

Kickass 281

Chapter 281

“Okay, I’ll... get ready then. You’ll be okay out here?”

Karl waves a hand dismissively. “Go ahead. You got a mirror somewhere so I can get to work on...” He gestures to himself, to his tousled hair, his white button-down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. “...This?”

I nod and point to the hallway. “There’s a full-length mirror over there. Good luck.”

He grins. “Same to you.”

...

The steam curls around me and smooths away my tense muscles. It’s funny how I never realize how badly I need a hot shower until I’m finally in it, and now I don’t want to get out. But once my body is washed and my hair is shampooed, I don’t have much more time. With a reluctant sigh, I finally turn off the water and step out, wrapping a towel around me.

First, I get started on my hair. The sound of the blowdryer fills the bathroom as I get to work, running a brush through it until it’s all dry. Then, I pull it back into a neat bun that sits at the nape of my neck. Have to make sure no hairs get in the food, so I slick it down with a tiny bit of gel, both to make it look sleek and keep it in place.

Next, I slip into my chef’s whites, which I had professionally cleaned just for today. They’re a bit too crisp against my skin, but they look nice. I slip into a pair of comfortable loafers, then glance in the mirror.

Looks good. Now, makeup.

I stand in front of the bathroom mirror, and that’s when the memories of the cook-off return. The thick foundation, the dramatic eyes, and lips painted a bright shade of red. False lashes, too, which I remember being horribly uncomfortable when I cried.

My hand freezes as I'm about to reach into my makeup bag for my foundation.

Do I want this? To cake my face, to place the focus of tonight on my appearance rather than my abilities and my professionalism? To feel uncomfortable, like I'm wearing a mask?

Or do I just want to be me? Abby. The chef, the restaurant owner, the woman with smile lines and a tiny hint of crow's feet beginning to show at the corners of my eyes. The woman who has been dragged through hell and back for her craft.

A woman. Not a doll.

I shake my head and zip my makeup bag shut. I choose the latter when it comes to my cooking. Tonight isn't about a perfect face or long lashes. It's about cooking the best damn meal those judges have ever tasted. And I don't need lipstick to do that.

As I step out of my room, the air suddenly feels a few degrees cooler. Karl meets my gaze, and for a moment, time seems to stop.

He's standing in the living room, his hands in his pockets. He's ditched his tuxedo jacket and tie, opting instead for just his crisp white shirt. He smoothed it down and rolled the sleeves more neatly, and although he's not in chef's whites like me, he looks good.

Really good.

He looks at me, longer than perhaps either of us expect, and when his smile widens, it's as if he's sharing a secret joke between old friends.

"You look perfect in your chef's coat, Abby," he says, and his voice is soft.

I can feel the heat rise to my cheeks, but I don't bother to hide the tinge of red that begins to spread across my face.

Chapter 282

Abby

I swallow hard, my palm slick with nervous sweat as I reach for the door handle.

“Ready?” Karl asks, his voice low. His eyes meet mine, and I can feel a sense of calm wash over me, although it’s not quite enough to allay the anxiety that’s blooming in my chest.

“Ready.”

The door swings open and the evening light spills into the hallway, carrying with it the judges.

Vanessa, with her air of understated elegance; Xavier, with his calm and quiet demeanor; and then there’s Logan.

Logan. His gaze scans over me, and suddenly I feel like I’m back on stage again beneath his heavy scrutiny. How does he feel about this second chance that Vanessa pushed for? Did he fight it? Will he scrutinize me again? Humiliate me again?

But then, Logan’s eyes slide over to Karl. There’s a flicker of something between them, and it reminds me of the supposed conversation they had. What more was said between the two of them that I don’t know about?

Either way, it doesn’t matter—because I have more on my plate tonight than a few critiques from a single judge.

“Good evening,” I say with an almost robotic smile, stepping aside, hoping that they can’t hear my heart thumping in my chest.

Vanessa sweeps in, her perfume washing over me as she walks past. It’s oddly calming, but as she looks around, I can’t help but wonder what she’ll think about my place.

“I’m so sorry for the switch-up,” I stammer. “My restaurant—”

“No worries,” Vanessa says with a warm smile. “This will do just fine. You have a lovely home.”

