

His Kickass 61

Chapter 61

It's Friday afternoon before the dinner rush, both the best—and worst—time to get this over with. The idea, planted in my head by Ethan, has been rolling around in my head for two days. Finally, I decide to set it into motion.

I lean against the door frame of my office, taking a deep breath before calling out, "Karl, John, could you both come in here for a moment?"

I don't miss the sidelong glances exchanged between the two men as they cross the threshold. It's as if the air thickens, charged with an electricity that neither wants to acknowledge but can't ignore.

"Please have a seat," I instruct, nodding toward the two chairs across from my desk.

Karl takes a seat, folding his arms over his chest as if steeling himself for battle. John follows suit but not before shooting Karl a disdainful look, one that he returns with equal measure. The atmosphere is so tense I could snap it with a knife.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the desk, my eyes shifting from one to the other. "Listen, both of you have been valuable members of this team. But we've got a problem—a serious one. Karl, you can be as stubborn as a mule, and John, you have a knack for being, well, grating."

The looks on their faces tell me they both want to protest, but I hold up a hand to stop them.

"And so I've made a decision," I continue, locking eyes with each of them in turn. "Starting today, Karl, you will be working under John to learn the ropes as a line cook."

For a moment, stunned silence fills the room. And then, as if a fuse has been lit, both men spring to their feet.

"No way, Abby," Karl growls, his jaw set and his eyes narrowed. "No way in hell am I working under

“You can’t be serious, Abby!” John chimes in, red-faced and incredulous. “I’d rather be fired than work with this

The tension escalates, each man bristling like a cornered animal, inches away from lunging at each other. It’s a volatile stand-off, a powder keg ready to

“Sit down,” I snap, my voice laced with a finality that allows no room

To my surprise, they both comply, although the atmosphere is still buzzing with palpable animosity. I seize the moment to make my stance

“Look, if either of you would rather walk out that door than make this work, then by all means go ahead,” I say, gesturing toward the door with an outstretched arm. “But understand that this is a restaurant, a team. If either of you can’t adapt, then you’re the ones who are out of place, not

I can practically hear the gears grinding in their heads, weighing options, simmering egos. Karl’s eyes meet mine, and I see it—the unspoken understanding, the awareness that there’s something more at stake here for

For us.

As for John, he’s worked with me for years. I’ve seen him passionately involved in his work, genuinely invested in the team. Quitting now would be admitting defeat, something I know goes against his

Neither of the men move to leave. I feel a slight twinge of both relief and trepidation in my core, and take a deep breath.

“Starting today, Karl, you’ll be apprenticing under John,” I say, setting my words in stone. “I expect you both to put your differences aside for the good of this restaurant. And let me be perfectly clear—if there are any issues, any at all, you’ll both answer for them. Am I understood?”

Both men lock eyes with me, the reality of my ultimatum sinking in. It’s a bitter pill to swallow, but one that comes with the territory of teamwork, of personal growth.

“We understand, Abby,” John finally mutters, albeit begrudgingly.

Karl simply nods, his eyes never leaving mine, sending a silent message that only I can decipher.

“Good,” I say, exhaling a tiny sigh of relief that feels like it’s been trapped inside of me for ages. “Then you’re both dismissed. Get back to work.”

After Karl and John exit my office, I sink back into my chair with a sigh. My mind churns with second thoughts and what-ifs, but it’s done. The decision is made. Only time will tell if I’ve set the stage for disaster or growth. Or maybe a little bit of both.

I push myself out of the chair, needing to distance myself from the tense atmosphere still clinging to my office. Stepping into the storeroom, I find Chloe knee-deep in bottles and cans, jotting down notes on a clipboard as she takes inventory.

