

Kickass 261

Chapter 261

The footage begins, and the scene comes to life in front of my eyes.

It's the morning of the cook-off, the prep time that I missed in the morning. The contestants are busy chatting, chopping, and rearranging while various staff wander around the stage, finishing up last-minute tasks. My station is empty, of course, because I wasn't there yet.

But then, there's Daniel. During a lull in the conversation, he meanders his way over to my station. He stands there for a moment, stretching and looking around nonchalantly, but I can see it: the way he's glancing over his shoulders, the tiny glass bottle he sneakily slips out of his pocket and places on my spice rack.

Then, just as quickly as he placed the first bottle down, he grabs another—one from my rack this time—and slips that one into his pocket. Checking over his shoulders one last time, he walks away.

"What is he doing?" I whisper, leaning closer to watch the footage again.

Mr. Thompson's voice is hardly more than a whisper too. "He's swapping your spices, Abby. Just like you said."

For a moment, it feels as though the room has suddenly flipped upside down. I'm at a loss for words. All I can do is stare at Mr. Thompson, unblinking, my eyes wide.

"Keep watching," he says, nodding his head toward the screen again. "There's more."

My body feels stiff, but I do as he says. The screen jumps forward, and it's the moment when Karl ran to the pantry to get the black truffles.

Time feels like it's standing still. Karl freezes in the pantry in a showdown of wills against Daniel's sous chef.

I can't hear what they're saying, but I can see everything; the other sous chef with his hand in the container of black truffles. He's dropping something inside, something that looks a whole hell of a lot different from the actual black truffles, which are in his other hand.

Karl says something. He points, then holds out his hand, palm facing up. The other sous chef shakes his head and says something else, and then...

Karl steps forward, taking the real black truffles from the sous chef. That's when all hell breaks loose.

The other sous chef stands there for a moment, his eyes searching Karl. And then, suddenly, he grips his wrist out of nowhere and begins to wail. Karl looks around frantically, confused, and now I can see why.

Karl was right; he never touched the sous chef. He only took the truffles from him in an attempt to reveal the sabotage that was occurring. And yet, the security guards dragged him away, and the container of 'black truffles' was left untouched, with the wrong mushrooms inside.

The video ends and there's a lengthy silence in the room. My hand is clamped over my mouth, my eyes wide with shock.

"He... He did sabotage me after all," I finally manage, my voice trembling. "And Karl never touched him."

Mr. Thompson nods, the lines of his face easing ever so slightly. "Yes," he says, leaning forward a little, his eyes trained on me. "And Daniel has been expelled from catering for the Alpha party. His status as winner was revoked."

Chapter 262

Karl

The front door creaks loudly as I push it open, the sound echoing off the walls of the foyer to my all-too-quiet house.

I've just come home from the city, with Abby's words still fresh on my mind. Mistake. Shouldn't have happened. Never happening again. It feels like tiny knives being stuck under my skin over and over again.

All I ever did was try to make her realize that I still cared—that I still loved her. And yet, no matter how hard I tried, she pushed me away.

I toss my keys onto the small table by the door with a sigh. My wolf stirs inside of me, like a persistent nudge in the back of my mind. He wants me to go back, but I won't. Not now, at least. Maybe not ever. God, I don't know.

But right now, I don't have time to think about Abby. My pack needs me. When I step into my office, there's already a pile of papers waiting for me on my desk. It's a welcome distraction right now, and before I know it, I've been lost in paperwork for hours.

By the time I even look up from the pile of papers sitting in front of me, the afternoon light has already waned. It's the tail end of sunset now, with nothing but a few golden rays peeking out over the pink horizon.

Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. Sharp, insistent. I know who it is before he even speaks. Marcus, my Beta. A man who knows me almost as well as I know myself, maybe better in moments like these.

"Karl?" His voice is muffled through the wood, but I can already hear the concern in his voice.

"Come in," I call out, more curtly than I intend.

The door swings open and Marcus steps inside, his eyes quickly taking in my disheveled state.

"You look like hell," he says, never one to mince words. He takes a seat opposite me, his eyes scanning the pile of papers on my desk.

"I feel like it, too," I admit with a wry chuckle, leaning back and letting out a breath that I didn't know I was holding.

Marcus is silent for a moment, his gaze steady, before he speaks. "The pack's talking, Karl."

I bark a short, humorless laugh. "What else is new?"

"You're distracted. It's Abby, isn't it?" He isn't asking; he knows.