A surprised warmth flushes through me, easing the tightness in my shoulders. “Thank you. I’m glad you think so.”

Logan’s gaze prowls the space, analytical and cold. He gives a curt nod and not a word more. Xavier smiles, his eyes crinkling at the corners, but he remains silent, following Vanessa’s lead.

Karl’s presence at my back is strangely comforting. We guide them to the kitchen where everything is laid out on the sparkling countertops, like a stage set for a big performance. The air is thick with the scent of herbs and citrus.

“You remember... Ken,” I introduce him, using his same pseudonym from the cook-off. He’s not wearing his blue surgical mask tonight since he’s not on television, but I can tell from the glance he gives me that he’s grateful for the anonymity. “He will be my sous chef again tonight.”

Logan steps forward, his hands clasped behind him. “We were under the impression, Abby, that this meal was to be prepared by you... without assistance.”

I feel the blood drain from my face, eyes darting to Karl, whose gaze is steady. There’s a silent exchange between us, and for a moment, I feel like I might crumble; but the look in his eyes bolsters me. I nod, looking back at the judges. “Of course. That’s not a problem.”

The room falls silent for a moment before Vanessa’s soothing voice fills the void. “We’re looking forward to the meal you’ll be preparing for us tonight, Abby,” she says, glancing around the kitchen, taking everything in. “Now, for the stipulations...”

Without further ado, the judges go on to explain my expectations for tonight. They will be observing me as I cook, and I’ll be expected to explain my process throughout. That should be easy; a whole hell of a lot easier than being on camera, at least.

I nod when they’re finished. I can do this.

Just before I begin, Karl's hand brushes mine. It's a momentary touch, but it's grounding when I need it the most. He gives me a glance, his eyes speaking volumes.

He knows I can do this. I know I can do this.

There's no Daniel, no sabotage, no audience—just me and my skills.

...

"Tonight, I'm starting with a roasted carrot and ginger soup," I announce, glancing up at the judges as I begin to work on the carrots I've prepared.

Vanessa's gaze is encouraging, a slight smile on her lips. "I love the sound of that, Abby. Tell us, what inspired this choice?"

I begin peeling the carrots, each strip falling into a neat pile on the cutting board. "With autumn on the way, I wanted to prepare something cozy and comforting," I explain, and the words come more easily than I expected. "I always love roasted carrot and ginger soup on a cold, rainy day."

Logan's pen pauses on his notepad, his eyes meeting mine. "And what's your process for bringing out the flavors in your dish?"

I reach for the ginger, its skin rough beneath my fingers. "The key is in the roasting. If done correctly, it can boost the spice of the ginger and bring out the natural sweetness of the carrots."

Xavier leans in, his interest clearly piqued. "Roasting, you say? How do you ensure you don't lose the essence of the ginger?"

"It's all in the timing," I reply, slicing the ginger with care. "Adding it just when the carrots start to caramelize. This gives the heat just enough time to coax the flavors out without overcooking it."

With the vegetables prepared, I glance at the pot heating on the stove. “I’m using homemade vegetable stock as a base.”

The judges nod, scribbling notes on their notepads, as I pour the stock into the pot. I then add the carrots and ginger, and soon the kitchen smells like a cozy autumn day.

Vanessa tilts her head. “I detect something else in there. Is that thyme?”

I smile. “Yes, just a touch.”

As the soup simmers, I move on to the garnish. “Each bowl will be topped with a dollop of sour cream and green onions,” I explain.

Logan looks up, his eyes skeptical. “And what makes you think that the green onions would pair well with the other flavors?”

I swallow, shooting Karl an almost imperceptible glance as he stands behind the judges, leaning against the doorframe. He nods ever so slightly, and that gesture alone gives me enough confidence to answer Logan’s question.

Chapter 283

Abby

The judges are sitting in front of me, spoons poised, and I can’t help but hold my breath. Every moment that they taste the soup without a word feels like an eternity. My palms are sweating, and it’s all I can do to not show them that I feel like I’m about to pass out.

Vanessa is the first to break the silence, and her voice is smooth and soft—an instant comfort.

“Abby, this is delightful,” she says, her spoon clinking against the bowl as she sets it down. “The balance of flavors is excellent, and the carrot really shines through. Your hint of thyme really makes the dish.”

