

Kickass 321

Chapter 321

Abby

“Karl! Abby! Over here!”

Karl and I exchange glances with each other before we decide to head over to the table where Ethan and Gianna are waiting. Despite Gianna’s presence, Ethan’s smile is a beacon of happiness, and I’m glad to see it.

Although Ethan was in his coma for the majority of the time that Karl and I were together, I always liked him. He was a good brother to Karl, a genuine person and a kind soul.

It was heartbreaking when he fell into his coma, and yet at the same time it was like a new chapter; Karl became the Alpha and ruled the pack in his brother’s place, and I became the Luna.

I have hope that the two brothers will be able to come to some sort of amicable conclusion about their status, and I know that it won’t end poorly between the two of them. They’re all each other has, after all.

But then there’s Gianna.

She’s like a dark stain on the night, and an even darker stain on our history. With Gianna by Ethan’s side, it also fills me with a sense of dread.

There’s no telling what she’ll do to smear Karl’s reputation through the mud, and if she’s already somehow managed to manipulate Ethan into falling in love with her, I can only imagine what she’ll be able to accomplish.

On one hand, I want to believe in the power of true love, but on the other hand... I don’t trust this. Not one bit.

Karl and I meet Gianna and Ethan at the table, where Gianna is already seated beside Ethan, her gaze averted to the drink menu in her hand. She doesn't look up as we approach.

Karl pulls my seat out for me, and I'm grateful that he chose the seat for me that's the furthest from Gianna. After what she did, I don't even want to breathe the same air as her.

"Abby, I must say, I didn't expect to see you tonight," Ethan says, his eyes flickering with amusement as he looks at me—but not in an unkind way. "I thought Karl already had a date."

Gianna glances up, a flicker of something malicious in her eyes at this news. Karl's jaw tightens a bit.

"My date and I decided to go our separate ways," Karl explains vaguely, his knee bumping against mine under the table. "And so Abby and I reconnected."

"Well, I'm glad to see it," Ethan says with a kind glint in his eyes. "And, Abby, you catered tonight, correct?" he asks.

I nod, choosing to ignore the way that Gianna rolls her eyes ever so slightly, her gaze averting back to her menu.

"I did," I explain. "Actually, this restaurant is mine."

Ethan's eyes widen. "Really?"

"Abby opened it after you went into your coma," Karl explains for me. "You missed a lot, brother."

Ethan chuckles. "I guess I did." His attention then shifts to the food on the buffet table. "It sure looks delicious," he says. "And, Abby, congratulations on opening your own restaurant. That's no small feat."

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It's no different than the night that Karl threw the party at our old home, and seeing someone treat the food—which my team and I so painstakingly prepared—like it's not even worth tasting is hurtful. The contrast between her and Ethan is striking, and I can't help but wonder about her true intentions.

“Well, I agree with Ethan,” Karl chimes in, sensing my upset over Gianna. He holds up a forkful of glistening pasta and smiles. “This is delicious. I may need to have a second helping later.”

“Speaking of second helpings,” Ethan says, pushing his now-empty plate away, “I can see that the spinach puffs are disappearing quickly over there. I’ll be right back—”

“Allow me,” I say suddenly, standing abruptly. “I’ll get it for you.”

Ethan shoots me a concerned look. “Abby, you don’t—”

“Really,” I retort with a smile. “You should relax. Besides, I’m the caterer.”

Before Ethan has the chance to refuse, I push my chair back and walk away. Really, I just need a moment away from Gianna so I can breathe, but I won’t let them know that. As I approach the table, however, I can hear the sound of footsteps behind me. I know it’s Karl.

“Are you okay, Abby?” Karl’s voice is hushed as he brushes his fingers gently against mine, reaching for a plate of calamari on the table.

I offer him a reassuring smile. “I’m fine, Karl,” I say. “Just needed to take a moment to breathe.”

“Trying to get away from Gianna?” he asks.

I nod, knowing that there’s no point in sugarcoating it. We both glance over our shoulders to see that Gianna has shoved her untouched plate away. Ethan is reaching for it.

“Man, he sure is ravenous,” Karl says with a chuckle.

I can’t help but laugh, too. “Hey, at least one of them is enjoying the food,” I say.

Karl nods and sighs, a mixture of frustration and gratitude evident in his eyes. "I'm really sorry she's here, Abby. I just wish we could spend one night free of drama, you know?"

