

His Kickass 241

Chapter 241

Karl

The sizzle of sauteing farro mafaldine fills the air as Abby and I maneuver around our station like we've done this a million times before. I can sense a newfound glimmer in Abby's eyes, a hint of something confident and downright mesmerizing.

"Ken," Abby's voice cuts sharply through the noise, using the pseudonym that I chose earlier today like it's second nature to her despite the pressure, "start on the mushrooms. I'll handle the mafaldine and get the sauce going."

"On it," I reply, grabbing a skillet. I drizzle the olive oil into the pan just as I've watched Anton and John do all along, having taken their motions and saved them in a little recess in the back of my mind, like a sponge soaking up knowledge.

Abby doesn't miss a beat, her hands working with a practiced rhythm as she finishes kneading the pasta dough and begins feeding it through the pasta machine. She shoots me a quick, conspiratorial glance that says we've got this in the bag, so long as we don't have another sabotage on our hands.

"Make sure those mushrooms are golden, Ken," she says. "They need to be perfect."

I nod, adjusting the flame. "On

Her laugh crackles across our station. "'Chef,'" she says. "I like when you call

But then, her hands move over the mafaldine, her attention back on the pasta. "We'll need the truffles soon," she says. "Can you

"Coming right up," I say, although the mushrooms demand my focus for a few moments longer. They're browning nicely, the nutty aroma mixing with the sweet scent of the

Satisfied, I turn down the heat and take a step away from the stove, wiping my hands on the towel that's slung over my shoulder. "I'll grab the truffles

As I make my way to the pantry, I can't help but feel the prickling sensation of being on the cusp of victory. Abby is bound to win this, I'm sure of it. The second round was a bit of a bust, but lady luck is on our side right now.

But then, the door to the pantry swings open, and that's when I see him—Daniel's sous chef, truffles in hand, and a conspiratorial look in his eyes.

"Hey!" I bark out before I can think better of it. The man startles, knocking a container of herbs off the shelf. "What do you think you're doing?"

He's cornered, like a mouse caught by a cat, and there's no mistaking the flush of guilt that spreads across his face. His hands clutch a container, the label reading 'black truffles,' but the contents... they look all wrong. Not at all like the truffles that Abby and I risked our lives to find.

The sous chef scrambles for words, his mouth opening and closing like a fish gasping for air. "I—uh..."

"Those aren't the black truffles, you little snake." My voice is low, almost a growl. I take a step closer, the intensity of the competition and my desire for Abby to win fuelling

He shifts where he's standing, his eyes flitting desperately toward the door. "Look,

"You're tampering with the ingredients, aren't you?" I hiss, taking another step forward. "Go on, spit it

His eyes dart from side to side. "No, look,

"Trying to give Abby another handicap, are you?" I ask. "Just like you did in the second round, when you swapped her

His gaze finally breaks from mine, looking at anything but my face. “I was just checking something,” he says, his voice so low it’s a whisper.

“Oh, you were ‘checking something?’” I echo, my tone chalk full of disbelief. “By switching labels and possibly ruining our dish? Hm?”

He opens his mouth, then closes it again, the perfect picture of guilt.

“I was just...” He stammers, his voice trailing off.

I can’t take it anymore. I’m getting those truffles—the real black truffles, the ones that are balled up in his filthy little hand, about to be slipped into his pocket—for Abby, one way or another.

Without entirely thinking of a plan, I find myself lurching forward, fueled by anger and the adrenaline of the competition, and snatch the truffles out of his

“You’re cheating!” I call out, loud enough for the others to hear. “Did Daniel put you up

But then, as the truffles come into my possession, the sous chef’s face morphs into something unreadable, and suddenly, he’s cradling his wrist, howling in

“You wrenched my wrist! You hurt me!” he

I stand there, truffles in hand, shocked. “I did no such thing! I didn’t even

His cries echo off the pantry walls, drawing eyes toward us like moths to a flame. The room falls deathly silent, save for his accusations. The camera swivels in our direction, eager to capture this drama for live television.

“Look, everyone, I didn’t touch him! He’s lying!” I protest, holding out the truffles as evidence of his deceit. “He was swapping the ingredients. He took the black truffles and—”

But it's too late; the narrative has shifted, and I can see it in the way their eyes change, how the whispers are starting to spread. The sous chef howls even louder, gripping his wrist as his face turns beet red.

"Ow! Owwww!" he wails, pacing back and forth. "God, I think he sprained my wrist! Ow!"

A security guard, a hulking figure of authority, steps forward. "Sir, you need to come with me," he says, jerking his head toward me.

Abby's face, once flushed with the heat of cooking, blanches as she witnesses the scene. "Karl, what's going on?" Her voice, filled with disbelief, reaches me even as I'm ushered away from the scene by the security

"I never touched him, Abby! He's faking it!" The desperation in my voice does nothing to change the unfolding

But the sous chef only continues his theatrics, his voice reaching a crescendo of feigned agony. "My wrist, I can't believe he just attacked me! He's violent!"