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding and a smile spreads across my lips. "Thank you, Vanessa. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Xavier follows, his voice deep and thoughtful. "I must agree. The sour cream and green onion were a nice touch as well. An unexpected flavor combination, but delightful nonetheless."

Their words empower me, and I can feel the knot in my chest loosening.

But then I look towards Logan, the last to comment, and his brow is slightly furrowed. The room seems to grow colder as he places his spoon down with a long sigh.

"It's... good," he starts, and for a moment, hope flickers inside of me, only to be immediately put out like a candle by his next words. "But if I'm being honest, it's too... safe. Expected, rather." As he speaks, his eyes meet mine, and there's that glint again.

I feel a small knot twist in my gut, and it's all I can do to keep my composure. "I see," I manage, swallowing. "Was it the flavors, or...?"

He shakes his head, pressing his lips into a thin line. "I can't quite say. It tasted good, but it's just... boring."

Suddenly, Vanessa interjects before I can offer a retort. "Not every dish needs to reinvent the wheel, Logan," she says. "And it was quite flavorful. The ginger—"

Logan's lips twitch, and he interrupts her. "Flavorful, perhaps. And you're correct; not every dish needs to reinvent the wheel. But when it comes to the most important event of the year, one would hope for more than..."

That's when he pauses, and in a swift gesture, he pushes the bowl away from him on the table, his cold eyes meeting mine. "...cozy and comfortable."

My heart feels like it's sinking. It feels as though Logan turned my words against me, turning something that was meaningful to me into a joke. I feel like every female chef ever, who has had her craft diminished into nothing more than frivolity.

Vanessa, sensing the tension, speaks up again. "Well, it was only the first course," she says. "I'm sure Abby will continue to wow us throughout the evening."

Xavier chimes in, his voice soothing. "I agree. And if we're going to critique, let's make it constructive. Abby, for the next course, we'd like you to make us something out of the box."

Their words send a shock up my spine. Out of the box? But I already had a meal in mind. I begin scrambling internally for options, for something else I could make or perhaps a twist on what I've already got the ingredients for.

As the judges finish their notes, I retreat to the kitchen to consider my options. Karl follows, his hand brushing against mine as we walk away from the table.

"You're doing great," he murmurs once we're out of earshot. "Logan is tough to please, but you've got Vanessa and Xavier on your side."

Chapter 284

His words give me pause. Our eyes lock, and for a moment, I'm lost in his brown gaze. But then, I realize that he's right; Logan just wants to throw me off my game. This isn't the cook-off. There are no fellow contestants switching my spices, no real reason to let one judge's comments make me doubt everything.

But that doesn't mean that I can't go outside the box for the entree. Suddenly, I have an idea, and a grin spreads across my face.

"I've got it," I whisper.

...

“So, Abby, what’s on the menu for the entree?” Vanessa asks, her voice carrying a note of genuine curiosity that helps unwind the nerves that have settled in my stomach.

I glance up, a smile touching my lips. It’s not what I planned for tonight, but I just know it’ll work.

“Stuffed chicken breast with a side of rosemary potatoes and sauteed green beans.”

Logan makes a face. “We asked you for something outside of the box, Abby,” he says, his voice almost a hiss. “And you choose chicken, potatoes, and green beans?”

I nod, ignoring his jabs. “I did.”

Xavier speaks up before Logan can retort and leans in, peering at the herbs I’m laying out on the counter. “Interesting choice. I assume you’ll find a way to wow us, to make this dish a real standout, correct?”

I nod, my hands already deftly prepping the chicken breast. “I will. You’ll see.”

Logan’s expression is unreadable, his eyes following my knife, but says nothing.

Vanessa grins. “Well I, for one, love this dish. I’m excited to see how you make it your own, Abby. A twist on a classic.”

The chicken is now seasoned and ready for the pan, sizzling as it hits the heat. “The surprise is a hint of lion’s mane.”

The judges exchange looks, each as baffled as the rest. “Lion’s mane? The mushroom?” Vanessa asks.

I nod. “Yes. I believe it adds a unique texture and an earthy flavor to an otherwise light dish. Combined with the tang of the lemon juice in the sauce, think of it like...”