Truthfully, I do know. And I want that, too; more than anything right now.

But before I can respond, a woman with two adorable children—a boy and a girl—approaches us. The little ones are beaming with innocence and joy, their mouths and tiny hands flecked with chocolate.

"Excuse me," the mother says, flashing me a smile. "You're Abby, correct? The caterer?"

I nod and set down the plate of spinach puffs I'm holding. "I am."

The mother grins and looks down at her two kids. "Go ahead," she says to them. "Tell Miss Abby what you told me."

With bashful looks on their faces, the little kids stammer out their gratitude.

"Um, the chocolate cake is super tasty," the little boy says, licking his lips. "Thank you for making it for us."

"Yeah, thank you," the little girl chimes in. "It's delectable!"

Beside me, Karl stifles a laugh. The mother giggles, shaking her head. "She means delectable," she corrects. "It's her new favorite word."

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Karl

Abby stands after her interaction with the woman and her children, and her eyes meet mine beneath the colored lights.

“What?” she asks with a slight chuckle, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She looks beautiful, her pinkish pale skin and her pearlescent white dress illuminated by the dark purple lighting.

I shake my head. “Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.”

But that’s a lie.

Watching Abby interact with those kids, her smile radiant as ever and her laughter so infectious, I’m instantly reminded of a time before everything fell apart.

It takes me back to a moment from the past, a time when Abby approached me with a bashful expression on her face, her eyes filled with hope and uncertainty...

I was sitting at my desk, neck-deep in paperwork and exhausted after a long day. My hair was a mess, my eyes were bleary, and I had a pain in my neck that just wouldn’t go away thanks to hours of hunching over my desk.

That was why, when I heard a knock on the door, I answered more sharply than I intended.

“What is it?” I called out, my voice blunt and annoyed. I figured that it was my secretary or my Beta coming to give me some more paperwork, or maybe to tell me about some new issue or another.

There was a silence before a meek and familiar voice responded. “It’s me, Karl.”

The second I recognized that voice, a feeling of guilt washed over me for answering the way I did. I sighed, placing my pen down.

“I’m sorry,” I called out. “Come in, Abby.” A moment later, the door cracked open and Abby slipped in. I knew right away that something was up, judging from the way her eyes darted around and the way she wrung her hands in front of herself.

“Is something on your mind?” I asked.

She stood in front of me for a few moments, fidgeting with her fingers, and finally, in a soft, stammering voice, she spoke up. "Karl, I... I want to have a baby."

Her words caught me off guard, as we had never broached the topic of starting a family before. The idea had never been openly discussed between us, and yet, here she was, revealing her deepest wish. I studied her face, trying to gauge her sincerity, and saw nothing but earnestness in her eyes.

"You do?" I replied, my voice filled with surprise and the tiniest shred of joy.

She nodded. "I do."

"Abby, why didn't you say anything before?"

She looked down, her cheeks tinged a delicate shade of pink. "I guess I didn't know how you would react," she admitted. "And I thought it might sound silly, or that you weren't ready."

I couldn't help but smile, my heart swelling with warmth. I stood up from my desk, taking her hands in mine, and pulled her into my arms. Truthfully, I had been thinking about it for a while too, although maybe not as intensely as her.

"Abby, you have no idea how happy this makes me," I whispered, my lips finding hers in a tender kiss. "I've always wanted to start a family with you."

Her eyes widened, and she tossed her hair over her shoulder. It was black at the time, a phase that I coerced her into. Now, looking back, I know that her natural blonde always suited her better.

"Really?" she asked. "You do?"

I nodded. "Of course I do," I said. "Abby, whatever you want, we'll do it. We can start trying right now if that's what you want to do."

With a smirk, Abby's eyes narrowed and her voice grew husky. "Like... right now?"

Before I knew it, our lives were twisted into an endless string of hot sex and pregnancy tests. It was as if the thought of trying awakened something in Abby, and she was insatiable.

We were both thrilled at the prospect of becoming parents, of bringing a new life into the world together. Our discussions shifted to plans, dreams, and the future we hoped to build as a family. It was a time filled with hope and excitement.

But as the months passed and Abby still wasn't getting pregnant, despite our efforts and countless attempts, we realized something was off. We decided to consult a doctor who conducted tests and examinations.

The news we received was disheartening.