I turn back to Abby, the only person who might believe me. "They're trying to sabotage us! He swapped the truffles. The labels..." My words tumble out in a rush, hoping desperately that she can hear me, but she's too far away now, and I know she

The security guard's grip is firm on my arm, unyielding. "Let's not make a scene, sir," he

Chapter 243

Abby

All I can do is watch, helpless, as Karl's form recedes.

He's being guided forcibly away by the firm hand of a security guard, and he's yelling something over the din of the crowd, the announcer, and the sounds of cooking.

I can't make out what he's saying, but whatever it is, it's frantic. But before I can make sense of it, a microphone is suddenly shoved in my face, and the camera blocks my view of Karl's fading form.

"Abby, what's happening? Does your sous chef often show such aggressive behavior?" The announcer's voice breaks through my train of thought, loud and grating over the microphone. I feel frozen to my spot, unsure of what to do.

"I... Um... Excuse me," I manage, pushing past the announcer and hurrying toward the edge of the stage, toward where Karl and the security guard disappeared to. But Mr. Thompson is already in my way, grabbing my arm and yanking me out of the view of the camera.

"Abby, you can't follow him," Mr. Thompson hisses, his voice low. "Get back out there."

"But I need to—" I begin, but the words are cut off.

"No," Mr. Thompson cuts in, his tone leaving no room for argument. "What you need to do is finish your dish. This will be handled, don't worry."

"But Karl, he—"

"Will be taken care of," he interrupts firmly. "The judges have made it clear: the timer will not stop. You must continue or

My mind races. "But I can't cook without my sous chef," I argue, my voice wavering now. "It's not fair. Daniel still has his

"Fair or not," Mr. Thompson retorts with a regretful shake of his head, "those are the rules. I'm sorry, Abby, but it's not up to me. You do want to win,

Winning. The concept seems so far from me now. It doesn't feel right to keep going without Karl. And I can't do this all on my own. I need a sous chef. "I can't just pretend that this is all okay," I say. "He would never hurt anyone like that. This—this is

“You don’t have to pretend anything,” Mr. Thompson replies. “Just cook. That’s what you’re here for, isn’t it? To prove yourself in the

I glance back at the station, at the unfinished dish lying on the counter. The cameras, the lights, the eyes on the stage—all of it is the real reason why I’m here. Mr. Thompson is right; I can’t just abandon it

“Abby, you have to go back,” Mr. Thompson murmurs, his voice lower now, his eyes laced with concern. “You know Karl would want you to finish this, even

I close my eyes for a fleeting second, letting his words anchor me to this moment. Mr. Thompson is right, yet

“You’re right,” I say, though each word feels hollow, even to me. “But this isn’t over. I’ll finish the dish, but I won’t let this lie. Karl is many things, but violent isn’t one of

“Don’t worry,” Mr. Thompson says, squeezing my shoulder. “I’ll look into this. Personally.”

I whirl around and run back on stage, where the camera and the announcer have been waiting for me all this time. The audience is murmuring in confusion, and the judges are staring at me from their booth. Daniel and his sous chef, however, are right back at work. And the timer hasn’t paused for even a second. I’ve already wasted several minutes over this.

“Dammit,” I murmur as I dash past the camera and back to my station. The timer feels like a ticking time bomb, a countdown to an explosion that may or may not come. And I feel utterly helpless in this mess.

As I make my way past Daniel’s station, I catch his eyes. He and his sous chef are back at work, his sous chef cooking with one hand, although I know he’s not really injured. Daniel shoots me that look with that knowing glint in his eyes, a subtle smirk crossing his lips.

“Rat,” I think to myself, feeling my hackles raise just at the sight of him. But I can’t stop now. Whatever this is, I’ll have to deal with it later. Right now, my focus is my half-finished dish.

My hands tremble with a combination of anger and adrenaline as I come to a screeching halt at my workstation. A quick glance at the half-finished dish reminds me: truffles. Cursing under my breath, I run to the pantry, grab the coveted container off the shelf, and run back.

“Just like Anton taught me,” I think as I sprinkle the finely chopped truffles into the butter, letting them simmer together so that the flavors melt into one another and create a perfect harmony of umami and woody tang.

I then return my attention to the pasta, stirring it. It’s handmade, so it cooks quickly, and before I know it, it’s out of the pot and ready for the truffle butter.

I steal a glance at the clock—mere minutes remaining. “Okay, okay, pan,” I murmur, carrying the strainer over to the frying pan where the truffle butter is waiting.”

