,” he says. “Now, we begin to separate the good eggs...” His eyes skewer me from across the room, and I resist the urge to look away. “From the

Karl’s eyes flit over to me, but I ignore them. I keep my smile plastered on my face, urging myself to ignore the ghost of Logan and Daniel’s words, to place my entire focus on the real reason why I’m here: to

Vanessa’s tone, by contrast, is a comfort. “I expect the best from all of our lovely contestants,” she says, her smile sweeping the stage. “And most of all, let’s appreciate why we’re here today: to celebrate cuisine in all of

As the judges return to their stand, the announcer draws in a deep

“Contestants,” he starts, the studio falling eerily silent. “We’re about to sweeten the pot! Forget the entrees; we’re diving into desserts this round! A limoncello and pistachio tiramisu is

A murmur ripples through the crowd, and a knot of anxiety begins to twist in my gut.

“Dessert?” I repeat softly, my mind racing through the preparations that I wasn’t expecting to make until the third round.

Karl leans in, his whisper barely audible over the buzz of the audience. “Didn’t see that coming, did we? You’ve got any dessert tricks up your sleeve?” he asks.

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Maybe one or two, but tiramisu is a whole different beast,” I answer. “Luckily for us, I’ve practiced this recipe. So I think we should be okay.”

Karl grins, the tension leaving his eyes for the first time since the announcement. “And that’s why you’ll win; because you’re

“Yeah, well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,”

I take in the array of ingredients that I didn’t have a chance to properly familiarize myself with this morning: the standing mixer, the fragrant spices, the proofing rack. I begin making a list in my head of what I’ll need, which spices will best suit the flavor, what I could incorporate for an extra kick that will make my dish stand

Just then, the director gives us the cue. We’re just moments away from the signal to start, the final seconds ticking

The announcer raises his voice, and I feel Karl’s hand grip mine for a fleeting moment—it sends a shiver through my body, and I find myself squeezing back, the knot in my throat loosening ever so slightly as his

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I move toward the standing mixer, throwing ingredients in, taking care to measure with conviction. Cooking is one thing, but making is another; there is no room for measuring mistakes. An extra tablespoon of sugar could ruin the whole dish.

Karl grins, his voice cutting through the tension. “Don’t forget to breathe, Abby,” he reminds me, shooting me a wink from across the table.

I let out a breath. “I’m breathing.”

“Yeah, sure,” he says, sliding the bowl of lemon zest toward me. “Everyone knows that breathing involves keeping your chest perfectly still, your shoulders stiff, your face red.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Alright, fine. You’ve got me.”

We move in sync for a little while longer, zesting and whipping. The timer is counting down faster than I expected, but I’m not worried.

Until, that is, I reach for the nutmeg—only to pop open the lid and wince at the overwhelming scent of cumin.

Karl looks up, eyes narrowing. “That’s not

“No, it’s not.” I frantically search for the correct spice, but time is slipping through my fingers. “Maybe the labels got messed up.” I pick up another jar, pop open the lid, and inhale. But the jar, labeled ‘cinnamon’ this time, smells like

“Huh?” I mutter, my panic rising. “Paprika in the cinnamon jar? What’s going on

Karl is already on the move, reaching into our spice cupboard up to his elbow. He eventually pulls out another jar labeled ‘nutmeg’ and hands it to me. “Here, this one is bound to be the right one. The other must have gotten mixed

Nodding, I grab the jar. A quick glance at the clock makes my heart leap into my chest; I’ve wasted more time hunting for spices than I would have liked, and the camera is on me, documenting my struggle. Stifling a curse, I dump the nutmeg into the mixture and get back to work.

We scramble to catch up with the other contestants, but the lost minutes feel like a lifetime. I can’t shake the feeling that something isn’t right, that this mix-up was more than just an accident.

“Karl, these spices,” I hiss, whisking furiously, “do you think—”

“—Sabotage?” he finishes. I nod, and he narrows his eyes. “Don’t worry about it right now, Abby. Not enough time.”