I look away. "I'm fine. It's over with Abby. That's all there is to it."

He nods, accepting my words at face value, but I can see the gears turning behind his steely gaze.

"Listen, Karl," he says, his voice taking on that tone that I know all too well, that tone that says that I'm about to receive some counsel that I—more often than not—sorely need. "With the Alpha party coming up, it would be a good look for you to show up with a date."

A date. The word hits me like a ton of bricks. Abby was supposed to be my date, but now, I'm not so sure.

"And why would I need that?" I ask, cocking my head to the side.

He sighs. "Look, with your brother on the verge of waking up, you want all the strength in your approval ratings you can get," he says. "And, as draconian as it sounds, an Alpha with a family on the horizon is going to be better off than one without. And given your recent ratings, I think you'd want that edge over him."

Marcus watches me, waiting for a response, but I remain silent, unsure of what to say. He's completely right; if I want to hold my position as Alpha over my brother, then I need what my brother doesn't have.

A family.

But my family was supposed to be Abby. Look, I know I fucked up, but I thought I made it up to her. And yet, after everything, she's still pushing me away.

“Just think about it,” Marcus urges as though sensing my trepidation. “It would be good for you, good for the pack. Your approval ratings are slipping; this could bolster them.”

Without another word, Marcus stands and slips out of the room. I watch him leave, then wince slightly as the door clicks shut behind him.

Approval ratings. Politics. None of that should matter when it comes to something as profound as family. But Marcus has a point. As Alpha, my personal desires have to take a back seat to the needs of the pack.

I have responsibilities after all, and perhaps it might just be time to meet them head-on.

...

A couple of days go by, and I can't get Marcus' words out of my mind.

Finally, by the third day, I've awoken with a new resolution in my head: I might not be looking for a family just yet in Abby's wake, but I do need a date to the Alpha party. And if that's the case, then I might as well go with someone who could possibly fill that role down the road.

Far, far down the road. But down the road nonetheless.

Despite my wolf's protests, I reach for my phone without a second thought. Marcus picks up on the first ring.

“I need you to find me a date for the party,” I say before he can even get a hello in. It's direct, perhaps too direct, but there's no need to be subtle right now.

There's a beat of silence on the other end before he speaks. “What changed your mind?”

My wolf bristles at the question, and I push down the instinctive annoyance. “Not so much that my mind's changed. More like...”

“Duty,” he says, finishing for me.

“Right. Listen, just make a list,” I say with a newfound conviction. “Good prospects only.”

“Alright, boss. I’ll get right on it.”

Later that day, I’m ensconced in more paperwork when Marcus slips into my office, a stack of papers in his hand.

“This the list?” I ask, holding my hand out.

Chapter 263

Abby

The moment Mr. Thompson utters the words, the whole world seems to stop. I’m still sitting at my desk in my cluttered little office, but I feel as though I’ve been launched into outer space; it’s like that feeling in a dream when you suddenly fall from an impossible height, only to wake up just before you hit the ground.

“Are you... are you serious?” I manage, gripping the edge of my desk to steady myself.

His smile is as reassuring as ever. “Of course, I am, Abby. You think I would joke about something like this?”

It’s hard to breathe. After everything, as though some sort of unseen force suddenly decided to make things right, they want me to cater the Alpha party. Me. Abby. The girl who lost the cook-off miserably on live television. The girl who was sabotaged by a male chef.

“Listen,” Mr. Thompson says, “Vanessa Greene asked to give you another chance. And after what happened... You deserve it.”

My mind feels blown again. Vanessa Greene? As in, my biggest idol, Vanessa Greene? All this time, I thought she looked down on me after the cook-off... And yet she was the one who advocated for me to have another chance?

"I... Mr. Thompson, I don't know what to say," I stammer, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Say you'll do it, Abby. Say you'll prepare a meal that'll knock their socks off," he says, his eyes twinkling with encouragement.

"But what if... what if my food still isn't good enough?" The words tumble out before I can stop them, and my voice quivers slightly, betraying the storm of emotions roiling inside of me.

Mr. Thompson's expression softens, and he places a hand on my shoulder, grounding me in this moment. "Abby, I've always believed in you. Your food has that special something—you've got the talent. Don't let one setback make you doubt yourself."

I take a deep breath. His faith in me is a comfort. "Okay," I say with a nod. "I'll do it."