“Looking a bit rough there, Abby,” Daniel says, his eyes meeting mine with a smirk tugging at the corners of

I shoot him a glare that could kill. “Worry about your own

“Oh, I am,” he chuckles. “It’s just impossible not to notice when someone is

I want to snap back, to throw his smugness back in his face, but there’s no time. My hands are moving on their own now, muscle memory guiding me more than thought right now, each ingredient added in a rush of

Plating begins, and that’s when it all starts to go to

It’s as if my fingers have turned to clumsy tools, thick and uncoordinated. The components of the dish stack awkwardly on top of one another, vastly unlike the beautiful dish I’ve practiced relentlessly with Anton and

“And end round in three...” the announcer’s voice calls over the microphone, grating my

Another curse under my breath. I forgot the basil, but it's too

"Two..."

Chapter 244

Abby

I feel frozen to my spot as the judges make their way toward Daniel's station. The grin stretched across his face almost makes me feel sick, and it's all I can do not to run off the stage right now.

"Wow," Vanessa says as she takes the first bite of Daniel's dish, which looks leaps and bounds ahead of mine just by presentation alone. "Really, Daniel; wow. Despite everything, you created a phenomenal dish."

"Thank you so much," Daniel says, his eyes flickering toward me. "You know, with my sous chef's wrist in so much pain, it was difficult. But we made it."

Next, the judges begin making their way toward me, and I feel like I'm going to be sick. They stop in front of my station, and I can feel the cold weight of Logan's gaze on me already.

"Hello, Abby," Vanessa says, her gaze sweet as ever despite the circumstances. "Your performance in the second round was lacking, but you're here now. How do you feel?"

I swallow. "I feel..." I pause, my throat cracked and dry. "I feel... Hopeful," I mutter. Vanessa nods in response along with the third judge, but Logan—his face is as inscrutable as ever.

As the judges begin their taste test, time feels as though it's moving in slow motion. All eyes are on me, Abby, the chef with the 'violent' partner. I wish that Karl was here now, if only to have his presence by my side, but he's not. Right now, this stage feels even more vast and cold than it ever has.

"Oh... Abby," Vanessa finally says, her voice low. "This... This isn't what I expected from you."

I feel a tightness in my chest as panic begins to set in. “I... I tried to bring the flavors together, to—” I start to explain, but my words falter under

She nods, but it's not one of understanding. “I see what you tried to do, but it's not coming together on the plate. I'm sorry,

My gaze flicks to the second judge, Xavier, a chef of few words. His eyes meet mine, and I see it there before he even speaks—a

“It's unbalanced,” he adds simply, his

I want to argue, to defend my dish, to say that the circumstances were against me, but I swallow the words. They know the chaos that unfolded. They saw Karl being taken away, and yet they seem to expect the impossible

But it's Logan's voice, clear and authoritative, that slices through the tension. “Abby, what we have here is a fundamental problem,” he states, his cold eyes

I clutch the edge of my station, my knuckles whitening. “Please, enlighten me,” I say, hoping that the quiver in my voice isn't

He raises an eyebrow. “Well, to put it plainly...” He pauses, as though for dramatic effect. “You didn't follow the instructions, Abby. This dish is not what we asked

My breath hitches, and I find myself gasping for air. “But I—I don't understand,” I stammer, my composure shattering. “This is farro mafaldine with black truffle butter and mushrooms. It's exactly what was asked of me.”

“But that's where you're wrong,” Logan says with a disappointed shake of his head. “This is not farro mafaldine with black truffle butter and mushrooms.”

My eyebrows raise, but Logan is already digging through the dish with his fork. I watch in horror as he stabs a piece of black truffle and holds it up in the light, turning it this way and that.

“Abby, does this look like a black truffle to you?”

The studio suddenly seems as though all of the oxygen has been sucked out of it. I lean closer, my eyes widening as I notice that Logan is right. The color, the texture, the smell... It’s wrong. It’s all wrong. These aren’t the coveted black truffles. They’re black trumpet mushrooms.

“No,” I admit, my voice hardly more than a whisper as I feel the weight of the camera and the audience pressing in on me. “It doesn’t.”

Logan slowly lowers the fork, a soft sigh escaping his lips that almost sounds like a hiss. “I’m disappointed, Abby. Truly.”

“As am I,” Vanessa murmurs, bowing her head slightly. Xavier, the third judge, nods silently in agreement.

I find myself scrambling for a logical explanation, as if that would somehow help here. “I—I took them right out of the container labeled ‘black truffles,’” I stammer, my words tumbling out of my mouth like an avalanche. “I promise, I didn’t

Much to my surprise, Vanessa’s eyes seem to flash, and she tilts her chin up to meet my gaze. “Abby, you are a chef. It is your responsibility to know the differences between your own ingredients. I’m sorry, Abby, but I’m with Logan on this

The disappointment in her voice makes me feel as though I’m about to crumble. No, this can’t be. Vanessa Greene, my number one idol in the entire world, my biggest role model, won’t even take

Xavier leans in then, his own gaze narrowed. “Abby, I must agree with my colleagues. This sort of mistake is

My hands clench into tight balls of fury at my sides, my shoulders trembling. “But it’s not fair,” I murmur. “The ingredients were swapped, same as my spices in the second round. How is this

But the judges' faces remain impassive.