"I'm very sorry," the doctor said with a sigh as he looked at the file in his hands. "But Abby, you only have one functioning ovary. Your chances of conceiving are slim."

Abby's eyes filled with tears as the doctor's words sank in.

"Is there nothing we can do?" I found myself asking.

The doctor shook his head. "IVF may be an option," he said, "and there's always surrogacy or adoption if that doesn't work. But there's no way to make the other ovary function."

"I won't do any of those treatments," Abby said almost immediately. "If I can't have my own baby the natural way, then I don't want one at all."

The doctor and I exchanged looks, shocked by Abby's words. Later, in privacy, he explained to me that it was a common reaction for people to have, but that Abby would likely come around to different options down the road.

Little did I know that, less than a year later, we would be divorced.

The night she received the news, her sobs were uncontrollable. I felt helpless, as if there was no way to console her.

And in the end, I left her alone in our bedroom, drowning in her sorrow all on her own, unable to offer the comfort and solace she sought.

Chapter 324

Abby

“Should we head back to the table?”

Karl nods his head toward the table where Gianna and Ethan are still sitting. I follow his gaze, taking a moment to watch as Gianna leans over and whispers something into Ethan’s ear. I don’t want to go back, but I know it’s the polite thing to do.

“Sure,” I respond with a nod of my head.

However, just as we’re about to head back, there’s a tap on my shoulder. I turn to see Daisy standing there.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” she says, “but you’re needed back in the kitchen. Another rush is coming in.”

“Okay, Daisy,” I reply with a stiff smile. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll be back soon.”

Daisy gives me a nod and scurries away, but not before her eyes flicker back and forth between Karl and me for a moment, a conspiratorial look in her gaze.

Once Karl and I are alone again, we stand there for a moment in silence.

I meet Karl's eyes, a silent apology. I wish I could stay, but I never intended to attend the party all night, and my staff needs me now. I've already spent nearly two hours at the party, and the attendance has only gone up since I've been out here.

"Go," he murmurs with a nod of his head, as though reading my conflicted thoughts. "It was nice seeing you."

"It was... nice seeing you too," I reply, my voice soft.

For a moment, we just stand there under the colorful lights of the party. The music swells, the lively chatter of the other guests feels deafening, and yet at the same time it feels as if we're the only two people in the room.

I want to tell Karl that I'd like one more dance, that I'm sorry we couldn't spend more time together tonight. I want to tell him to stay after the party.

But at the same time, I know that we can't. We shouldn't. He has to return to his pack, and I have to stay here and run my restaurant. Whatever magic transpired between us tonight may or may not have a future now. But it was nice while it lasted.

Without another word, because I know I'll get too emotional, I turn on my heel and walk away.

I feel a pang of sadness as I scurry away, wishing we could have at least had more time together tonight. But it's time to get back into a professional headspace and put it behind me.

I hurry back to my office, where I quickly change back into my chef's whites, put my hair back into a neat bun, and remove my makeup. It feels bittersweet as I hang my dress carefully back up on the door, and I pause for a moment, touching the soft fabric as the events of the night wash over me.

But there isn't any time left to dwell on it. First and foremost, I am the owner of this restaurant, and I have a party to cater.

As I push back into the kitchen, John and Anton look up from behind the line.

“There she is,” John says, sounding relieved. “We’ve got a second rush here. It’s getting a bit crazy.”

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John and Anton don’t say anything else about it, but I can sense their knowing gazes on me. However, I return my attention to the task at hand: putting out delicious meal after delicious meal.

The kitchen turns into a cacophony of noise, and before I know it, I’m hardly thinking about the party at all. I’m too focused on making good food to think about Karl, the dance, or even Gianna and Ethan.

“French onion soup, coming up!”

“Hot pan!”

“Anton, where’s that steak?”

As the night wears on, John, Anton, and I work like a well-oiled machine to beat the second wave of meal orders. Daisy and the other servers float in and out, and each swing of the kitchen door brings in a rush of music from the party, which only reminds me even more of the magical, fleeting moment I shared with Karl on the dance floor.

I focus on chopping vegetables, the rhythmic motion of the knife against the cutting board providing a welcome distraction from the swirl of emotions brought about by the night’s events.

Dancing with Karl had stirred up a whirlwind of feelings I thought I had buried deep inside of me, but I can’t think too much about it right now.

Just as I’m lost in thought, Chloe enters the kitchen with a curious glance around, searching for something—or someone.