Karl is right. I’m gritting my teeth, my mind racing with suspicions I can’t afford to entertain right now. The clock is ticking, and the tiramisu is only halfway done.

“Pass the pistachios,” I say next, my voice strangely steady despite the pounding in

Karl hands them over without a word, his focus completely dialed in on

The mascarpone turns out a little bit clumpier than I would like, but the clock isn’t slowing down, and the other contestants are already layering their tiramisu. “Come on, we have to layer,” I murmur, slamming the dish on the counter. Karl, sensing my anxiety, begins laying the lady fingers inside, and I follow suit with a layer of

“You’ll be fine,” Karl assures me as he glances at the clock. But I’m not immune to the trepidation in his voice; we’ve only got two minutes

As we assemble the final layer, my hands shake, dusting the pistachios on top with less grace than I would like. The tiramisu doesn’t look like the masterpiece I envisioned; it’s messier, its layers are uneven, and the mascarpone

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Abby

The buzzer goes off, and the contestants place down their dishes, stepping back from their stations. The room is alive with murmurs, excitement from the crowd as their eyes scan the three dishes on the stage. The judges step down from their booth, their gazes inscrutable.

My hands tremble, still hovering over the tiramisu’s uneven surface— it’s a mocking reminder of the chaos just moments before, but I could fix it, at least a little. Maybe no one would even notice.

My dish is not even close to perfect, far from the image I had in my head, and every fiber of my being screams to adjust the messy dusting of pistachios just a little bit, just so I can make it look a tiny bit more presentable.

But before my fingers can act, I catch Logan's cold glare, halting me, his disapproval crystal clear. I quickly pull my hands away, feeling my face turn what I can only imagine is the deepest shade of red ever.

We all stand back, the stage now eerily quiet. The judges begin to make their rounds, and I can hear them before I see them.

"Delicious," Logan says, slowly chewing a bite of none other than Daniel's tiramisu. "Truly delicious. You've outdone yourself, Daniel."

"Thank you, Logan," Daniel says with a nod. His eyes flicker over to me, and I feel a twinge of something bubbling inside of me, a fury that makes me want to lash out. Did Daniel switch my spices? I wouldn't put it past him.

The judges approach Bryan next. I can't quite make out what they say this time, but their expressions tell me that they like his dish. Vanessa rolls her eyes back as she tastes the mascarpone, a subtle "Oh my god..." escaping her lips.

Shit. She loves it. And now, it's just me left; me, with my ugly tiramisu. How can I even compare if they love the others' dishes so

"And the best for last." Vanessa's voice is sweet, almost too sweet, as she addresses me, pulling me out of my pit of dread. "Hello,

All I can do is offer a tense smile, nodding politely as Vanessa picks up a spoon and delicately lifts a bit of the lumpy tiramisu to her

She chews thoughtfully, her eyes closing for a brief moment. Then, her expression shifts ever

I feel my blood run cold. It's not a grimace, but it's certainly not satisfaction

"Did you use any spices out of the ordinary, Abby?"

I feel the color drain from my face. "Just... Just nutmeg," I reply, my

"Hm." Vanessa's hum is low and confused as she beckons Logan over with a tilt of her

Logan shoots me a look as he approaches. I brace myself, recalling the misplaced spices, the unsettling suspicion of sabotage, the way the mascarpone clumped up when I added the 'nutmeg' to

I almost want to curse out loud; I should have checked it just to be safe, but I was running out of time.

Logan slowly takes a spoonful. His eyes, a stormy gray color, never leave mine as he tastes the dish.

"That's cardamom," he states flatly, putting the spoon down with a clatter, his face twisting into a scowl. "Not nutmeg."

My stomach churns, a sour taste suddenly taking over my mouth. "I—I must have grabbed the wrong spice," I stammer, though the explanation sounds feeble even to my own ears.

Logan's gaze is unsympathetic, and his words cut deeper than I expected. "It's clear you didn't put as much effort into this dish. I expected more from you, Abby," he says coldly.

I feel like I'm shrinking. It's not possible; it can't be possible. I know my spices.