Mr. Thompson grins. "That's what I wanted to hear. Now, listen—they want you to prepare the meals in front of them. In your kitchen."

My eyes widen. "Here? In the restaurant?"

He nods. "Yes. I assume that won't be a problem for you...?"

My restaurant kitchen; the place I haven't set foot in for the past two weeks. Just the thought of going in there makes me sick, but if it means catering the Alpha party, if it means proving Daniel and all of the other men who doubted me wrong, then it looks like I have no choice.

"Okay," I murmur. "My kitchen. I can do that."

Mr. Thompson's grin widens. "That's the spirit! We'll set everything up for this coming Saturday. It'll be a private meal, just you and the judges. You show them what you're capable of, and that party is yours to cater."

Saturday. It feels both like an eternity away and as if it's looming over me, ready to pounce at any moment.

Chapter 264

I'll have to be at my best on Saturday, to cook like I've never cooked before. I'll need to plan a menu that showcases not just my skills but my spirit. And I'll have to pour every ounce of passion I have onto those plates.

Saturday. The judges. My kitchen.

I can do this. I hope.

...

As I step into my kitchen—my home kitchen, rather than my restaurant kitchen—I stop for a moment, taking in the mess.

Takeout food containers are stacked by the trash can. The counter, rather than being cluttered with cooking utensils, is covered in junk mail and empty drink glasses. The sink is full, and yet I haven't cooked a goddamn thing since I lost the cook-off.

Two weeks.

It's been two whole weeks since I've cooked anything more complex than toast in here. And now, with the chance to cater the Alpha party, my mind is foggier than ever. I can't even come up with a menu, something that would have popped into my mind in an instant two weeks ago.

I need to research. That's what I'll do: I'll research. I'm definitely not procrastinating, right?

Dragging my feet to the counter, I pull open my laptop. Maybe the internet will inspire some brilliance. The keys feel cool under my fingers, and the screen blinks to life, brightening the dimly lit room.

Clicking through recipes, my eyes glaze over. Fusion? Too risky. Classic French? Too expected.

Every idea feels either too bold or too safe, and there's no in-between. I tap my finger on the counter, growing impatient by the second.

And then, out of nowhere, a memory notification pops up. A photo from a time when everything seemed brighter and simpler. My eyes widen as I enlarge it, and my hand instinctively moves over my mouth.

There's Karl and me, standing amidst the glitter and glow of a Alpha party from four years ago. He looks as handsome as ever in his black tuxedo, his smile as wide as it possibly can be, and there I am, leaning into him, my dark green dress elegant and hugging my curves in all the right places.

I can almost hear the laughter, the clinking of glasses, the soft swell of music. That night, I was so proud to be on his arm, so naive to how it would all unravel.

That was before...

For a moment, I'm back there, under the fairy lights, the air filled with the scent of champagne and perfume. I can still feel his hand on my waist, the way we swayed together to the soft pop music.

But fairy lights go out, and promises break. My hand twitches toward my phone, itching to call him. I want to hear his voice, tell him what happened today. Maybe he'll have some ideas. Hell, maybe he'll want to come back and be my sous chef one last time before the Alpha party.

Chapter 265

Abby

Sunlight spills through the restaurant windows, casting a warm golden glow over the bar where everyone is leaning. It's right before opening, and I've called everyone: Chloe, Daisy, Ethan, John, and

Anton to the front. Leah is here too before work, a cardboard cup of coffee in her hand, which Chloe gave to her on the house.

“So, guys,” I start, my voice trembling slightly. “I have something to tell you.”

Chloe looks up from her phone, a spark of interest in her eyes. Leah takes a sip of her coffee as her eyebrows raise. John, Anton, Ethan, and Daisy lean forward. It’s now or never.

“They want me to cater the Alpha party after all,” I blurt out. “The judges are coming here, on Saturday, to try my food again.” The words tumble out like an avalanche. For a second, there’s silence. Then, the bar erupts.

“What? Seriously?” John’s voice is a mix of shock and pride.

“That’s amazing, Abby!” Daisy’s grin is as bright as ever.

Ethan’s hand lands on my shoulder, his smile gentle and encouraging. “You’re going to knock it out of the park.”

I can’t help the giggle that bubbles up. “Thanks, I—”

“You haven’t been in your kitchen for weeks, Abby,” Chloe interjects, logical as ever. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

The laughter dies in my throat. She’s right. I haven’t cooked anything significant in what feels like an eternity, and the thought of going into the kitchen makes my stomach churn. My skills might as well be nonexistent right now.