Her gaze lands on me, and I instinctively lower my head, pretending to be engrossed in my vegetable chopping.

But she's as sharp as a tack. She spots me instantly, seeing straight through my act, and storms over to me. Taking advantage of the lull in activity, she grabs my arm and pulls me off to the side, her gaze piercing.

"Tell me my eyes deceived me out there earlier," she whispers, her gaze intense. "Did you dance with Karl?"

I sigh inwardly, knowing that I can't avoid this conversation any longer. Slowly, I lift my head and meet her concerned gaze. "Yes, Chloe," I admit quietly. "You saw correctly. We danced together."

Chloe's response is immediate and unceremonious; she playfully smacks me on the arm.

"You're playing with fire, Abby," she chides, her expression a mixture of worry and disappointment. "You know how complicated things are between you two. And he had a date earlier tonight! He's a player."

I wince, feeling the sting of her words. It's not that I don't understand her concern; she's watched me go through the ups and downs of my relationship with Karl over the years. But right now, I don't need the scolding.

"I know, Chloe. But it was just one dance."

Chloe shakes her head, her eyes holding a mixture of exasperation and affection. "Abby, I've seen this before. You can't deny that there's still something between you two. But you're going to get hurt again if you're not careful, and besides; I thought you were going to take a break from the romance scene."

I look down at the vegetables I'm chopping, my heart heavy with conflicting emotions. Chloe's words are a reminder of the past pain and heartache I've experienced because of Karl. But they're also a reminder of the deep connection we once shared.

"I appreciate your concern, Chloe," I finally say, my voice softening. "But I need to figure this out on my own. I can't help how I feel."

Chloe sighs, her worry for me evident in her eyes. “I know, Abby. Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

Chapter 326

Karl

As I watch Abby disappear into the crowd, the lingering echoes of the music from our dance still resonate in my mind. It’s a strange mix of emotions that washes over me—happiness from the dance, a sense of loss as she leaves, and a tinge of uncertainty about what will happen after tonight.

But before I can fully process my thoughts, I’m suddenly interrupted by Daniel, the Alpha who had questioned me earlier about Abby and Shana. He approaches with a confident smile, and I brace myself for the conversation that’s about to happen.

“Karl,” he begins, “I couldn’t help but notice that Shana left. What happened?”

I take a moment to choose my words carefully. The last thing I need is more rumors spreading about me.

“Nothing much to it,” I say casually. “Shana and I had a conversation. We realized that our feelings weren’t as deep as we thought, and we decided it was best to part ways. It was a mutual decision.”

Daniel nods approvingly, seemingly satisfied with my explanation. “I see. Well, it’s better to end things amicably than drag them out. And I must say, Abby looked absolutely stunning tonight. I saw you two on the dance floor. You two make a great pair.”

A genuine smile tugs at the corners of my lips. Abby did look amazing tonight. Dancing with her was the highlight of the night, the week, hell—even the month. “Thanks, Daniel.”

Daniel pats me on the back. “Rooting for you, Karl. Always.”

I nod and watch as he walks away, leaving me lost in thought once again. Ethan and Gianna then catch my eye, and I realize that they’re both looking at me expectantly. Even though I think I’d rather lose a limb than talk with Gianna right now, I know I should head back for the sake of appearances.

As I take my seat, Ethan looks at me with curiosity. "Where's Abby?" he asks.

"She had to go back to the kitchen," I explain, my voice tinged with disappointment. "There was a rush of orders, and she's needed there."

Ethan sighs. "Ah. I wish we could have caught up more. It's been so long since we hung out."

"I know. But she was glad to see you, really." For a moment, I glance at Gianna, but her face is an inscrutable mask. I can practically feel her seething, though.

Ethan nods, a smile playing on his lips. "Well, it looks like you and Abby are on good terms again."

"You could say that," I reply vaguely, not wanting to get too into detail just in case.

As I'm speaking, Gianna, who has been quiet all night, scoffs under her breath. It's not lost on me, and my patience with her is wearing thin.

"Problem, Gianna?" I ask, my tone annoyed.

Gianna raises an eyebrow, feigning innocence. "I don't have a problem, Karl."

I know she's full of shit. She's been scowling all night, and for good reason; did she really think she could just waltz in here with my brother after everything she did and get away with it?