“A symphony of flavors,” Xavier says, sounding pleased. I nod, and lift my eyes to meet the judges. Vanessa and Xavier are both on the edges of their seats, while Logan is leaning back, his arms folded across his chest, watching me with the utmost scrutiny.

But I won’t let it get to me. I can’t let it get to me. I’m too determined to make him eat his words.

As the chicken cooks, I turn to the potatoes, their skins crisping to a golden hue. The beans follow, their vibrant green a contrast to the rich browns on the rest of the plate.

“Your timing is impeccable,” Xavier comments, his eyes never leaving the pans in front of me.

“I’ve been told I’m quick with a pan and quick with a retort,” I tease as I flip the chicken breasts in the pan, their earthy aromas rising into the air in a puff of steam. There’s a ripple of laughter from Vanessa and Xavier, and even Logan’s lips twitch upward.

The plates are already warm from where I’ve placed them beneath the warming rack, waiting for the chicken and potatoes. I make sure to plate with precision, the chicken sliced to reveal its hidden heart of lion’s mane and herbs, the potatoes and green beans scooped heartily beside it for a glistening, colorful companionship.

As a finishing touch, I drizzle spoonfuls of warm oil and rosemary over the plates. Then, I set the plates down with a flourish.

Chapter 285

Abby

A warmth rushes over me as I carry the extra plates to the table where the judges are sitting. Karl follows close behind with a jug of water and two extra glasses. The scent of rosemary and thyme hangs in the air as I slide the plates down and pull up a chair.

My heart’s doing somersaults, but I manage to muster a smile.

Xavier looks up, his eyes twinkling, and nods toward my plate. “I must say, Abby, the presentation is spot on.”

Vanessa agrees, her fork poised over the perfectly seared chicken. “And the aroma! You were right about the lemon and lion’s mane.”

“Thank you,” I say with a polite nod. “It’s a trick I’ve held onto for years.”

Karl gives me an encouraging wink as we start to eat. I can’t help but steal glances at Logan, who’s quietly cutting into his entree, his expression unreadable.

“So, Abby,” Xavier begins, wiping a bit of sauce from the corner of his mouth with a napkin, “tell us about this recipe. There’s a story here, I’m sure.”

I take a small breath. “Well, it’s a take on a recipe of my grandmother’s. I added the lion’s mane to make it my own.”

Vanessa chimes in, “So you took the foundation and built upon it. That’s the mark of a true chef, in my opinion; being able to take something so simple and make it your own, while still keeping the integrity of the original dish.”

Xavier nods. “Exactly.”

The meal progresses with lively chatter. Vanessa and Xavier share stories about past competitions and dishes that left a mark on them. I listen, enthralled and chiming in when I can, but it’s all so much. Here I am, Abby, sharing a meal in my own home with some of the greatest chefs of my time.

“I must say,” Vanessa says after chewing a bite of potato thoughtfully, “I’m quite impressed. Really.”

“I as well,” Xavier chimes in. “Abby, this is worlds away from your performance at the cook-off. What a shame your fellow contestant...” He pauses, shaking his head. Vanessa’s eyes fall to her plate. I can tell she’s disappointed by the memory.

“Well, I won’t talk about it,” Xavier continues, taking a sip of his wine. “But really, you’ve outdone yourself.”

I can't help but bask in the glow of their praise, but a glance at Logan cools my excitement. He still has yet to say more than two words throughout this entire meal, and his expression is inscrutable.

Xavier picks up on the tension and continues. "And Abby, aside from cooking, what do you do to unwind?"

I think for a moment before answering. "I..."

"She gardens," Karl chimes in, and there's a hint of something proud in his tone. I glance up at him, surprised. There's a sparkle in his eyes as he continues. "And she's really good at it."

"Really?" Vanessa asks, cocking her head. "Do you have a garden here? I'd love to see it."

I open my mouth to respond, but then stop; because truthfully, I don't. Not like I used to. Not like when I still lived with Karl, where I had my own sprawling garden. My lemon trees were my crowning glory, but that's all behind us now.

"Just a few window boxes right now," I say, popping a potato into my mouth. My gaze meets Karl's again, and I can feel a flush of red creep into my cheeks.