"I do apologize, Abby," Logan says, taking a step away from my station. "But this is not what we

The silence that follows is almost deafening. I feel like I'm tied to the whipping post for all the world to see, the victim of a terrible sabotage. Suddenly, everything I've been through: the journalists, the fire, the food poisoning, and now this... All of it feels somehow connected in a way that only makes sense to my

Chapter 245

Abby

My body feels as though it doesn't belong to me as I stalk to the breakroom. I feel like a puppet on strings that have been cut, like my limbs are made of lead and my body might give out from beneath me at any moment.

When I'm alone in the breakroom once again, though, I can't contain my fury any longer.

"Dammit!" The word explodes out of my mouth, and without thinking, I whirl around and let my shoe connect with the wall. There's a faint but satisfying crack, and when I pull away, there's a slight dent where I unleashed my rage.

It's almost laughable, seeing how small the dent is. It's like my own body won't even do what I want, let alone the ingredients on that stage out there.

My mind is whirling with so many thoughts that I barely even register the door creaking open. But then that venomous voice, that voice that I'll hear in my nightmares for years to come, slices through the air like an arrow whizzing past my ear.

"Oh, Abby," Daniel says, the sneer audible in his voice without me even having to look at him. I can picture him without even turning around, that horrendous smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. "Having a little tantrum, are we?"

"Don't even start, Daniel," I hiss, leaning on the counter, still not turning to face him.

But he just chuckles. "What?" he says, coming closer now. "I'm allowed to be concerned,

I decide not to respond, but it seems as though that doesn't satisfy Daniel. He tuts, and I can feel my resolve beginning to crumble. "Boy, that sure was a mess out there. You know, maybe it really should've been you dropping out, not Bryan. It would have saved you

I clench my fists, my nails digging into my palms despite the sting of where they dug in earlier. The pain anchors me, if only a little. I can't give him the satisfaction of letting him see me

But he continues, relentless as ever, his words dripping with condescension. "But then again, it's fitting, isn't it? You never belonged here. You're nothing

I whirl around to face him, my eyes ablaze, my heart pounding in my chest. The word he spits out next is vile, demeaning,

"You're nothing but a stupid little slut who belongs in the bedroom, not the culinary world,"

It's as though something shatters inside of me. My resolve has crumbled; he has won. I close the distance between us, my eyes shooting daggers at him. "You," I hiss, my voice trembling with the force of my anger, "are a disgusting excuse for a chef. And an even worse excuse for a human

His smile only widens, that infuriating, cocky smirk of a man who believes he has already won. "Struck a nerve, have

The muscles in my arm tense. Before I can stop myself, I'm stepping closer, my arm raised, my hand poised to slap him across the face.

I know he deserves it. He's a rat, a cockroach, a stain on this entire competition. He not only sabotaged me and Karl, but he laughed while doing it, and now he has the nerve to spit slurs in my face like it's nothing.

Daniel's eyes flick down. He quickly glances at my raised hand, and that's finally when I see it—the flicker of doubt in his gaze, the realization that he may have finally pushed too far.

His smirk falters, if only for a moment, and in that fraction of a second, I can finally see him for what he really is—nothing more than a scared little boy in a man's body, hiding behind a loud mouth and a grating personality.

But then his calculated veneer reasserts itself, and he steps a little closer to me, tilting his head to expose his cheek to me.

“Go ahead,” he goads, a wry chuckle escaping his lips. “Make my day, Abby. You hit me, and I'll love pressing charges. It'll be a fun story to tell, how you and your 'sous chef' are just a pair of violent criminals.”

The words are like a slap in the face, because he's right.

“And then,” he leans in closer, “your precious little restaurant will be nothing but a memory, shut down for good. Wouldn't that be a shame?”

My arm suddenly feels heavier than it should. Slowly, I lower my hand, letting it fall back to my side, the weight of it grounding me just in time before I potentially ruined everything I've worked so

I look away, my eyes stinging with tears that threaten

Daniel chuckles. “Ah, but she's all bark and no bite, I see,” he teases, folding his arms across his

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” I murmur. “To be so cruel to a fellow chef, in a field in which we all struggle to make it work, day in and day out. We should be friends, allies, not... whatever

Daniel's smirk doesn't falter; instead, it's as if my words only fueled his

“Friends? Allies?” He laughs out loud, throwing his head back. “Do you even hear yourself, Abby? This isn’t Barbie’s Dream House. You can’t ‘save the day’ with friendship and ponies and rainbows. Maybe that’s how it works in your little female brain, but here? The kitchen is a battlefield. And you, Abby, aren’t wearing

I shake my head, choosing to take the higher road now, to dismiss his vile words. “Just you wait and see,” I say, tilting my chin up to meet his gaze. “Once everyone finds out that you sabotaged me, it’ll be you who loses your restaurant. And what will they call you then,

For a fleeting moment, there’s a flicker in his eyes, a crack in the facade that he quickly plasters over with more of his

Chapter 246

Abby

“Your sous chef... I saw him trying to bribe the judges earlier.”