“Hey, Abbs,” she says, glancing up at

I sink onto the top of a crate, my shoulders sagging. “Hey,

She looks up, her eyes meeting mine. “You look like you’ve just been through a war. Is

I rub my temples, hesitating before I finally spill. “It’s fine. I just had to sit Karl and John down in my office. There’s been tension, and well, I’ve decided to make Karl apprentice under John as a line cook. Figured it would force them to get

Chloe’s eyebrows shoot up, her lips curling into a faintly incredulous expression. “You’re joking, right? Abby, why are you so bent on making Karl fit in here? It just

I sigh, running my fingers through my hair. “I want to give him the benefit of the doubt, Chloe. He deserves a chance to prove

Chloe's eyes narrow, the clipboard now forgotten beside her. "Benefit of the doubt? Really? Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't recall Karl ever giving you the benefit of the doubt, especially not when you

I cut her off, my voice a little harsher than I intended. "That was

"How is it different now, Abby?" Chloe presses, clearly agitated. "Why extend a favor to him that he never

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The door to Abby's office swings shut behind me, and my mind races as I walk back into the kitchen. First, she asks me to make nice with Chloe, and now this? Apprenticing under John, of all people? A guy I can't even stand to be in the same room with?

"Karl, grab the veal from the fridge. Now." John's voice snaps me back to reality, jarring and grating as ever.

I grab the veal and set it on the counter, taking a moment to steel myself. I'm doing this for Abby, I remind myself. As if sensing my inner turmoil, Abby glances over at me from across the kitchen.

Our eyes meet for just a second, but it's enough. I nod subtly. I can do this.

The dinner rush starts, and the kitchen turns into a whirlwind of flying knives and sizzling pans. John wastes no time in laying into me.

"Come on, Karl, chop those onions faster! We don't have all day!"

My knuckles whiten around the knife handle, but I force a smile. "Sure, John, whatever you say."

Dinner service rushes on like a torrential river, and I'm just trying to keep my head above water. Each critique from John feels like another weight pulling me down, but I keep reminding myself why I'm here, who I'm here for.

The clock ticks past nine, and the last orders are finally up. John looks at me, a satisfied smirk spreading across his face. "Not a complete disaster, I suppose."

My jaw clenches, my fists curl, but I refuse to let the torrent out. Abby's eyes catch mine again, her gaze searching. I look away. I can't let her see how much this is getting

And that's when it happens. One small, insignificant straw that breaks the proverbial

"Karl, you idiot! These steaks are overcooked! Do you even know what medium-rare looks like?" John practically spits the words out, his face flushed with

Something inside me snaps. All the pent-up frustration, the hours of biting my tongue, the soul-crushing effort of swallowing my pride—it all comes rushing to the surface like a

That's it.

I yank my apron off, my hands shaking with barely contained fury. I shoot one last look toward where Abby was standing before, only to realize that she's gone. Where her beautiful face would have calmed me a bit, I'm now met with nothing but a blank

With a deep, ragged breath, I throw my apron down onto the counter. "Cook the steaks yourself, then. I need some air," I growl, more to myself than anyone else, and storm out of the

I push through the back door into the alley, my chest heaving. The cold night air stings my face, but I barely feel it. I pull out a cigarette and light it, drawing the smoke deep into my lungs as if it could somehow fill the gaping void

I lean against the brick wall, my mind reeling. What the hell am I doing? All of this, swallowing my pride, taking John's relentless crap—it's all for her. For Abby. Because despite the chaos, the humiliation, the maddening frustration of it all, I want her back in my life.

I take another drag, exhaling slowly as I stare up at the sliver of night sky visible between the buildings. It's a stark reminder of how confined I feel, boxed in by my own choices, my own mistakes.

And yet, as much as I want to break free, to tell John to shove it, to tell Abby that this is too much to ask, I can't. Because deep down, as much as it galls me to admit it, I know that this is my last chance. My last chance to make things right, to prove that I'm not the same guy I used to be.

I lean back against the cold, unforgiving wall of the alley, still wrestling with the storm of emotions raging inside me. A deep growl resonates from within, not from my human side, but from the wolf that shares my consciousness.

"What is it now?" I murmur under my breath, trying to soothe the restless animal inside me.

"He's just an ass, Karl," my wolf's voice echoes in my head, clear as day. "This John guy, he's testing you, pushing your buttons on purpose. You just have to push through it for a little while longer."

"I know, I know," I reply silently, a conversation taking place entirely within the confines of my mind. "Abby wants me to do this, to prove I can be part of her world. But I fucking hate it."