As dinner continues, Xavier and Vanessa continue to hold the conversation afloat with praise and stories. But there's an undercurrent of tension emanating from Logan's end of the table that I can't ignore.

Finally, I decide to break the silence.

"Logan, you've been quite quiet. Is the dish to your liking?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

He pauses, lays his fork down with precision, and meets my gaze. "It's fine," he states plainly.

His words leave a knot in my stomach. Just two words? It's... fine? Nothing more? I want to prod, but it's too late. Vanessa and Xavier are finishing their meal, and it's time for the third course.

Dessert. The make-or-break moment.

...

My hand shakes a little as I reach for the whisk. The room is quiet save for the sound of the jazz music on the speakers. Across from me, at the kitchen counter, the judges sit in waiting. Vanessa swirls her wine around in her glass with ease.

Xavier leans forward, elbows on the table, an eager spark in his eyes. I think the wine has made him a little more energetic, or perhaps the good food and good company, if you ignore Logan.

"So, Abby, what are you preparing for dessert?" he asks, although I think he already knows.

I force a smile, grateful for the distraction. "Chocolate souffle. It's a..." I pause, glancing up at Karl again, and it's like I've been transported back to the night when he made that souffle for me.

It only just now hits me that maybe that's why I've chosen it tonight: because deep down, it's a way to connect with him.

"It's a personal favorite," Karl chimes in, giving me a knowing nod.

Vanessa watches, her eyes following my every move. "Chocolate souffle. I haven't had a good souffle since I was a child."

Strangely enough, her words seem to bolster me, as though it's a challenge. I can't help but grin as I begin to whisk. "Well, perhaps it's time to remedy that."

Xavier chuckles. "I have no doubt about that, especially after that entree."

There's warmth in Xavier's words, but my eyes catch Logan whispering something to Vanessa, his expression unreadable. A stone sinks in my stomach. What could he be saying?

Chapter 286

Abby

Six years ago.

The stainless steel countertops gleamed under the harsh lighting of the culinary school kitchen as I plated my dish with trembling hands. The scent of my creation, a painstaking fusion of herbs and spices, wafted tantalizingly through the air—but I had no appetite.

My gaze flickered across the room, landing on the stern face of Professor Hawthorne, who punctuated the silence with the scribbles on his notepad and the clicking of his shoes on the tile floor.

"Time," he called out, his voice cutting through the flurry of student activity.

The room went still as Professor Hawthorne began his rounds. His critiques were always light, allowing plenty of room for improvement. As he made his way past each station, the students let out sighs of relief at his gentle encouragement.

And yet, he was never like that with me.

"Overcooked," he pronounced after no more than a nibble of my carefully crafted dish. "And the balance of flavors is off. This is a cooking class, not an exercise in mediocrity, Abby."

I felt my cheeks flush with a mixture of anger and embarrassment as I watched him jot down notes. The silence that followed his departure from my station felt like a heavy weight on my shoulders, and although I wanted nothing more than to retort, it was as if my voice was stolen from me.

He moved on, praising Jackson's seared salmon, gushing over Sophia's perfect risotto. Their success stories felt like stabs to my gut. Why was he always criticizing me so heavily when everyone else received praise?

The bell rang. As the other students left, chatting and laughing happily over their passing grades, I lingered, my gaze locked on the dish that had so thoroughly failed to impress. I got a C-. Barely passing. To me, it might as well have been a colossal failure.

Once I was finally alone in the hallway, I sank to the floor, my back against the cool tile wall beneath the stairwell.

“Dammit,” I murmured, blinking away the tears that threatened to come. “Another horrible grade.” I crumpled up my results and tossed them into a nearby trash can.

That was exactly where he found me, the one person who caused all of this. His shadow fell over me like an eclipse.

“Miss Abby, what seems to be the problem?” Professor Hawthorne's voice was devoid of its usual sharpness, but I couldn't look at him.

I glared up through watery eyes, my voice coming out sharper than I intended.

“What do you think the problem is? You nearly failed me, again! Even when I pour my soul into my cooking, it's like you hate everything I do. You never critique the others like you critique me!”

Even I was shocked by my own words. It was as if they tumbled out all at once, like they couldn't be contained any longer.