Daniel’s words land on me like a lead weight. Karl? Bribing the judges? He wouldn’t do something like that. When would he have even had the time? Why wouldn’t he have told me?

My gaze locks with Daniel’s, and disbelief tightens around my chest as though some invisible hand is gripping my heart, squeezing tighter and tighter.

“What do you mean by that?” I demand, my voice trembling despite my desperate attempts to keep myself steady, to maintain control in a situation that’s making me feel like the world is tilting on

Daniel’s wry chuckle bounces off of the walls of the breakroom. His voice sounds like a taunt as he takes a step closer, narrowing his eyes. “Come on, Abby. Don’t act like you don’t know. You put him up to it, didn’t you?” he asks. “Your performance during round two was so awful, surely you thought you could bribe the judges into keeping you on the

My eyes are so wide they feel like they’ll pop out of my head. “Never,” I hiss. “I would never do any such thing, and neither would he. You’re full of it, Daniel. Absolutely full

But Daniel just chuckles again. “Then explain this to me: why, during the break, did I see your sous chef...” he leans in, his breath foul with the scent of coffee and arrogance, “going into the judges’ room? He looked pretty cozy too, tucking a wad of cash into his

I recoil away from him, my heart racing, a mix of anger and dread coursing through my veins. “You’re a liar,” I say, my voice sharp. “You’re just trying to throw me off. First you sabotage me, and what now? You’ll accuse me of bribery on live television?”

But even as I speak, Daniel’s smug expression doesn’t falter for even a moment, and a sickening realization dawns on me that he might not be making up lies.

“Don’t believe me?” he asks, straightening. “Why don’t you ask him yourself, then?”

With that, Daniel jerks his head toward the door to the breakroom, which I’ve had my back to throughout this whole godforsaken conversation. My heart feels like it stops, like the room has been sucked out of

I whirl around, and the room tilts, time stopping in

Karl is standing in the doorway, his jacket in his hand. He’s still wearing the blue surgical mask to cover his face, but he’s no longer in his white chef’s uniform. He’s back in his plain clothes, his hair slightly disheveled from his tussle with the security guard, and a weary look in

Our gazes lock, and for a few heartbeats, the world somehow seems to shrink to the space between us. It’s like we’re caught in a void, just the two of us, staring at each other. Shock is etched into every line of his face, mirroring my

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Then, Karl’s brown eyes almost seem to gloss over, and he shakes his head. “No,” he says, the denial in his voice immediate and almost instinctive. “I didn’t try to bribe the judges. Daniel is lying.”

But even as he speaks I can see the flicker, the slightest shift in his eyes that betrays him. My heart sinks even more than it already has.

“Karl, don’t you dare lie to me.” My voice breaks, a crack in the facade of strength and poise that I’m desperately trying to maintain right now. “I know you. We used to be married. I can always tell when something’s off with you.”

For a moment, he just stares at me, and it’s like I can see the war raging behind his eyes. Then, finally, he lets out a deep and exasperated sigh.

“Okay,” he says quietly, sinking down onto a stack of boxes behind him. He tugs his mask down so I can finally see his entire face, and then he runs a hand through his already-tousled hair.

“Okay?” I murmur, taking a tentative step forward. “What is that supposed to

Karl is quiet for several more moments that feel like an eternity, and it makes me want to reach across the tiny supply closet and throttle him. But then, finally,

“Daniel only has half of the truth, though,” he says, his brown eyes lifting to meet my

I frown and fold my arms across my chest. “Explain. I don’t have

As if on cue, the PA system outside flickers to life, muffled through the door of the supply closet: “Contestants, please return to your marks in five minutes. Repeat, this is your five minute warning.”

Karl pinches the bridge of his nose and shakes my head. “Alright,” he says, as though battling with something unspoken. “I... I did try to talk to the judges.”

My heart feels like it stops. The supply closet feels as though it’s shrinking, like I’m caught between four walls that are closing in and will slowly crush me. The air feels hot and thick, and I can hardly breathe. I find myself taking a few steps back and leaning against the door, one hand clutching my chest and the other reaching for the door handle.

“You... why would you do that?” I murmur, my voice choked and thin.