My wolf snorts. "I know you do. It'll just be for a while longer, though."

"Will it, though?" I ask. "It feels like she'll never be

It's a question I've been asking myself ever since I walked out of Abby's office earlier today. Sure, I can stick my neck out, be the bigger man and tolerate John for Abby's sake. But where does it end? How long until Abby sees that I'm trying, really trying, to be the man she wants me

"Abby will see," my wolf reassures me, as if reading my thoughts. "She'll realize you're making an effort, that you're putting her needs above your

But the doubt creeps in, worming its way into my mind despite my wolf's reassurance. What if Abby can't see past my old mistakes? What if I'm forever labeled the screw-up, the black sheep, the man who broke

And then there's Chloe, Abby's best friend, who I'm sure is filling her head with doubts and suspicions. The thought of Chloe whispering in Abby's ear, poisoning her against me, gnaws at me like a persistent itch I can't

"Chloe has Abby's ear," I admit, voicing my fears to my

"And you think she's making things worse?" my wolf probes, as insightful as

"It's a possibility," I say, my gut clenching at the thought. "Chloe doesn't like me. Never has. And if Abby listens to her, then everything I'm doing, all this effort—it could be for

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I'm standing by the stainless steel counter, doing my best to look like I'm occupied with inventory and prepping the dough for our fresh bread in the morning.

But my real focus is on the fiery dance unfolding in front of me—Karl and John, circling each other in the kitchen like two alpha wolves in a turf war. The tension is so thick you could spread it on toast.

"Karl! Chop those onions faster!" John barks, to which Karl surprisingly complies—and with a smile on his face, no less. I'm pleased. It's not perfect, but it's their first night. I just hope that it gets better over time.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes in my pocket, shattering the moment. I glance down; it's a call from Calvin, the representative for the cook-off. I'm suddenly flooded with a mixture of excitement and nerves. This could be a game-changer for my career, for my restaurant, for me.

With a lingering glance at Karl, whose hands are meticulously arranging greens on a plate, I slip away. I dart through the swinging door of the kitchen, my heels clicking urgently against the tile floor, and make a beeline for my office.

Once inside, I close the door, leaning against it momentarily to collect myself. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I swipe the screen and answer.

"Mr. Thompson, hi! Sorry I couldn't take your call immediately. Things are a little hectic here."

“No worries, Abby.” Calvin’s voice is as smooth as I remember, professional with a tinge of friendliness. “I know you’re a busy woman. That’s part of why we wanted you for the cook-off, actually.”

My heart swells with a combination of pride and anticipation. “Thank you, Mr. Thompson. That means a lot.”

“Now, onto why I called you: I’ve just received the recipe list for the cook-off,” he continues. “I’ll be sending it to you via email shortly. You’re welcome to spend the coming weeks practicing, but keep in mind that only three recipes will be chosen from the list, and you won’t know which ones will be chosen until the time of the competition. The format will involve each contestant cooking a three-course meal: an appetizer, an entree, and

I jot down some quick notes as he speaks. This is more structured than I thought, but also more exciting. “Three courses,” I repeat.

“Also,” Calvin continues, “you will be allowed to bring one assistant—or sous chef, rather—of your choosing to help you during the competition. Only one.

“Of course,” I say, already wondering who I would bring. John, most likely. Or maybe Ethan. He doesn’t have much experience behind the line, but he’s

Calvin continues. “Each round will eliminate the lowest-scoring contestant until we’re down to the final two. It will be a spectacle, Abby, and a real challenge. And... It will be

The adrenaline courses through me at his words. Challenge is exactly what I need right now, something to throw myself into, something that isn’t fraught with emotional landmines like my current situation with

But television? I’ve only been on the local news once for a brief five-minute

“I can sense your trepidation,” Calvin says, and I can hear his warm smile through the phone. “But don’t worry. Our producers are the best. Everything will be taken

“Th-Thank you, Mr. Thompson,” I manage, swallowing.

“We’re excited to have you, Abby,” Calvin assures me. “Check your email soon.”

