

Kickass 258

Chapter 258

Abby

The smell of roasted coffee beans and fresh pastries fills the air as I step into the brunch spot where Chloe, Lea and I meet up once a week. It's been a tradition of ours for years, and I'm glad to have things back to normal now that the cook-off is over

Normal.

The word feels foreign. After losing the cook-off, followed by Karl's departure, 'normal' feels like something strangely new now. It's weird how things can go precisely back to the way they were before, only for it to feel entirely different than ever.

It's been two weeks since Karl left and since I lost the cook-off, and time feels like it's both standing still and moving too fast all at once.

I feel like I'm lost in a mountain of paperwork and managerial duties, half-finished wine bottles and crumpled books. Right now, my life feels unendingly, irrevocably boring.

And maybe 'boring' is exactly what I need right now.

"Hey, Abby, over here!" Chloe's voice cuts through the low hum of chatter and clinking silverware. I wave, spotting her and Leah at our usual table by the wide bay window.

As I navigate my way through the tables, I rehearse my spiel in my head—because I know they'll ask. I haven't set foot in the kitchen for more than five minutes at a time in the past two weeks. Instead, I've been occupying myself with managerial duties at the restaurant, spending the days in my office.

I know that they're worried about me. It's probably why they reinstated our brunch tradition—as an intervention of sorts. But I can't go back to the kitchen, not now. Maybe not ever.

I slide into the booth, offering a weak smile. "Morning, you two."

Leah's eyes are warm but searching as she looks up from her menu. "How are you holding up? With the Alpha party coming up, I imagine Karl's been on your mind."

I stir my coffee, amazed at my friends' inability to give me a moment to breathe before the probing begins. "I've been busy, you know, with the restaurant. Karl's got his own life, and I've got mine. So, you know, he's not on my mind. Not at all, actually."

Chloe frowns slightly, the way she does when she suspects I'm lying, which I am. "He hasn't tried to contact you?" she asks.

The question lingers in the air, heavy and unwanted. The last time I spoke to Karl was the morning after our almost-hookup. I can still feel the sensation of his fingers on the small of my back, his breath on my ear.

"No," I say, setting down my spoon with a clink. "He hasn't. And why would he? We're both busy people."

I can tell they're not convinced. Chloe and Leah exchange a glance before Leah reaches across the table, her touch gentle on my hand. "You know, Abby, it's okay to miss him. And it's okay to be upset about the cook-off."

I retract my hand, wrapping it around my mug instead. "Honestly, guys, I'm fine. I'm just... reassessing things, you know?"

"Reassessing?" Chloe says. "Is that your new term for hiding in your office and refusing to cook? Reassessing?"