Karl, seeing the disdain in my eyes, suddenly shoots to his feet. “Abby, I swear, it’s not what you think,” he says, his hand reaching

But I slap his hand away, shaking my head. “No. This can’t be happening. You... You shouldn’t have done that, Karl!” I say, my voice rising. “No wonder the judges hate me. No wonder I’ve been doomed to fail this whole time. Because you tried to bribe

Suddenly, everything makes sense. The disdain for me, the disappointment, the ingredients, the public humiliation... Karl tried to bribe them, and therefore I have to

This is television, after all. The show must go on, and with Bryan gone, they had to make a spectacle out of me for views instead of disqualifying

Chapter 248

Karl

The second round had left a bitter taste in my mouth. Seeing the way that the judge, Logan, tore into Abby on live television left me feeling maybe a little too overprotective, but I couldn’t just stand idly by while Abby had her integrity ripped apart on stage.

I told Abby I needed to take a call, but it was a complete lie. I needed to talk to this Logan, understand why he was being so harsh on Abby compared to the other contestants. And most of all, I needed to make him see the truth: that Abby was an excellent chef, undeserving of this treatment, and that her spices had been sabotaged.

The security guard outside the judges’ private room was a mountain of a man, his face impassive as I approached.

“Hello,” I said, adjusting my blue surgical mask slightly. “I’d like to speak with—”

“I’m sorry, sir, but you can’t go in there,” the security guard replied, his voice a low rumble. “Policy.”

“But I just need a moment with Judge Logan. It’s important,” I pleaded, trying to keep the urgency out of my voice.

Before the guard could refuse me again, the door cracked open and Logan's piercing gaze found mine. His eyes searched me up and down for a moment, as though he were considering, before he finally nodded.

"It's alright, let him in," he said, and the guard stepped aside, albeit with a reluctant look on his face.

Logan's presence was as commanding off stage as it was onstage, and the judges' room felt small and thick with tension. Logan was the only judge inside, the other two likely off doing their own thing. I was relieved, because I wanted this to just be the two of us: man to

I closed the door behind me, turning to face Logan, who was regarding me with a mixture of curiosity and

"Ken, is it?"

I nodded, although that wasn't my real name. It was the pseudonym that I had chosen for the day, and it was what I would stick with until this competition was

"What can I do for you, Ken?" he asked, folding his arms across his

"I'll be straight with you," I began, my hands clasped behind my back to steady myself. "I've noticed something... a tension between you and Abby. On stage, your critiques seem more personal than with the other contestants. I want to understand, man to man, why it seems like you've got it out for

Logan's eyebrows lifted. "Did Abby send you?"

I shook my head vehemently. "No. She has no idea I'm even here. I wanted to talk to you

Logan looked at me for a moment, then leaned back against the table. "Ken, you're assuming I dislike Abby, which couldn't be further from the truth," he said with a disarming

“That’s not the impression you give out there,” I countered, my voice tense. “The way you’ve been with her, it’s like she’s being singled out.”

He paused for a moment, considering. “Look, I know Abby has talent,” Logan continued. “Her flavors, when she actually gets them right, are some of the best I’ve tasted in this competition. And her techniques are pretty much spot on.”

“So what’s with the attitude, then?” I pressed. “Why are you so harsh with her, on live television, no less? You’re not nearly as strict with the other contestants.”

Logan’s eyes met mine, and there was a flicker of something unexpected within them. “Ken, in this business, we push those we see potential in. Sometimes harder than the rest. It’s not dislike, it’s quite the opposite.”

The room seemed to tilt slightly as his words sank in. “What are you saying?” I managed.

Logan let out a slow breath, his demeanor shifting ever so slightly from defensiveness to unexpected candor. “Abby is actually my favorite in this competition.”

My eyes widened. Abby? Logan’s favorite? It made no sense.

“But I saw the way you treated her,” I insisted. “The way you looked at her. It’s hurting her.”

Logan raised an eyebrow, a slight smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. “Oh? So you’re her knight in shining

“No, I just...” I trailed off for a moment, frustrated. “You’re nitpicking, Logan. You made her lose her spirit

“Karl, I’m nitpicking because Abby can do better. I expect more from her.

“But you made it sound like she’s the worst of the lot,” I pressed further. “That’s not fair and you

“Fair?” Logan scoffed. “This is a competition, Ken. I’m not here to coddle anyone. Abby is not putting in the effort, she’s riding on praise and it’s made her

I felt a flash of anger at the use of that word: lazy. Abby was anything but that. “That’s bull, Logan. She works her ass off. Ten times harder than any of the other

Logan leaned forward and smirked. “Oh, really? Because what I see is a chef who’s 8/10 at best skillswise, which is pretty damn good. But she could be better. So much better, if only she would quit hiding in her office doing managerial

I clenched my fists, feeling a heat rise to my cheeks. “She’s not hiding, she’s running a business. And she’s good at it. You’ve got no idea the pressure she’s

He laughed. “Pressure? I see two men doing the heavy lifting while she parades around like some sort of celebrity chef. She’s forgotten the heat, the rush, the essence of being a chef. She’s lost her passion, plain and

Chapter 249

Abby

As Karl speaks, my fingers worry the hem of my white chef’s coat, now no longer pristine but splattered with sauce and tiny stains and the remains of haphazardly cooked meals. It feels like a perfect representation of my inner world right now: once untarnished and lily-white, but now stained and weathered from the trials I’ve been through today.