He regarded me for a moment, his face unreadable. Then, he crouched down to my level, his tone unexpectedly gentle. “I know I'm hard on you, Abby. It's because you can do better. You have enormous potential, but you're not reaching it.”

His words left me reeling. He had never hinted at believing in me, not once.

“Potential?” I echoed, disbelief lacing my voice. “Then why do I feel like you're trying to sabotage me?”

When it was time to present, I stood by my dish, my heart hammering against my ribcage, as Professor Hawthorne approached.

The silence stretched on for what felt like forever. I watched him closely, searching for any sign of approval.

Then he spoke, so quietly I almost didn't catch it.

"A+."

That was all he said before he moved on, leaving me feeling like I was lost in a void.

The other students glanced at me, their eyes wide, whispering. I had my A+, the recognition I had craved, but it came with a hollowness in my chest.

Why did his praise just feel like another form of punishment?

...

The room falls silent, save for the subtle sounds of spoons clicking against ceramic as the judges take their first bites. Karl and I sit beside each other, but I'm too nervous to try my own souffle.

This is the final moment, after all. This could be make-or-break; and with Logan's slow praise, I can't help but worry if I'll wind up catering the Alpha party at the end of it all.

Then, finally, Vanessa speaks.

"Abby... You were right." She pauses, slowly setting down her spoon as a look of wonder crosses her features. "I haven't had a good souffle since I was a little girl. But you... you changed that."

I nod, blinking quickly to dispel the tears of happiness that threaten to come. “Thank you so much, Vanessa,” I manage. “I’m glad it’s to your liking.”

Across the table, Xavier’s chuckle is warm and encouraging. “To our liking? My dear, you’ve outdone yourself. The balance, the texture—it’s exceptional.”

My eyes drift to Karl, who is quiet; but his gaze says it all. Beneath the table, his leg moves almost imperceptibly, and his knee brushes mine. It sends a shock through my body.

But then, Logan’s fork clinks against his plate, a sound that feels too loud in this space. I watch him from the corner of my eye. His face is inscrutable again.

Vanessa's smile is soft around the edges as she turns to me again. “Abby, where do you find your inspiration for these marvelous dishes?”

“My inspiration?” I manage, biting my lower lip. “Um... Everywhere, really. My friends, my family, the world around me.”

“And this dish in particular?” Xavier asks.

That’s when I glance at Karl again. His gaze is as steady as a rock in a stream, unmoving, always there. It grounds me in a way that I needed, and I can’t stop the words from tumbling out like the water that moves through the stream.

“Ken...” I use his pseudonym again, although his real name almost slips out on instinct. “He taught me how to make a phenomenal soufflé. I owe it to him.”

Karl’s eyes glint as I speak. I can tell that he’s taken aback by my candidness. All I can do is smile at him, warmth emanating from my gaze.

Chapter 288

Abby

The silence in the room is thick with tension as we wait for Logan's verdict.

Vanessa's and Xavier's praises still echo in the back of my mind, but it's Logan's opinion that really seems to hold the weight of the world. I can't explain why, but it somehow feels as though Logan's opinion holds more sway than the others'; or maybe that's just how it feels to me, seeing as how slow he is to dole out praise, just like Professor Hawthorne all those years ago.

Without warning, Karl's hand finds my knee under the table. It's a brief touch, but it grounds me. I don't pull away, not yet.

Vanessa's voice is soothing as she picks up on the tension and fills the silence, taking another bite of her souffle. "Really, Abby, it's exquisite," she says with a warm smile.

Xavier nods in agreement. "Definitely. I might just need to ask you to make a few more of these for me to bring home. My wife and daughter would be angry if I didn't share."

I laugh in response, but it's a hollow sound. Nothing will feel right until I hear what Logan has to say, and I hope beyond all hope that it's more than just 'it's fine' again.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, Logan leans back in his chair and looks poised to speak. His gaze lifts to meet mine, and there's something new in his eyes that I haven't seen before. He looks less cold now, but only ever so slightly.

"Good job, Abby," he says with a curt nod. "I have to say, I'm more impressed than I was at the cook-off."

The relief that floods through me is almost dizzying, but his words aren't a complete balm. There's still an underlying tension there that gives me pause.

"Really?" I ask, my voice wavering slightly.