"It... It can't be," I find myself blurting out before I can stop myself.

With a scowl, Logan holds up a clean spoon for me. "Here. Try for yourself."

With shaking hands, I tentatively take the spoon and dig it into the tiramisu as the weight of everyone's eyes fall on me. It's all I can do to even get the spoon to my mouth without collapsing, and when I do, my gut wrenches.

Logan is right. It's not nutmeg. Not even

My heart races, threatening to burst from my chest, but I can't just stand here and not defend myself. "My station was sabotaged," I blurt out. "Someone switched my ingredients. They were all in the wrong

The judges' eyebrows all seem to arch in

"Sabotaged?" Logan repeats the word as if it tastes sour on his tongue. "It isn't a good look for a contestant to be accusing others of tampering with her

My resolve begins to crumble, but I can't let go of the truth. "But it's not an accusation if it's true," I counter, desperate for him to understand, to see the sincerity in my

But he doesn't waver. "You should be ashamed," he says, and it feels like a slap. "A good chef should be more knowledgeable about her ingredients. You should be able to tell the difference between two such distinct spices, with or without a label on the

Shame, hot and prickly, spreads across my cheeks. "I—I do know the difference," I stammer, my voice a mere whisper now. "It was just... the heat of the moment,

Logan's expression is full of disdain. "Excuses," he cuts me off with a wave of his hand. "In this kitchen, we take responsibility for our

I want to argue, to fight, to scream that I am not at fault. But the steel in his gaze silences me. My shoulders slump, and I mutter a quiet,

Chapter 237

Abby

I'm sitting by myself in the breakroom, my fingers wrapped around a cardboard cup of coffee from the vending machine. The coffee has already gone cold, but it's not like I was drinking it anyway. The taste was too bitter for what I need right now.

Karl stepped out just a few minutes ago. He said he had to make a call, and I'm too numb to question it. Right now, I welcome the silence of the breakroom. I needed it after that little display on the stage.

I can still feel the heat from the stage lights, the biting sting of Logan's harsh words. "You should know your ingredients." His voice replays in my head like a broken record, his voice pulsing alongside the pounding headache I have right now.

Suddenly, the door swings open, and Bryan strides in, his phone pressed to his ear. He shoots me a distracted nod before he murmurs an apology and exits the room, no doubt seeking privacy for his call. My solitude is short-lived.

Then, much to my chagrin, Daniel enters the breakroom just as Bryan slips out. He stops short when he sees me, his eyes lip up with a smirk that makes my

"Tough break out there, Abby," he says, pouring himself a coffee. No sugar, no cream. Black, just as I expected. Just like his

"Did you have anything to do with it?" The accusation leaps from my lips before I can weigh the

He turns, leaning back against the counter, his eyes narrowing into slits. "Tamper with your station? Please. I don't play games, Abby. I don't

"But the spices were switched. You were the only one who—" I start, but my voice trails off. I shouldn't finish. It's too much of a leap, and I don't have any evidence.

"Even if I did, which I didn't, you should have known," he hisses. "A chef should know her ingredients by smell, by taste." Daniel's sneer is sharp and pointed directly at me. There's a sort of gleeful malice behind his eyes, and I can tell he's lying through his teeth.

My hands clench into fists around the cardboard cup, crushing it a little with my grip. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I blurt out.

His chuckle is low, wry, voice of any real humor. "What I enjoy, Abby, is watching someone who's out of her depth flail around and make a fool out of herself on live television."

The coffee is forgotten as I stand, my chair scraping back with a noise that feels all too loud in the quiet room. "So, what, this is fun for you? Sabotaging

Daniel shrugs casually, but I know what he's thinking. "You sabotage yourself, Abby. You don't need my help to do that," he says, his lips turning up at

"And you think because you've won a few rounds, you're some kind of cooking prodigy yourself?" I hiss, curling my hands into fists at

Daniel takes a step forward, his eyes never leaving mine. "I know I'm good. But you?"