We’re still standing in the supply closet, and the air feels thick. Karl is standing over me still, his hand pressed into the door next to my head, sandwiching me there with his body.

My wolf stirs ever so slightly, but now is not the time; I just found out that Karl tried to talk to the judges for me, and I’m not sure how to feel about it.

“Abby...” he begins, his voice trailing off for a moment as his eyes search mine. Finally, he pushes away from the door and crosses the small room, running his hand through his hair for what feels like the millionth time in the past few minutes.

“Just tell me, Karl,” I murmur, blinking away the tears that are threatening to spill.

He pauses, then draws in a deep breath, and turns to face me again. “Abby, yes, I did talk to Logan; but I never tried to bribe anybody. I hope you can believe me in that regard.”

I nod, because despite the whirlwind that this competition has become, I do know that. Karl has no reason to lie to me right now. His integrity is still intact, just as he promised all those weeks ago.

“I know, Karl. But why talk to him? What did you say?”

He takes a deep breath, and I can tell he’s choosing his words with the utmost care. “I told him you’re an incredible chef, Abby. The best here, without a doubt. And you don’t deserve the way he treats

“But?” The word hangs between

Karl’s jaw tightens, and he looks away for a brief moment, gathering his thoughts. When he faces me again, it’s as though there’s a newfound resolve in his eyes, like there’s something that he wants to tell me but he can’t get it

“But... he’s got this idea about you, Abby. He doesn’t see things clearly. I just... I tried to make him see that you are putting in your heart and soul into this competition.

My heart races, and I don’t know what to say. There’s a profound mixture of gratitude and dread knotting itself around my stomach: gratitude for Karl’s attempt to talk to Logan, but also dread because I know that, whatever Logan’s ‘misconceptions’ about me are, nothing Karl can say would ever change the outcome of this

“And what happened with the sous chef?” I ask, my voice barely more than a whisper. “What happened,

A shadow crosses Karl’s face. “He was tampering with the ingredients in the pantry. The truffles. I caught him in the act, tried to stop him. I grabbed the mushrooms out of his hand, but I swear, Abby, I never laid a finger on

I know he's telling the truth; Karl, despite all of his overpowering Alpha demeanor, would never hurt anyone in this sort of context. Not in a million years, and especially not on live

"And the guards didn't believe you?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "The guards think I'm lying. The sous chef might press charges if the footage looks... Anyway, it doesn't matter. They're sending me home, Abby. I won't be here when you get offstage."

I stare down at the floor unblinking, staring at my feet. Outside, I can hear the PA system crackle to life again: "Contestants, this is your two minute warning. Return to the stage in two minutes. I repeat, two minutes."

Before I can say anything, Karl's hand reaches out and seems to hover beside my cheek for a moment before it settles on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Abby. I didn't mean to ruin all of this for you today. It's all my fault."

I'm still trying to process it all, but there's one thing that I know for sure: none of this is Karl's fault. The game was rigged from the beginning, and I was never meant to win.

"No, Karl, it's not your fault," I murmur, reaching up to place my hand over his. "Don't feel bad."

He sighs. "I just want you to know... I believe in you, Abby. I always have. And I believe you can still win this. As long as you used the right truffles for your last dish—"

I don't let him finish. Maybe it's the adrenaline still coursing through my veins, or maybe it's the desperate need to convey everything I can't seem to articulate, but I lunge forward.

My hands find the sides of his face, his skin rough with a five o'clock shadow, and I press my lips to his in a kiss that's as much an apology as it is a thank

He's stiff for a moment, stunned, before his warmth seeps into me, steadying me. As we pull away, I'm met with the soft confusion in

“What was that for?” he murmurs, and I can feel the blush spreading across my cheeks, hot and

“It was just... a kiss of friendship,” I stammer, feeling the sting of hot tears pricking at the backs of my eyes. “For everything you did today, Karl. Even though it all... it all went

His brows knit together in confusion. “Went wrong?” he asks. “Went wrong how? Abby,

But I shake my head, unable to form the words, to describe the sight of my dish—my dream—crumbling before my eyes. I used the wrong truffles. He tried to warn me, but it was too

The tears brim and spill over before I can stop them, and I quickly look away, trying to blink them back before they ruin my

Karl reaches out, his hand hovering next to my face as if he wants to wipe the tears away but isn’t sure if he should. “Abby, talk to

Chapter 250

Abby

The stage lights feel even more blinding now from the tears in my eyes. A makeup artist darts around, dabbing my face with powder to cover the streaks from crying. In more ways than one, I’m glad this hell is almost over; right now, I’m just looking forward to getting this damn makeup off.