"You know," I start, my tone dropping. "Don't think for a second I've forgotten—"

Before I can finish, Ethan interjects. "Let's keep things amicable," he says, holding up his hand. "Karl, I'm aware of the situation. But, please, let's just enjoy the night. We can talk later."

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As the night continues, I can't help but think about her. She looked so stunning under the party lights, her white dress fitting her perfectly, her golden hair cascading in gentle waves down her back.

Ethan continues to chat with me, but my mind feels distant. Finally, I have to excuse myself from the table to slip away to the bathroom. I need a moment to breathe, to think clearly without my brother's conversation or Gianna's cold gaze.

Leaning against the cool marble countertop, I close my eyes, allowing a few precious moments of silence to wash over me. But I'm not alone for long; my wolf's presence strengthens, and I can feel him in the back of my mind.

"Go to her now," he says, sounding frustrated. "Confess your feelings. Tell her you want to get back together. Tonight."

I shake my head slightly, even though there's no one in the restroom to see my silent conversation with my wolf. "Now is not the right time, and you know that," I reply inwardly. "She's busy catering the Alpha gathering. She's worked so hard for this night, and she deserves to focus on her career."

My wolf growls low in his throat, his impatience evident. "You're such a coward, Karl. You keep making excuses instead of going after what you want. You love her, and she loves you. What are you waiting for?"

I consider his words for a moment. Maybe my wolf is right. After tonight, it feels like we could take things to the next level. But the thought of disrupting Abby's work, especially on a night as important as this, gnaws at me.

But he's right; it's either now or never.

And I need to see her again, if only for a moment.

As I exit the restroom and make my way down the hallway toward the kitchen, the swinging door opens, and I catch a glimpse of Abby. She's in her element, cooking and talking with her staff, her laughter filling the air. She looks even more beautiful and vibrant in her chef's uniform.

My wolf's voice echoes in my head, taunting me. "Do it, Karl," he hisses. "She's right there. What are you waiting for?"

But I hesitate, my gaze fixed on Abby as she works tirelessly. I shake my head, taking a step back. I can't bring myself to distract her now, not when she's poured so much effort into this night. She deserves the chance to focus on her career without any interruptions.

"Coward," my wolf mutters once more, his voice laced with disappointment.

I clench my jaw and turn away, heading toward the bar instead. Maybe a drink will help clear my thoughts and silence the persistent voice in my head.

Chloe gives me a scowl as she prepares my drink. Her disapproval is evident, and as always, she doesn't hesitate to voice her concerns.

"I saw you with another woman tonight, right before you danced with Abby," Chloe says, her tone sharp. "You had better not hurt her, Karl."

I raise an eyebrow, as I take my drink from her. "Chloe, you've got it all wrong," I reply, my voice steady. "I have no intention of hurting Abby. I thought you knew that by now."

Chloe narrows her eyes at me, unrelenting. "Yeah, well, I'm still onto you, Karl. Abby is a busy, professional woman who doesn't need a playboy holding her back."

I look at Chloe for a moment, considering her words. I know that she cares deeply for Abby, and her protectiveness is evident. I can't fault her for that; if I were in her position, I'd do the same. Hell, I've got to absurd lengths to 'protect' Abby.

Chapter 328

Abby

The rest of the night goes by in a whirlwind. John, Anton, and I are like a well-oiled machine, sending out plate after plate of well-received meals. There are a few complaints and dishes that are sent back, but we handle everything in stride.

“Abby, table seven sent back their steak,” Daisy says, returning with the plate. “They asked for medium well and they got medium rare.”

I nod at John, who is already throwing another steak on the grill. “Tell them we’re sorry, and bring them another appetizer while we make a new one,” I say without batting an eye.

Daisy nods and disappears, leaving the three of us in our element again.

“You know, despite a couple of hiccups here and there, tonight has been pretty much seamless,” John points out as he watches the steak.

He’s right; it has been seamless, in more ways than one. For the most part, at least. I keep thinking about the fleeting dance I shared with Karl, and no matter how much I try, I can’t get it off my mind. And although I won’t admit it to Chloe or anyone else, I don’t think I want to get it off my mind.

But I don’t know where things will go from here, and that’s the confusing part. For all I know, Karl may go home to his pack to focus on his Alpha duties, and I’ll get caught up in my work, and that will be the end of whatever is happening between us.

