

## Kickass 256

### Chapter 256

Abby

The door to the restaurant swings open with a familiar creak, and the scent of fresh coffee and bread reaches my nostrils.

It's been two days since Karl left town. Things are finally back in full swing after the competition, but I took the weekend off to recover—not just from the cook-off, but from everything else, too. Now, though, I feel a little more prepared to take on my work.

“Morning, Abby,” Ethan greets, his eyes meeting mine over the bar. He's neck-deep in paperwork; we're all playing catch-up, considering how everyone was sick with food poisoning. I still wonder where that came from in my impeccably clean kitchen, but I suppose that accidents happen.

But then again, after the fire, the ingredient sabotage on the cooking competition, and the food poisoning, I'm beginning to wonder whether anything really was an accident.

I muster a smile. “Morning. Feeling better?”

Ethan nods. “Much. Although, Karl isn't here yet. Have you heard from him?”

That's when my facade starts to crack. Of course I knew that everyone would have to find out eventually, but I guess I just wasn't expecting to have to talk about it right now. But there's no time like the present, right?

“He's...” I pause, clearing my throat, as though that will somehow hide the tremor in my voice. “Karl is gone. He's no longer working with us.”

Ethan raises an eyebrow. Chloe, who just walked into the room with a cup of coffee in her hand, freezes on the spot.

“Karl’s gone?” she asks.

I nod. “Yep. The plan was for him to head back home once the cooking competition was over. Well, it’s over.”

Ethan and Chloe exchange glances. I know what they’re thinking, or at least what Chloe’s thinking: that something else happened. And in a way, I guess it did. But Karl was going home regardless; he has Alpha duties to attend to, and despite everything, I’m wholly grateful for the time he spent here these past few months just to help me.

“Well, that’s a shame,” Ethan says, flipping to another page in his notebook. “I kind of liked Karl. He was a huge help, too.”

“Yeah,” I say, starting to move again toward my office, where I know I can hide at least for a few minutes. “I’m sure we’ll all miss his help.”

But as I walk past Chloe, her eyes meet mine, and I know she knows. Something happened between Karl and me, something that I’m not telling her. And I know, without a doubt, that she’ll pry it out of me sooner or later.

It seems as though she chooses sooner, because she follows me to my office without a word. When I reach the door, she grabs my shoulder, turning me to face her.

“Abby, can we talk?” she asks, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

I nod, bracing myself for whatever lecture I’m about to receive. We slip into my office and shut the door behind us. A moment later, I flick on the lamp on my desk, casting the room in a warm orange glow.

Chloe takes a deep breath, her eyes searching mine. “You can fool them, but not me. I saw how you were with Karl. You have feelings for him, don’t you?”

I can feel the blood drain from my face as my brain scrambles to come up with a solid answer. “Chloe, I—”

“No, don’t try to deny it,” she interrupts, her gaze steady. “I know you, Abby. I saw the way you looked at him. The way you two were around each other. It wasn’t just because of the competition.”

“Well, you were seeing things wrong,” I lie, turning and walking over to my desk. I sink down onto the chair, hoping that my movements won’t bely the fact that my heart is racing a mile a minute. “There’s nothing between me and Karl. Nothing.”

Chloe narrows her eyes, her grip tightening around her mug of coffee. She closes the distance between us and sets her coffee down, then leans her palms on my desk, leaning closer to me as she speaks.