“Well, um...” My voice trails off, and I’m left standing here, unsure of what to say. That’s when the first group of customers comes in for breakfast, and the group disperses with murmurs of encouragement, leaving only me, Leah, and Chloe standing at the bar.

“Look,” Leah says, placing her hand on my shoulder. “Why don’t Chloe and I come over tonight?”

“Yeah,” Chloe chimes in. “You can cook something for us. Consider it a... practice run.”

I swallow, nodding, and meet my friends’ gazes. “Okay. Practice run. Sounds good.”

...

The smell of garlic and basil fills my kitchen as I chop vegetables with a rhythm that feels both familiar and foreign. Leah and Chloe are due to arrive at any minute, and the knots in my stomach tighten with each slice of the knife.

When the doorbell rings, I nearly jump out of my skin. Pulling myself together, I open the door to find Leah and Chloe, each bearing a bottle of wine and wide smiles.

“You ready to wow us, chef?” Chloe’s eyes dance with mischief.

I lead them into the kitchen, the space that used to be my sanctuary but now feels like a prison. “Let’s hope so.”

Leah peeks over my shoulder at the ingredients laid out on the counter. “It smells incredible in here already.”

I offer a tense smile and gesture toward the stovetop where a pot of sauce simmers. “Just getting started.”

Chloe pops the cork on a bottle of wine, pouring three glasses. “To Abby’s comeback.”

We clink glasses and I take a long sip, the rich flavor of the wine grounding me for a moment.

Steeled by the wine, I turn to the stove and begin, explaining my process as I go. The girls watch, offering nods and hums of approval, but as I add spices to the sauce, my hand trembles.

Memories of the cook-off flood back—the cameras, the embarrassment, the sabotage, the defeat.

Leah is the first to notice the waver in my hand. “Hey, you okay?”

The sauce needs to be stirred, but suddenly, I can’t move. “What if I can’t do this?” My voice is a whisper. “What if I’m not good enough?”

Chloe sets down her glass and steps closer, her gaze firm. “Abby, stop. You’re an amazing chef. One setback doesn’t define you.”

“But—”

Chapter 266

I find myself laughing, really laughing, for the first time in two weeks.

“Okay, taste this,” I instruct, scooping a spoonful of sauce for them.

They oblige, and the looks on their faces tell me all I need to know.

“That’s the stuff,” Leah grins.

Chloe nods. “You’ve still got it, Abby.”

...

Dinner has long since been cleared from our plates. We’re already halfway through a second bottle of wine, the sound of soft music playing in the background.

“Whew, I think I broke the seal,” Chloe giggles as she stands, her high heels discarded on the floor by now. “Be right back, ladies.”

Leah and I watch as Chloe saunters off to the bathroom for the fourth time tonight, shaking our heads. Once she’s gone, the room is silent for a moment, but it’s a comfortable sort of silence. That is, until Leah speaks.

“Heard from Karl lately?” she asks, sipping her wine casually.

I shake my head, tracing the rim of my glass with a finger. “No, and I don’t think he’d want to talk. After...well, you know.”

Leah sets her glass down with a soft clink. “I don’t, actually. ‘After’ what?”

I wince, realizing that I spilled my dirty secret thanks to the alcohol and there’s no turning back now. “Promise you won’t tell Chloe.”

“Pinky.”

I take a deep breath, my voice lowering. “We almost... on the night of the cook-off. It was a mess, Leah. I pushed him away, and he left, upset. We haven’t talked since then.”

Her expression softens as she fills in the blanks that I’ve left for her. “Abby, that’s rough.”

I laugh, the sound more bitter than I expected. “‘Rough’ is an understatement.”

Leah reaches across the sofa and grips my hand. “Tell me about it. Men... they’re about as easy to navigate as a minefield.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “I don’t know, Leah. It’s like every time I get close to someone, I’m just...waiting for the other shoe to drop. And with Karl, when it did, I wasn’t surprised, just disappointed in myself.”

She squeezes my hand, the corner of her mouth lifting in a half-smile. “Disappointed because you did almost something you didn’t want to or because you knew, deep down, that you’ve been wanting it more than pretty much anything else?”

“Both, I guess.” I shrug, my gaze drifting to the grain of the wood on the coffee table. “I don’t know, it’s just... It failed the first time. Why let it fail again via a natural course when I can just ruin it all myself from the get-go, right?”