And frankly, I don’t know which outcome I’m hoping for. Do I want it to fizzle out on a good note with this last magical night on my mind, or do I want to open myself up to a second heartbreak?

Before I can process my thoughts, suddenly, out of nowhere, Mr. Thompson strides into the kitchen.

“Abby,” he says, his eyes meeting mine. There’s a serious look in his gaze. “Do you have a moment?”

Fearing the worst, I glance at John and Anton, who give me a subtle nod to indicate that they’ve got the kitchen under control.

“Yes,” I reply. “What do you need, Mr. Thompson?”

“Follow me.”

My heart leaps into my throat as I wipe my hands on my apron and follow him out into the hallway.

The three judges from the cook-off—Vanessa, Logan, and Xavier—are standing there, and my stomach churns with nervousness. I saw each of them on their own tonight, but wasn't expecting to see them together again; and especially not right now.

"Good evening," I manage to say, trying to keep my composure. "Is everything alright?"

Vanessa steps forward with a warm smile. "Everything is more than alright, Abby," she says in that gentle, soothing voice of hers. "We just wanted to congratulate you on a successful Alpha gathering. The food tonight has been outstanding."

I can't help but smile as a sense of relief washes over me. "Thank you so much," I murmur. "It's been an honor to cook for all of you."

Xavier then steps forward. "Abby, since tonight has been such a success, we may have more opportunities for you," he says. "It could involve traveling overseas for some special culinary experiences. We can't give you all the details right now, but we wanted to let you know. If you're not interested in traveling, we won't bother you with it."

My heart skips a beat at his words. "Really?" I ask, taken aback.

He nods. "Yes. Is that something you'd be interested in, Abby?"

Even though I don't know the details, the thought of traveling overseas for new opportunities fills me with excitement, and I find myself nodding vigorously. "Y-Yes, of course," I manage. "Thank you for this opportunity. I'd love to hear more about it."

"Excellent," Xavier says with a smile. "We'll be sending you the details at some point in the near future."

Logan, on the other hand, steps forward, and his gaze is intense, inscrutable. He doesn't say much, but the weight of his words hangs heavily in the air.

“I’ll be expecting improvement in the future.”

His words leave a gaping hole in my chest. Expecting improvement. Was tonight not enough? What else do I need to do in order to prove myself?

I nod, not knowing what else to say. It’s clear that Logan’s standards are high, but I’m determined to meet them someday, no matter how difficult or even impossible that may be.

“Well,” Vanessa says, adjusting her purse on her shoulder, “again, it was a lovely night, Abby. You’ll be hearing from us.”

“Thank you,” I manage to respond with a smile. “I’ll be looking forward to it.”

They say their goodbyes and walk away with Mr. Thompson on their heels, leaving me standing there, feeling like my head is spinning after what they just told me. The possibility of future opportunities and travel is exhilarating, but Logan’s words linger in my mind.

Improvement—I need to keep pushing myself to become better, to rise to the increasingly difficult challenges that he throws my way. I need to prove myself, to show him that I am as capable as he thinks I am.

But will that even be possible, or will he keep moving the goalposts, always expecting something from me that’s just out of reach?

With a deep breath I return to the kitchen, where John and Anton are waiting, curious expressions on their faces. They’ve noticed something is up, and I know I won’t be able to keep it from them.

“What happened?” John asks, his brow furrowed.

I hesitate for a moment, unsure of how much to share before the whole overseas travel thing is a bit more concrete. “The judges just wanted to say goodnight,” I reply vaguely.

Anton raises an eyebrow, clearly not buying it. “That’s it?”

I sigh, realizing I can’t keep it all to myself, and lean in closer to them. “Well, not exactly,” I say. “They mentioned the possibility of more opportunities, even overseas travel. But Logan—he expects improvement.”

Chapter 329

Abby

We’re nearing the end of the night, and although my feet are more sore than they’ve ever been and there’s a fine sheen of sweat on my skin, it’s a good sort of exhaustion that I’m feeling.

I’m taking a moment to stand beside the line, sipping on some ice cold water to calm my nerves. It’s been a whirlwind of a night, but we’ve finally beat the second wave of orders, and now we’re just tying up loose ends before the kitchen is officially closed.

As I glance around, making sure everything is in order, I hear the kitchen door swing open. I look up, expecting to see Daisy or another server bustle in, but there’s no one; just the door swinging on its hinges.