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"I know my way around a kitchen better than you ever will," I retort, although the words feel hollow even as I spit them out.

"Abby, Abby, Abby," he tuts, pushing off from the counter to take another step closer. "You can barely navigate your way out of a paper bag. This competition? It's not for the weak. It's not for the passionless. And it's definitely not for someone who can't tell nutmeg from cardamom."

His words are like a slap to the face, a reminder of the humiliation on stage. Of Logan's disappointment. Of Vanessa's confused expression. Of the tiramisu that now represents my biggest failure, all on live television.

Logan turns to leave, his posture as casual as ever as he saunters over toward the door, as if this is over.

But then, I suddenly have an epiphany.

“You’re scared,” I blurt out. “That’s why you’re trying to sabotage me. You’re scared that I might outshine you. That a woman, of all people, might beat you in this competition. And you can’t stand

Daniel freezes for a moment, and for the briefest of seconds, I think I see a slight tremble in his shoulders. It’s so quick that I almost miss it, but it’s there. He slowly turns around, and there’s that signature smirk of his again, but I can sense the hollowness behind

“You wish,” he says, lifting his coffee cup to his lips. “As if I’d ever be scared of

“Like what?” I ask, placing my hands on my hips. “A

Daniel meets my gaze with a flash in his eyes. “Not just a woman. A slut.”

I can feel the tips of my fingers go cold from the sudden shock of his words. “Excuse me?” I grit out through clenched teeth.

“It’s shameful, really,” he states, taking a step toward me. His posture almost feels aggressive, and I find myself taking a shaky step back, my resolve wavering. He chuckles. “A woman attempting to muscle her way into a space where she’s clearly outmatched. It tarnishes the image of dedicated chefs—real chefs—who have a genuine passion and talent for cooking.:

As Daniel speaks, he closes the distance between us. I find myself involuntarily stepping back, trying to put space between us, until my back is up against the counter. But Daniel just keeps coming until he’s mere inches away from my face.

“You think because I’m a woman, I can’t be as good as any man in the kitchen?” I ask, my voice trembling more than I

There’s a tense silence for a moment, broken only by a chuckle from Daniel’s lips. “Good? Abby, even if I had tampered with your station—which I assure you I did not—you would have found some way to botch it up because, frankly, you don’t know the first thing

“And opening a restaurant?” he continues before I can retort, each word deliberate, punctuated with a sneer. “Maybe after today’s performance, or should I say lack thereof, you’ll realize you have no place in this industry. Shut it down. Go home. Let a man take care of you for a change. It’s in your nature,

I open my mouth to retort, but before I can, I’m abruptly cut

Chapter 239

Abby

Daniel and I fall silent as Bryan and Mr. Thompson suddenly walk into the room, Daniel’s earlier remarks still ringing in my ears.

But as my eyes flick from Bryan, whose eyes are red-rimmed and swollen, to Mr. Thompson, whose face is somber, I suddenly find myself forgetting all about my argument with Daniel.

“Bryan, are you okay?” I ask, taking a step forward.

He looks up, his eyes full of an emotion that strikes me instantly. Bryan has been the quiet sort throughout this entire competition, focused entirely on his work. But now, he suddenly appears as though his very soul is slipping out from him, like the rug was just ripped from beneath his feet.

“It’s private, Abby—” Mr. Thompson begins, but Bryan cuts him off.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Bryan says. “It’s just... um...” His voice quivers, and there’s a pause before he finally takes a deep breath and speaks. “It’s... It’s my mom,” he whispers, the words catching in his throat. “She passed away. Just now.”

The room tilts a little, my heart dropping to my stomach. The competition, the rivalry, the argument with Daniel—all of it suddenly seems to fade into nothingness.

“Oh, Bryan... I’m so sorry,” I murmur.

He nods. "She wasn't doing so well, and has been in the hospital for a while. I should have been by her side, but..." He shakes his head now, clearly regretful. "I was here instead."

"What now, then?" Daniel asks, his posture stiff. I glance over at him, and there's a glint in his eyes, something telling me that he's only thinking of himself right now. Empathy isn't in the cards for him; not today, and maybe not

"I'm dropping out."