Leah’s laughter is soft. “Abby, you can’t just self-destruct every time you’re worried you might get hurt.”

I let out my own wry chuckle. “Why not? It feels safer this way.”

“Maybe.” Leah’s tone turns serious again. “But he was your sous chef for the cook-off. Does he even know that you’ve been given this chance?”

My heart hammers against my ribs. “But what if he doesn’t care? Worse, what if he’s angry if I try to reach out?”

Leah’s grip tightens around my hand, her gaze meeting mine. “You won’t know until you try. And Abby, I’ve seen the way Karl looks at you—like you’re the most important thing in the universe. Whatever happened, whatever almost happened, I don’t think that’s changed. He’d want to know.”

I’m silent, the battle raging inside me: the desire to reach out against the fear of being pushed away after everything that’s happened. “You really think he’d want to hear from me after I hurt him?”

Chapter 267

Karl

“Talk to him. It’s good for him to hear some language—keeps the brain active.”

The doctor’s words still linger in the back of my mind as I stand in my brother’s bedroom, looking down at him. He’s laying in his bed, still unconscious.

I hate seeing him like this. The tubes, the IV, the sound of the machines... It's all in such stark contrast to the warm mahogany wood and plush blankets. Someone brought fresh flowers, which are in a vase next to the bed. I'm not sure who brought them, or even why; it's not like he can see them.

But I guess I'm just being pessimistic. The flowers are a nice touch.

I fumble with the edge of Ethan's blanket, lost in thought. The silence in the room is oppressive, and I find myself yearning for any sign of improvement.

"Ethan," I start, my voice cracking slightly. It feels awkward, speaking to someone who might as well be a world away. But the doctor's words still prod at the back of my mind, urging me on.

"Ethan, it's Karl. I..." I trail off, unsure how to continue. Does he even know I'm here? Does he recognize my voice? I clear my throat, as if that will help somehow. "You know, they say it's good for you to hear voices. Keeps the gears turning up there." I tap my temple with a forced smile, as if he can see the gesture.

The room remains silent aside from the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor. I sigh and walk around to the side of the bed where an armchair is sitting. I sit down in it, resting my elbows on my knees. "You've missed a lot while you've been out, Ethan. The pack is doing okay, considering..."

My words falter, the mention of the pack reminding me of Abby, her laugh echoing in my mind.

I glance around, half expecting a nurse to walk in and catch me pouring my heart out to my unconscious brother. But we're alone, just Ethan and me.

"You remember Abby, right? My ex-wife?" I ask quietly, as if I'm bringing the topic up to a friend over a casual dinner.

I pause, searching Ethan's face for any flicker of recognition. Nothing. A deep breath in, then out, and I continue, the floodgates finally opening.

"It's... It's a mess, Ethan. I want her back. We got close, very close, and I thought everything would work out. But she pushed me away. It's like... it's like she's scared of anything real, you know?" My voice wavers, and I press my lips together, surprised at my own honesty.

The thought that he will never hear this, that I can say anything, is freeing in a way I didn't expect. Maybe that's why I continue.

"She's just so frustrating. She has this wall up all the time, and just when I think we're getting somewhere, she shuts down. It's like she doesn't trust me. But, shit, how could she? I divorced her. I divorced her over nothing."

I rub the back of my neck, letting out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "I haven't heard from her since that night. I don't even know if she wants to talk. Maybe she's moved on, just like how she moved on so quickly after our divorce." I pause and chuckle, but there's no humor in it. "I'm just being bitter."

The silence that follows my words is punctuated only by the beeping of the heart monitor. Ethan's chest rises and falls with a steady rhythm that is somehow both comforting and maddening. I wish he would just say something. Anything.

"I should be mad, shouldn't I?" I find myself continuing without entirely meaning to. "Mad that she pushed me away. But I'm not mad, not really. I'm just... hurt."

Ethan's stillness is a stark contrast to the turmoil inside me. "But she's not just some girl. She's... Abby. She's the only person who has ever made me feel like I'm not going through the motions. When I'm with her, Ethan, it's like I'm actually alive..."

I pause. I can't help but laugh again, shaking my head at the absurdity. "And now I'm just talking to my brother who's in a coma, hoping he can hear me, hoping he wakes up and tells me to stop being such an idiot."