“I will... Thanks again,” I reply, the smile on my face probably wide enough to split it in two.

As I hang up, I clutch my phone to my chest, my eyes fluttering closed for a brief, sacred moment. For the first time in a while, tears prick the corners of my eyes for a reason other than heartbreak or frustration. They’re tears of joy, of potential, of a future that’s finally looking bright.

I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe this is real. I’ve worked so hard, faced so much, and now a new opportunity is unfurling in front of me like a path of golden breadcrumbs. And I want to follow it, wherever it may lead.

With a final deep breath to center myself, I tuck my phone back into my pocket. It’s time to return to the battlefield that is my kitchen, to the tensions and trials that still await me there.

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The kitchen is bustling with activity, the aroma of sautéed garlic and simmering sauces filling the air. I step in, glancing around at my team, my eyes falling on John. Beside him, where Karl should be, is empty.

John is red-faced, and the intensity of his glare could probably singe the chopped vegetables beside him. His mood is as palpable as the heat emanating from the stovetops. I steel myself for what’s coming.

“What happened? Where’s Karl?” I venture cautiously, already suspecting the

John’s eyes lock onto mine. “Your newest prodigy, the illustrious Karl...” He spits the name out like it makes him sick. “...Just stormed out. On his first night on the line. He threw down his apron and everything. What a

I sigh, a heavy, world-weary exhalation. "Okay, thanks for letting me know. I'll handle it," I say, already pivoting on my heels. I don't want to be caught in the crossfire between these two. Not

Exiting through the back door, the cold air in the alleyway hits me like a wave, washing away the heat and grime of the kitchen. There's Karl, leaning against the brick wall. He's holding a cigarette up to his lips, and as I approach, I hear him mutter something, a soft curse, beneath his

He seems to be completely absorbed in his own turbulent world, unaware that I'm

"Karl." I break the silence. "What happened back

He's startled, dropping ash from his cigarette. When he turns to face me, his eyes are

"What happened? What happened is, I'm doing my best, Abby. You wanted me to fit in, I tried. You wanted me to get along with Chloe, I said I would put in an effort. Now this, apprenticing under John?" His voice is tinged with incredulity and rises with

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Standing in the alley, the tension between Karl and me is almost palpable, like a living, breathing entity that neither of us can ignore. His eyes search mine, as if trying to excavate the truth from deep within me.

"Is it true, Abby? Your wolf is—"

I cut him off, not wanting to delve into that cavern of pain right now. "Forget it," I say, turning away.

There's a beat of silence as we both grapple with our feelings. I thought that Karl somehow knew about the fact that my wolf has been in a coma all this time, but it seems as though he has no idea. I can't decide if it makes it hurt worse or less.

"Abby, why didn't you tell me?" he asks gently.

I can feel his fingers brush my arm. It's a comfort for the briefest of moments, but I'm still angry, still hearing Chloe's words whirling around in my head. I pull away and turn on him, pointing a finger at his chest.

"Karl, if you want to get on my good side, if you want a chance at anything, you need to be a team player. That's the end of it."

He studies me for a beat, then finally nods, clearly giving up on the subject of my wolf. "Fine. But you need to talk to John about his attitude too, Abby. It's not just me who has a problem with him."

The concession tastes bitter in my mouth, but it's necessary. John's inappropriate remarks and hot-headed attitude in the kitchen have been a problem for a long time now. He's such a good employee and an excellent cook that I try to ignore it, but Karl is right; it's about time that he's put in his place.

"Agreed," I say with a nod. "Now get back in there. We have a dinner service to complete."

Karl gives me a nod, a mere shadow of his former cocky self, and heads back inside. I take a deep breath, preparing myself for the conversation that awaits me. With John.