Logan nods again. "Yes, really. Overall, I'd give tonight a seven out of ten."

Seven out of ten? I repeat the number in my head. That should be good, right?

But it doesn't feel good. I poured my heart and soul into tonight. A seven out of ten is good, but not good enough. Not for me. I try to keep my expression neutral and professional, but inside, my thoughts whirl around like a tornado.

"That's... Thank you, Logan. I appreciate your feedback," I manage to say, even though the words feel hollow.

He nods, a ghost of a smile on his lips, and then leans forward again with his elbows on the table. "Of course, I'll need to spend the night considering my final verdict. Whether or not you're fit to cater the Alpha party."

"Yes," Vanessa says, nodding along with him. "Of course. We should all discuss this privately before we can make our final decision. I hope you can understand, Abby."

I nod. "Absolutely. It's an important event to be catered. Take all of the time you need."

There's a moment of silence in the room as Logan's words linger in the back of my mind. Seven out of ten. It's a good score, isn't it? Yet why does it feel like a failure rather than a victory?

"Would you like some coffee?" I find myself asking, more out of a need to break the tension than anything else.

"That would be lovely, Abby," Vanessa says, and Xavier agrees with a nod. Logan, of course, says nothing, but also makes no motion to leave.

I stand, my legs a little unsteady, and make my way to the kitchen after gathering the empty dishes. I can feel Karl's eyes on me, and I wish I knew what was going through his mind.

Once in the kitchen, I take a deep breath. My exhale is shaky, and suddenly I feel like a teenager in culinary school again, held to a higher standard than the rest of the class.

Why seven? Why not eight, or nine? Or was that giving myself too much credit?

Logan hadn't hated it, that was clear, but he hadn't loved it either. That's fine; I don't expect everyone to adore my food. But why wouldn't he just give me some comments, some critique, anything?

Instead, he had given no specifics, nothing I could use to improve my skills. Just that he was 'more impressed than he was at the cook-off.' And that the meal was a seven out of ten. Nothing more, like a swift jab to my gut.

I lean against the counter, my eyes closing for a moment. This is out of my hands now, I quickly realize. I did the best I could. Now, all I can do is wait for the coffee to brew..

And wash the dishes.

The clinking of dishes is the only sound as I scrub and rinse, my hands moving automatically. I'm barely present in the task, my mind replaying every moment from the meal.

The voices from the other room are muffled, but oddly grounding. Karl is entertaining the judges while they wait, and I'm grateful he's here. I'll definitely need to make all of this up to him later, as soon as I have the chance.

That's when I sense it—a shift in the air. I'm not alone anymore, and somehow, I know exactly who it is.

Logan.

I keep my back to him for a moment longer than necessary, gathering my thoughts, steadying my breath. Then I turn. He's standing in the doorway, his wine glass in hand.

"Hi, Logan. Can I get you anything?" I ask, forcing my voice to remain steady.

"I decided I'd rather have a little more wine than coffee, if you don't mind," he says, holding his glass up.

I nod, putting down the last dish and drying my hands on the towel. "Of course." I reach for the bottle, uncork it, and pour the deep red liquid into his glass. There's a silence between us, one that's punctuated only by the sound of the wine pouring into the glass.

Finally, I can't stand it anymore. I set the bottle down, my hands gripping the edge of the counter. "Can I ask you something, Logan?"

Chapter 289

Abby

Logan's smirk unsettles me. It feels as though he somehow has the upper hand in a game I didn't even know we were playing.

"I don't understand, Logan. What are you talking about?" My voice is steady, but inside, I feel anything but.

Logan leans against the door frame, casual as ever. "Ken didn't tell you?" He raises an eyebrow, a smile playing on his lips that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "I thought after our chat on the day of the cook-off, he would fill you in."

"Fill me in on what, exactly?" I press, my heart pounding. Karl had mentioned a 'misconception' that day, that he had tried to change Logan's mind but couldn't, but that was as much as I knew.

And yet, the way Logan is looking at me, like he's got a secret that he isn't telling, is downright infuriating.

He shrugs, the smirk still there. "It's not my place. But, Abby, you should probably have a conversation with your 'sous chef.' I'm not one to repeat myself."