"You know what the worst part is?" I continue. "I don't even know if she feels the same. Maybe her restaurant is more important. And in a weird way, I'm happy that it is, because it's like her baby. And at the very least, I'm glad to know that she's gonna make it. Even without me."

I lean back, the chair creaking under my weight. “I guess the pack should be my baby. That I should know that I’m gonna make it without her. But... God, I just miss her. What’s an Alpha without his Luna, right?”

The feeling of talking to Ethan, even in this state, is oddly cathartic. My chest feels lighter, though the ache for some sort of response is growing by the moment.

“I just wish you could give me some advice, big brother. You always knew what to say.” My voice is barely a whisper now. “I guess I just have to figure this one out on my own, huh?”

I stand, stretching the stiffness from my limbs, and look down at Ethan with a tenderness that surprises even me. “I’ll be back tomorrow, and the next day, and every day after that until you wake up. And maybe one day, you’ll tell me all about what you heard while you were asleep.”

I pat his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Hang in there, Ethan.”

Without another word, I slip out of the room. The doctor is waiting for me, but just as I’m about to open my mouth to say something, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I slip it out and feel my heart practically stop.

It’s Abby.

Chapter 268

Abby

The phone rings for a beat too long. My heart is practically in my throat as I wait, each drone of the ringtone sounding like a warning siren in my ears.

What will I even say to him? “Hey, sorry I kissed you and then told you it was a mistake for the millionth time. Anyway, will you come back to help me again?”

I shake my head as if to dispel the thought. No. I just want to tell him that I might be catering the Alpha party after all—and that his innocence was proven when it came to the fight with Daniel’s sous chef. But what if he already knows? Or what if he doesn’t care?

Either way, it doesn't matter.

Because he doesn't answer.

The pang in my chest is sharp as I hear the sound of his voicemail message come through the phone. "You've reached Karl. Leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

I hang up before the tone plays, a curse lingering on my lips as I toss my phone down on the counter. Of course he wouldn't answer. Why would he want to talk to me? I'm just Abby, his ex-wife, the woman who took advantage of him when he was just trying to win me back.

Right?

I push away from the counter and start to pull out pots and pans, the clanging noise a welcome distraction. The judges won't care about my personal life; they'll care about what I put on the plate.

It has to be perfect. I can't let this second chance go to shit.

"Okay, Abby," I mutter to myself, scanning my scrawled notes. "Appetizer, entree, dessert. Simple."

Simple, I say, but it's anything but that. Each dish needs to be perfect. Every flavor needs to complement the others. Every texture has to be out of this world. And I can't show even a moment's hesitation while I'm cooking in front of them. I need to be the perfect picture of the perfect chef.

My mind buzzes with ideas, but my brain is still foggy after spending two weeks in a rut. "Soup... French onion?" I mutter to myself, then shake my head. "No, too overpowering. Minestrone... No, too bland..."

I sigh, passing my hand over my face. "Okay... I'll try the main course first," I say out loud, even though I'm alone in my own kitchen at home. "That'll make it easier to pick the appetizer and dessert."

Onto the main course. My hands move on their own, prepping for a dish I've that I know better than the back of my own hand. Trout meuniere. It should be simple, the perfect dish when you're looking for a light and flavorful meal. Plus, I've made it countless times. It's exactly what I need right now.

But as I begin the process of cooking the trout, it's like my mind freezes. The spices all seem to jumble together, the lemon juice feels too sticky on my fingers, the trout smells... off. My fingers feel clumsy and stupid as I try to whisk the sauce together, and my mind keeps drifting.

Drifting to him.

"God, Abby," I say out loud, throwing my whisk down into the sink with a clatter. "Focus. Stop thinking about Karl."

Easier said than done, though. His face keeps floating through my mind, the way his eyes were so full of pain when I pushed him away. It was three weeks ago now, but it feels like it was just yesterday.

My fingers itch to call him again. Maybe he was just busy. Maybe he didn't see my call.

But I can't, because I think I know the truth: he doesn't want to talk.

I shake my head again and decide to throw myself back into my cooking. That's all I can do right now, what I've always done. Cook. Even if it takes all night, I'll cook this damn trout meuniere. And it'll be the most goddamn delicious trout meuniere I've even tasted.

I work through the afternoon, the sunlight shifting across the kitchen tiles and casting long shadows over the counters. I taste, adjust, and taste again, making sure that each flavor and texture complements the others. It's precise work, but it's something I can lose myself in.