Bryan's words hit me like a ton of bricks. I'm at a loss for words, my eyes wide, my mouth

Then Mr. Thompson speaks up, his usually jovial demeanor masked by a sense of regret and urgency. "We're very sorry to see you go, Bryan," he says gently. "But it's your choice. Feel free to go; we'll handle

"And what about the contest?" Daniel blurts out, that glint in his eyes

Mr. Thompson turns, his hands clasped behind his back, a sure sign that he's about to switch into his professional mode. "The final round will proceed with you two, Abby and

Daniel's eyes narrow. "But

"The scores of the second round will not be taken into account," Mr. Thompson interrupts, shooting Daniel a warning look. "Regardless of scores, you are now the two remaining

There's a moment where I feel a bitter sense of relief mingled with guilt, the taste more acrid than that of my bitter tiramisu. But I push it aside, focusing instead on Bryan, whose world has

"Bryan..." I start, taking a few steps toward him, my own troubles feeling trivial and small now. "I... If there's anything—"

But Bryan's shoulders tremble slightly as I speak, and I can't just stand here anymore. As if I'm moving on autopilot, I step forward and wrap my arms around him in a hug. It's awkward, unexpected—especially from me, to him, this man I barely know—but in an odd way, I know he needs this right now.

He stiffens, like he's just been slapped. But then, after a few moments, he seems to relax. His arms tentatively wrap around my shoulders, hiding me back. There's a sense of surprise in his embrace, as he was no doubt not expecting a comforting hug from one of his opponents.

We stand here for a few moments, locked in this embrace. The room is silent, and I can feel Daniel's eyes boring holes into the back of my head—but more than anything, I can feel Bryan's shoulders tremble, a silent sob quaking his body. And right now, that's all that matters.

The hug breaks after a few long moments, and Bryan finally steps back. "Thank you," he says, his voice a cracked whisper. "I didn't expect—"

"There's no need," I whisper, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "Go and be with your family. We'll be thinking of you, Bryan."

He nods, and with a last glance, he turns and walks out of the breakroom, out of the competition, out of this chapter of his life. Mr. Thompson follows on his heels, and then the door clicks shut, and Daniel and I are now engulfed in a silence so profound it practically makes my ears pop.

Then, as if on cue, Karl reappears, his usual quick stride a bit slower, his forehead creased.

"Everything okay here?" he asks, eyes searching the room, as if he could sense the shift in the air.

I push away from the table I've been leaning on to steady myself, meeting him halfway in the middle of the room. "It's Bryan... he's out. His mother passed away." My voice is a whisper, cracked and strained with a combination of surprise

Karl's face pales. "Oh no, that's terrible."

“And because of that, Mr. Thompson said the second round scores are scrapped. It’s just Daniel and me in the

He nods, processing the information. “Right, the final...” His voice trails off, a hand coming up to rub the back of his

Silence swells between us, and I can’t help but notice the way his eyes dodge mine. “Hey... Where did you go earlier?” I ask, curiosity lacing my

He stiffens as though the question just hit a nerve. “Just... I had to make a call. Family stuff, you know?” he says, although I know Karl too well to ignore the lie in

I’m about to dig deeper when Daniel’s voice cuts through the room. I almost forgot he was even there, still standing in the corner

“Family stuff, huh? Must be catching.” There’s a sneer in his voice, and when I turn to him, his eyes are locked on Karl with a sharpness that sets me

Karl squares his jaw, the muscle ticking. “Something you want to say,

Chapter 240

Abby

The air in the studio feels dense with anticipation as Karl and I walk back to our station together. The crowd murmurs as they become aware of the implications: that only Daniel and I are returning, and Bryan, the third contestant, is nowhere to be found despite the fact that the winners of the second round were never officially announced.

“You okay?” Karl murmurs as we take our spots, standing next to each other with our shoulders touching.

I nod and shrug at the same time, a sense of guilt and trepidation washing over me. “Yes. Sort of. Maybe. I don’t know,” I murmur, clearing my throat subtly.