The atmosphere in the kitchen is thick with tension as I reenter, but I push through it, striding past the line cooks and prep stations until I reach my

Once inside, I take a few minutes to steady my racing heart, to gather my thoughts. Then, pulling open the door, I lean out into

"John, can I see you in my

The instant the words leave my mouth, I sense the shift in the room, the undercurrent of curiosity and speculation. John glances up from his prep work, his eyes narrowing as they meet

"Sure, boss," he mutters, wiping his hands on a kitchen towel before making his way

As soon as we're both inside, I close the door, sealing us off from the world outside. "Have a seat," I say, gesturing toward the chair across from my

He sits, but his posture is rigid, his eyes wary. "Abby, if you're gonna scold me over

I take a deep breath, trying to choose my words carefully. "John, your attitude in the kitchen has been an issue for a long time. But it's gone too far. Your comments, your tone, the way you speak to the

His eyes flash with indignation. "So, you're siding with the new guy now? Is

I look away, my hands clenched into fists around the arms of

"This isn't about taking sides, John. This is about the environment in our kitchen. And it's not just Karl. Your comments have been making female staff uncomfortable as well. This is your last warning."

John's face reddens, and for a moment I think he's going to explode. "I've been working here for years, Abby. You've got to be kidding me. Why are you bringing all this up now?"

I shake my head. "That's my business. And yes, you have been here for years, which is why this is just a warning."

John pauses, opening and closing his mouth as though trying to say something but not coming up with the right words. But then, finally, he spits it out. "This is all because you've got the hots for the new guy, especially now that you're single, isn't it?"

My eyes snap back to him, incredulous. "Get out, John."

"What?"

"Get out," I repeat, my voice icy. "And come back when you're ready to speak to me with the respect I deserve as your boss."

For a moment, he just stares at me, as if trying to decide whether or not I'm serious. Then, with a huff of frustration, he rises from his seat, storming out of my office and slamming the door behind him.

After the door slams shut in his wake, I drop my face into my hands and let out a sigh that feels like it's been building and building for years. This restaurant was supposed to be a dream, not a perpetual stress-inducing nightmare. But the show must go on.

I'm about to rise from my seat when I hear a knock at the door. Looking up, I find Ethan standing there, concern written all over his face.

"What just happened, Abby?" he asks, taking a tentative step into

I rub my temples, then exhale deeply before recapping the unpleasant exchange with John. "He doesn't seem to grasp the concept of treating people with respect, Ethan. It's frustrating and frankly, unacceptable. Especially his snide comments today. He

I pause, swallowing, because frankly, John wasn't entirely wrong. I do have the hots for Karl, and I miss him, but I won't admit it to anyone, nor do I ever plan on acting on it. And that has nothing to do with any of this

"Nevermind," I continue, shaking my head. "I won't repeat it. It was

Ethan's eyes narrow sympathetically as he closes the door behind him. "That's low. Even for

"Yeah," I mutter, "I thought

Walking over to my desk, Ethan wraps me in a friendly hug. "He'll realize he's an idiot and come back to apologize, you'll see. You know how

I let out another sigh, this one tinged with a sadness I can't quite place. "I hope you're right, Ethan. But honestly, I wish everyone would just take a chill pill. I have enough going on without having to play mediator between grown men acting like petulant

He releases me from the hug and looks me in the eyes. “Is there anything else bothering

I hesitate for a moment, then decide to spill it. “I need to choose a sous chef for the cook-off, and now I’m second-guessing whether I want someone as hot-headed as John standing beside me. Especially on

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The aroma of freshly baked bread and simmering tomato sauce fills the air as I sit at my desk, reviewing the inventory for the week.

It’s still early in the day, but the restaurant has already started to come alive. My eyes flit over numbers and figures, but my thoughts keep drifting to the chaos of last night—Karl, John, Ethan, and that cook-off looming in the future like a beacon of both opportunity and uncertainty.

As I’m about to turn my attention to the newly arrived email from Calvin, there’s a soft knock on my door. “Come in,” I call out, hoping it’s not another crisis that needs immediate attention.

The door opens, and it’s John, looking a little sheepish. “Hey, Abby, you got a minute?”

I nod, gesturing for him to take a seat. “Sure, what’s on your mind?”

He hesitates, choosing his words carefully. “Look, about last night—I lost my cool, and I shouldn’t have said what I did. I was...riled up, and I didn’t mean it. It was a long evening.”

I eye him skeptically, remembering his cutting remarks and confrontational demeanor. “You think?”