By the time I'm done, the kitchen looks like a mess, but the samples of my menu sit pristine and inviting on the counter.

And across from them, in my mind's eye, sits Karl. And his eyes are full of pain.

...

The door to the kitchen feels like concrete wall. No, more than that; it's like there's some invisible entity standing in the way, pushing me further and further back to my office, screaming in my ears... telling me that I don't belong here anymore.

Even as the servers bustle in and out and the door swings invitingly on its hinges, it feels like a trap. And I'm a mouse that's caught, frozen in fear.

I've been standing in the narrow hallway that leads to the restaurant kitchen for what feels like an eternity, my heart pounding so hard I think it might just beat straight out of my chest. The kitchen—the space that was once almost sacred to me, like a sanctuary amidst a battleground—feels like foreign territory now.

I know I should go in. I need to refamiliarize myself with my kitchen, because it just two days, I'll be preparing a three-course meal for the judges in that very space. And yet, I just can't do it.

"Abby? What are you going?" Ethan's voice breaks through my reverie. I turn, plastering a false smile on my face, and shrug.

"I'm... just thinking," I lie, because 'paralyzed by an irrational fear of my own kitchen' isn't something you tell one of your own employees.

Ethan crosses his arms, his gaze burning straight through me. "Thinking? You've been hovering around the door all morning. What are you thinking about, exactly?"

I want to tell him that I've been terrified, terrified of my own damn kitchen after losing the cook-off. "Okay, fine. I want to go in," I confess. "I want to cook. But I'm... scared."

Ethan's eyes soften, and he drops his arms back to his sides. "Scared of what, Abby?"

Chapter 269

Abby

I'm still standing, frozen, just inside the threshold of the kitchen. The air is silent as John and Anton suddenly halt their cooking, their eyes meeting each other for a moment before they slide over to me.

"Abby?" John's voice is somewhat incredulous, seeing as how I haven't set foot in here for the past three weeks. "Did you need something?"

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves as I face John and Anton, their expressions a mix of surprise and curiosity. "I'm just... checking in," I manage to say, but even to my own ears, the words sound like a lie.

Anton leans back against the prep station and wipes his hands on the towel that's slung over his shoulder. "Checking in?" He arches an eyebrow as a smirk plays on his lips. "Is that really it?"

John nods in agreement with Anton and folds his arms over his chest. "Yeah, Abby, tell us the truth."

There's a pause, a moment where I wonder if I should make up an excuse and leave, but I know that Ethan and Daisy are blocking the other side of the door. And besides, there's no point in lying. My staff knows me too well.

"Alright, fine. I want to come in and cook," I confess, the words tumbling out of my mouth in a rush. "But I've been scared. Scared that I can't do it anymore."

The kitchen seems to freeze in time. John and Anton exchange a knowing glance with one another before looking at me, and it's then that I realize that they've likely been talking about this for a while now.

Anton's smirk softens ever so slightly. "Scared, huh?" He chuckles, but there's no malice in it. "There is no such thing as fear in the kitchen."

John's approach is a little more gentle. "Look, Abby, we've all been there. But you can't let one loss hold you back from what you're really good at."

Before I can respond, they're on either side of me, their hands reassuring on my shoulders. Anton is suddenly grabbing a chef's coat off of the hook.

"Here," he says, holding it open for me. "Put this on. No chef cooks in their street clothes."

I hesitantly slip my arms into the sleeves, the fabric hanging a bit loose, but instantly I feel a shift. It's like a newfound purpose is watching over me. John is grinning now, the lines around his eyes crinkling along with it.

"And you'll be needing this," he says, thrusting a whisk into my hand. It's an old one, the wires bent from use, but it feels right.

"If you want to cook, then cook," Anton says, pushing me toward the line.

...

I'm not sure exactly how long I've been standing at the prep station, working on the same pile of vegetables. My hand is shaky as I julienne the peppers, the slices either too thick or too thin for my liking. But I'm here, and that counts for something, right?

Suddenly, John's voice slices through the frenetic air of the bustling kitchen.

"Abby, we really need another hand here. Can you jump on the line?"

I hesitate for just a split second—old fears gnawing at me—but when I turn around and see Anton and John struggling to keep up with a rapidly worsening dinner rush, that's when adrenaline kicks in.

"On it."

The line turns into a blur. The sounds all morph into one cacophony of clatters and sizzling, with my own voice rising above the rest.