“Hello?” I call out, a bit confused. There’s no answer I can’t see very well over the line, and John and Anton have their backs turned.

Figuring that it was just a random gust of wind or someone opening the wrong door in search of the bathroom, I decide to walk around the line to take a look—just in case.

But as I approach, I gasp in surprise.

There, standing in the doorway, are the two little children from earlier in the evening. They’re still dressed in their fancy clothes, but their faces are now smeared with chocolate more than before, and they look like they’ve been having quite the adventure.

“Chef Abby!” the little girl exclaims, pointing her chocolate-covered finger at me.

I quickly wipe my hands on my apron, my concern mounting. "Hey, you two," I say gently, crouching down to their eye level. "What are you doing in here? It's not safe for little kids in the kitchen."

The two children exchange glances, their faces breaking into mischievous smiles. The boy, with chocolate all over his cheeks, points to a nearby pot on the stove. "We wanted to come and help cook," he explains with a grin.

I can't help but laugh at their innocence. "Well, I appreciate the offer," I say with a chuckle, "but little children aren't allowed in the kitchen. It can be a dangerous place."

Standing, I reach out and take their tiny hands. "Come on," I say, leading them back toward the kitchen door. "Let's find your mom."

We step back into the party area, and I can see the relief on the faces of the partygoers, especially their mother, who has clearly been frantically searching for her children. She rushes over to us, her eyes filled with worry.

"Oh, thank goodness you found them!" she exclaims, gathering her children into her arms. "I was so worried."

I give her an understanding smile. "They just wanted to explore a bit," I explain, "but I couldn't let them stay in the kitchen. It's not safe."

She nods, scolding her children gently. "You two should never sneak into the kitchen like that. It's dangerous, and you could get hurt."

The children hang their heads, looking contrite. "Sorry, mom," they mumble in unison.

She hugs them tightly, her relief palpable. "Thank you," she says to me. "I'm sorry for the trouble."

I wave it off with a smile. "It's not a big deal; I caught it before anything happened."

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Their mother chuckles. "Thank you again," she says to me.

With a nod and a final smile, I leave them to enjoy the rest of the party and head back to the kitchen. But as I walk away, I can't deny the tears that have gathered in my eyes.

I almost forgot how much I love children, and it fills me with a sense of melancholy...

Because I know that I may never be able to have children of my own.

...

The night has wound down, and the kitchen is finally closed. It's been a whirlwind of a night, filled with so many different moments, both bittersweet and exciting.

My staff and I have convened in the kitchen for one last drink to power us through the end-of-night cleaning. I'm sitting on the counter, a welcome reprieve from standing all night.

After pouring the champagne, John holds up his glass with a smile on his tired face.

"To Abby," he says.

I blush, raising my own glass. "No. To all of us."

The others cheer in agreement, and I feel a warmth spread through me. It's moments like these that remind me of the wonderful people I have in my life.

"Really, I couldn't have done any of this without all of you," I say, looking at all of my staff's faces. "I'm so lucky to have you."

We all clink our glasses together and drink. As we take some time to chat about the night and rest our feet, however, I keep looking at the door. It's as if my heart is secretly hoping that Karl might just walk through.

But he doesn't.

I start to wonder if he's already left without saying goodbye, and in that moment, as though acting on impulse, I find myself standing.

"I'll be right back," I say, setting my glass down and walking out the door.

In the dining area, Mr. Thompson's staff is already breaking down the party decorations. The streamers and balloons have been taken down, the lights are being packed away, and the floor is being swept clean of confetti and glitter. It's actually kind of starting to look like my restaurant again.

Mr. Thompson looks up from the notes he's taking on a clipboard as I approach. "Ah, Abby," he says, tucking the clipboard under his arm. "Everything okay?"

I nod, my eyes scanning the room. All of the guests are gone—including Karl. "I'm fi—"

"You're looking for Karl," he says, dropping his voice to an almost-whisper.

I feel a blush creep up my cheeks. "I—"

He chuckles and pats my shoulder. "Look, Abby, I saw the chemistry between you two earlier. He just left a few minutes ago. Perhaps you could still catch him."

My heart sinks at the realization that I missed him, but at the same time, Mr. Thompson's words fill me with a sense of determination.

"Go," he says, giving me a little push. "If you run, I think you could catch him."

Embarrassment washes over me once more, but I don't care. I mumble a quick thank you and rush out the door without another word.