And with that, he turns on his heel and walks back to the dining room to join the chatting group with his glass of wine, leaving me alone with nothing but a steaming coffee pot and a mind racing with questions.

What did Karl say to him? What could have really been said between them? Is there something that Karl isn't telling me?

I reach for the coffee pot, my hands trembling slightly. The dark liquid pours into the cups, but I'm not really paying attention. My mind is stuck on Logan's words, on the implications of what he said. There's more to this story. There has to be.

Suddenly, thanks to my distraction, the coffee cup overflows and dark coffee spills out onto the granite countertop.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, quickly grabbing a cloth to mop up the mess. I can't afford to be clumsy right now, not when there's so much at stake.

Karl and the judges continue to chat away in the other room. I can hear the sound of Karl's laugh, his lilted voice as he tells some story or another. But I feel so far away, even as I mop up the spilt coffee.

What did they say to each other, really? And if it was important, then why would Karl keep it from me... especially after we promised that there would be no more secrets following the incident with Adam?

Once the mess is cleaned up, I place the cups and a little pitcher of creamer on a tray, my movements robotic as I try to piece together the puzzle. It just doesn't make sense. Karl wouldn't keep something important from me, right?

No, not when my career is on the line. He wouldn't. He couldn't.

But Logan's insinuations, the way he said I should get the truth from Karl... it hints at something more, something that's not quite right. A niggling doubt starts to worm its way into my thoughts, and I hate it. I hate the uncertainty, the suspicion that's now clouding my judgment.

The coffee's aroma somehow manages to bring me back to reality as I carry the tray back to the living area.

Karl and the judges have moved from the dining table to the sitting area, where Karl is entertaining them with more jokes and stories. They're still calling him 'Ken,' a pseudonym that once felt necessary but now feels like another layer to the secret.

Chapter 290

My smile wavers as I turn away, my mind still on Logan's words. Hasn't your sous chef told you? The question echoes in my mind, over and over, like a broken record on repeat.

As I busy myself with doling out the coffee, my eyes keep flicking to Karl. He's listening to a story of Vanessa's, laughing at something she's said, and he looks up, catching my eye.

He smiles, but I don't smile back. Not this time.

Because now I need to know. What really happened between him and Logan? And if it's so important, why didn't he tell me?

But this isn't the time or the place. Not with the judges here, not with the evening still going on. I'll have to wait, to put on a brave face and play the perfect hostess until they leave.

...

"Well, Abby," Vanessa says, her coat in hand, "tonight was lovely. We'll be sure to send out our verdict tomorrow."

"You'll receive a call from Mr. Thompson, of course," Xavier chimes in with a warm smile.

I nod, although the movement feels robotic. "Thank you. I'll be looking forward to it."

The judges say their goodbyes—even Logan offers a curt nod. But as the door clicks shut behind them and their voices fade away into the night, the air seems to rush out of the room.

I stand by the door, my hand still resting on the cool metal of the handle, watching through the glass as their figures disappear down the street. The tension I've been carrying in my shoulders all night seems to unwind ever so slightly. I finally feel like I can relax, like the mask can come off.

Then I hear his voice, gentle yet uncertain. "Abby?"

I turn to find Karl standing there, his expression unreadable. In the quiet space of the now empty room, his presence is both a comfort and a reminder of Logan's cryptic words earlier.

For a moment, I just stare at him, trying to find the right words, trying to make sense of it all. Finally, I can't hold it in any longer. I need to know.

"Karl," I start, my voice not quite steady, "Logan said something strange to me in the kitchen earlier."

"Oh?" Karl's brow furrows, and he takes a step closer, his hands tucked into his pockets.

"He implied that you... that you knew something. That there was some 'truth' you hadn't told me from the day of the cook-off." The words come out in a rush before I can stop them.

Karl's face changes. The easy openness that was there a moment ago now seems to be replaced by something else, something that I can't quite put a finger on.

"Did he?" His voice is even, but I can sense the tightness lurking beneath.

I nod, folding my arms across my chest as if that will somehow comfort me.

"Yeah, he did. He said, 'Hasn't your sous chef told you?' when I asked why he seemed to dislike me. Then he said it wasn't his place to say, but that I should talk to you and get the truth. He wouldn't waste his breath twice."