“Orders up! Let’s keep it moving, people!”

“Two risottos, one lamb, on the fly!” John calls out as ticket after ticket streams out of the printer, adding to the pile we’ve already got accumulated.

It seems, since what happened at the cook-off, that the restaurant’s popularity has risen ever so slightly. I didn’t notice because I kept myself locked away in my office, but I can see it now. I feel guilty, knowing that my staff was struggling to beat the rush while I was wallowing between piles of invoices.

“Risotto, coming right up,” I call back, keeping my rhythm as though no time has passed at all. “How long on that lamb?”

“Six minutes,” Anton replies, his chef’s knife nothing but a blur of silver as he works through a pile of herbs.

I move, scooping steaming hot mushroom risotto into miniature cast iron pans. The risotto waits under the heat lamp for a server to whisk it away, and I’m already onto the next order.

As the rush builds, so does the heat, the smells, the sounds of the kitchen. I feel like a ship’s captain in the midst of a raging storm, but I haven’t felt this alive in a while.

“I need a beef bourguignon, stat!” I bark, sliding two hot pans onto the stove with practiced ease.

“Beef’s resting, two minutes,” John responds, his forehead beading with sweat as he checks the ovens.

My hands work on autopilot, searing, plating, garnishing. I call for dishes, and they come, the team working with a seamless synergy that makes me forget about everything else.

“Abby, table five’s asking about their scallops,” Daisy shouts over the sizzle and roar.

“Tell them it’s on its way,” I reply, flipping the scallops with a flick of my wrist, perfectly browned.

“Need a hand?” John asks, his gaze meeting mine. There’s a knowing glint in his eyes, a flash of something that tells me that he’s thrilled to have me back in the kitchen.

“Just get that beef out,” I say, and he grins, nodding.

The night surges on in a blur of relentless orders, hot dishes, and minor catastrophes. My wrist is burned from a splatter of hot oil, my chef’s coat is stained with tomato sauce, but my heart is finally in it, and that’s all that matters.

Chapter 270

Abby

Five years ago.

It was the day before the annual Alpha party. I was standing in front of the mirror on a little platform while the seamstress worked her magic. My dress hugged my body perfectly in all the right places, an elegant black with flutter sleeves and a hem that trailed down to my ankles. I felt beautiful for the first time in a while.

That was when Karl walked in.

I saw him before the mirror did, his reflection coming into view with his brow furrowed. He was all business, phone pressed to his ear, his voice a low rumble of authority as he spoke to his Beta.

But when his eyes met mine in the glass, the world outside that room might as well have ceased to exist.

“Hold that thought,” he said into the phone, and I knew that for whatever reason, I had become the center of his universe once again. “I have to go.”

The call ended abruptly, and he motioned for the seamstress to give us privacy. With a respectful nod, she collected her things and left, leaving us alone.

I turned to face him and my heart was fluttering in my chest. "Is the dress alright?" My voice was steady, but the I couldn't fully hide the uncertainty that was hiding behind my tone.

He approached, and I could see the struggle on his face. "You look... beautiful, Abby," he admitted, and something in the way he said it made me believe him. "But the cleavage..."

He trailed off, and his jaw clenched. That was when I knew.

"There isn't that much," I murmured, more to myself than to him. But even my own words felt hollow.

I could see the apology in his eyes, the wish to be both the man he thought he should be and the man I needed. "I just worry about what the others might think," he said, his voice low. "About you. About us."

The words settled in my stomach like stones. To please him, to avoid the argument I could see brewing like a storm on the horizon, I gave in.

"I'll have it fixed," I said, my voice wavering slightly.

He thanked me with nothing but a nod, and then he was gone. I was left alone in the room, my thoughts whirling around me like a tornado. And suddenly, the dress that made me feel so sexy, so beautiful...

It felt like shackles.

I'm walking down the street now. It's the day before my second chance, and I'm a ball of nerves. I've decided to get a coffee and wander around on my lunch break to force myself to get some fresh air.

For some reason, the memory of the dress from five years ago has been on my mind all morning. In a way, it's more of a memory of Karl rather than the dress. Maybe it's my brain trying to rationalize why we shouldn't be together anymore, but it feels like more than that.

When Karl apologized to Daisy for making a comment about the buttons on her shirt, I guess I thought that that was that. But now, with the Alpha party on the horizon and my attendance all but set in stone, I've been wondering...

Has Karl really changed his antiquated views on modesty?