Finally, the director counts down from three, and it feels as though we’ve done this a million times before. The crowd cheers, the music plays, the announcer struts across the stage. And me? I’m standing here like a statue, my smile just as fake as my manicured eyelashes.

Daniel stands next to me, shoulder to shoulder, and I can feel the hatred emanating off of him. He stands tall and proud, the perfect picture of arrogance.

He doesn’t say a word to me, because he doesn’t need to. He already said everything he needed to say earlier. He got his digs in, made his sharp words stab me to my core. There’s no point now.

I can sense the satisfaction coursing through his veins as he stands beside me, the realization that he won—not just in the competition, but in life—washing over both of us. In just a few minutes, he'll get exactly what he wants. Not only a trophy, but to beat a woman down to nothing.

The announcer turns to Daniel first, his voice echoing across the studio. "Daniel, you've shown immense skill throughout this competition. As we come to a close, how are you feeling about your performance?"

Daniel's lips twist into a smile that doesn't even come close to reaching his eyes.

"Confident," he says without skipping a beat. "The true winner today will be more than just a lovable personality..." he sneers subtly, casting a sidelong glance at me. "He will be a

The message is clear, and the gleam in his eye is sharp, almost

Heat creeps up into my cheeks as the crowd applauds. The announcer then turns to me, his eyes meeting mine. "Abby, you've become a favorite for many during this competition. Tell us, what has this experience meant

My gaze lifts to the audience, to the sea of faces that seem to blur together into one. There are fewer signs with my name now thanks to my failures, and the realization leaves a hole in my

But then, there she is—the little girl in the third row with her chef's hat falling into her eyes. Her eyes are just as wide and bright as ever, and she still holds up her little sign in her tiny hand, a grin spread across her

I can feel the lump in my throat, but I push through... because I'm reminded of why I'm here, even if I

I'm here for her.

"This competition," I start, my voice surprisingly steady, "has been an extraordinary journey. As a female chef in this incredible, challenging field, I'm just happy to have been here. To show that we—" I pause, my heart in my throat, "—that I can stand toe to toe with

I take a breath, the air tasting thick. “And maybe, just maybe,” I continue, “my presence here will inspire others. That future female chefs will push even harder, making sure our skills—and our voices—are not only recognized, but also respected.”

There’s a ripple through the crowd, a murmur of acknowledgment, of support, maybe. Or maybe it’s just the sound of anticipation as everyone waits for the results.

The announcer’s voice then cuts through the murmurings.

“And the winner is…” His eyes flick to the judges as he pulls a small red envelope out of his pocket.

My breath catches. Logan’s eyes lock onto mine, his expression an unreadable mask. He doesn’t smile, doesn’t even blink. Instead, his head gives the faintest of shakes, and my world seems to tilt for what feels like the millionth time today.

Vanessa, once my champion, now looks on with a cool detachment. She catches my eyes for the briefest of moments before she leans toward Logan, whispering something, her head inclining toward me in a nod so slight it could have been a trick of the light.

My hands are trembling. I can’t look at Daniel, can’t afford to see the smirk I know is there. Instead, I find the little girl in the crowd, her eyes wide with hope, and I draw strength from her innocence, her belief in me.

“And the winner is…” The pause hangs for what feels like an eternity before he finally speaks, as though drawing it out for dramatic effect. And then, drawing the card out of the envelope he reads it and his gaze lifts up to the crowd.

“Daniel.”

The sound of his name, amplified by speakers and followed by the sudden thunderous applause, seems to suck the oxygen right out of the room. The edges of my vision seem to blur and for a heartbeat, or maybe an eternity, I feel like I’m not in my

It's as if I'm watching from afar, like I'm the little girl in the crowd, and I'm seeing my idol become crushed into nothingness right before my very

I don't even mean to, but I'm clapping. I'm putting on the smile, the facade for the camera. It feels mechanical. It feels like there are invisible strings directing my movements. I want to cry, but I

After all, tears will ruin my perfect

The announcer carries a gleaming trophy across the stage and hands it to Daniel, who holds it like a piece of treasure in his

"Daniel," the announcer says once the cheers have died down, "perhaps your confidence wasn't unfounded, don't

Daniel chuckles, a cold and calculated sound void of any real warmth or happiness. To him, this competition was nothing. He'll bring his trophy home and put it on the mantelpiece, he'll cater the Alpha party, and he'll move on. It'll just be another laurel on his crown, another accomplishment to add to