Karl shoots me a confused look from beneath his blue surgical mask. “What does that mean?” he asks, worry lacing his voice.

I can’t contain my sigh. “It means that, if it weren’t for Bryan’s mother dying, I wouldn’t be standing here right now,” I say quietly. “And I’m not sure how to feel about it, if I’m being honest.”

Karl is silent for a moment before he speaks. “Listen, Abby, I know it’s a shock. But—”

Suddenly, before he can finish, the director holds up his fingers and begins counting down from three. The stage falls silent, and the cameras begin rolling.

The announcer makes his way across the stage, his face more somber now than it was before. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he starts, “before we proceed to the final round, we have an announcement to make.”

My fingers are curled tightly around the edge of my station. I can feel Daniel’s eyes on me, intense and unyielding, even as we face the crowd. A quick glance over at him only serves to prove me right; his eyes are still glinting with that malicious sort of

“Bryan will not be joining us for the final round,” the announcer continues. Murmurs ripple through the live audience. “Due to a personal tragedy, he has chosen to

The murmur turns into a low hum, the audience looking around at one another. The announcer continues. “Bryan’s mother has passed away. Let us have a moment of

As the silence stretches over the crowd, I feel my head bow all on its own. It feels strange, being a finalist only due to a death. A wave of guilt washes over me, knowing that I don’t belong here after my performance in the

Finally, the announcer clears his throat and continues. “Now... the final round will be the biggest test of skill,” he announces. The atmosphere seems to shift, a mixture of tension and excitement winding through the air again. “Our two finalists will be preparing a dish that is both intricate and savory—farro mafaldine with black truffle butter and

My heart lurches.

That dish. My dish.

The one I'd practiced until my hands moved with the memory of it, the one for which I had hunted down those elusive truffles as if they were treasure. It can't be a coincidence. It feels like fate. It feels like a

"No way," I murmur, my breath hitching in my throat.

Karl leans a little closer. "I thought they weren't—"

"Me too," I hiss, my fingers gripping the edge of the counter even harder now. "Trust me, I thought so, too."

Suddenly, the announcer's voice booming over the microphone brings us back to the moment at hand.

"Our finalists have shown exceptional skill to get this far," he booms, breaking through the noise of the crowd. "And now, they will face their final challenge. The stakes have never been higher for Abby and Daniel."

Karl and I shoot another glance at each other. But then, beyond Karl, I see him: Mr. Thompson, standing on the sidelines, looking directly at me.

I shoot Mr. Thompson the subtlest of looks as if to say, "What the hell?" because after all, the last time I saw him in person, he heavily implied that the truffle dish would not be chosen due to the email mishap. And yet, here I am, being expected to cook it.

Mr. Thompson, in return, shoots me something that I don't expect.

A thumbs up and a grin.

He knew. All this time, he knew. He knew that I was in that email chain—maybe he was even the one to add my name to the list—and he knew that the truffle dish would, in fact, be chosen. Is it possible that it was intentional? A way to give me a leg-up when he knew I needed

I can't be sure. All I know is that right now, all of this feels like one big happy accident—because I know how to make this truffle dish like I know the back of my hand. What felt like countless hours were spent practicing with Anton, getting everything perfect, down to every little texture

This is it. This is my chance to win this. This is the edge I have over Daniel, whose face looks like it's made of stone when I glance over at him. His shoulders are stiff, his hands clasped behind his back, that smirk on his face nothing but a

Suddenly, Karl nudges me, bringing me back to reality. I glance up at him to see a glint in his eyes, a grin beneath

"You've got this," he says, his voice low enough so only I can hear. "Are

I can't help but smile. "Yeah. Yeah

Just then, the announcer continues, his finger poised over the buzzer. "And now," he begins, his voice echoing across the studio, "we will commence the final round of this year's Alpha party cooking competition... In

I feel my muscles tense, my senses sharpening, my body hungry to move, to cook, to make the best goddamn truffle dish that these judges have