He winces. “I do. And I’m sorry. If you’re willing to forgive an old dog for his foolishness, I promise I’ll train Karl properly and be more respectful. To everyone.”

The sincerity in his voice tips the balance for me. We’ve been through a lot, John and I, and though he’s far from perfect, he’s an important part of this restaurant’s soul.

“Alright,” I say, extending my hand across the desk. “Apology accepted. Let’s move on and make this a great place for everyone. Deal?”

“Deal,” he agrees, shaking my hand firmly.

“Great. Let’s get back out there; dinner service won’t prep itself,” I say, and we both stand to head back to the kitchen.

As the door swings shut behind him, I can’t help but feel a small sense of relief. One hurdle cleared, but still so many more to go.

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The evening begins like any other, the staff bustling around the kitchen as orders start pouring in.

But there’s a palpable change in the atmosphere. John’s tone is softer, more instructive, less caustic. I see him explaining the finer points of sauce reduction to Karl, who listens intently. My eyes meet John’s for a moment, and he gives me a nod.

The dinner rush kicks in, and everyone springs into high gear. Plates are flying, stoves are blazing, and the air is thick with the tantalizing smells of grilled meat, sautéed vegetables, and melting

But despite the chaos, there’s an underlying current of teamwork that wasn’t

“Table six is ready to go, Abby,” Ethan calls out, sliding the plates onto the counter. I do a quick check for presentation; everything looks

“Alright, let’s move, people!” I yell, and servers swoop in to whisk the dishes

Just then, I hear John’s voice, commanding but not overbearing, instructing Karl on the proper way to plate the linguini. “Remember, Karl, it’s all about balance. You want enough sauce so it’s flavorful but not so much that it’s

I pause to listen, holding my

“Got it, John,” Karl replies, his tone earnest. He adjusts the angle of his tongs and the pasta lands gracefully on the plate, a garnish of parsley providing the

“Nice,” John comments, and Karl beams, clearly pleased by the rare

It’s a small interaction, but it feels like a giant leap forward for both of them—and for me. As the night wears on, I watch Karl and John weave around each other in a sort of uneasy but effective partnership. They’re communicating, working together to get the meals out, and not a single steak comes

Finally, as the clock ticks past nine and the last few diners are savoring their desserts, I take a moment to step back and take it all

For the first time in a long while, the kitchen is humming with the sort of collaborative energy that makes a restaurant more than just a place to eat. It’s not perfect, far from it, but it’s a step in the right direction, a sign of what could be rather than what

John catches my eye from across the kitchen, and this time it’s me who gives the nod of approval. He nods back, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he allows himself a

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I step out from the frenetic energy of the kitchen into the main dining area, the clinking of glasses and murmurs of conversation filling the air. I’m about to congratulate myself on a night going surprisingly smooth when I spot Daisy seated awkwardly behind the bar, clutching her ankle and rocking back and

“What happened?” I rush over, my eyes narrowing with

“I, erm... I rolled my ankle while serving table nine. Just give me five minutes and I’ll get back out there,” she says, grimacing with each word.

I take one look at her flushed face, her ankle swelling before my eyes, and shake my head. “No, you’re going home. Put that leg up. I’ll take over your tables tonight.”

Daisy starts to protest, her eyes filled with worry. “But the tips—”

“Don’t worry about that. Whatever tips you miss out on tonight, I’ll cover. Just go home and take care of yourself.”

She hesitates for a moment before finally nodding, gratitude flooding her features. “Thank you, Abby.”

“Get better, okay?” I say as she limps out of the restaurant, supported by Ethan.

I tie on an apron and grab a notepad, turning my attention to Daisy’s tables. And then I see her—Emily, the Luna who used to be an acquaintance of mine, sitting there with her friends, smirking as if she owns the place.

Here we go.

“Nice to see you all again,” I greet, forcing a smile as I approach the table.

“Well, well! If it isn’t Abby,” Emily says, a stiff smile taking over her features. “We were just talking about you.”

“Were you?” I manage an equally stiff smile and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Hopefully only good things.”

Emily and her friends exchange glances, their eyes twinkling with a fakeness that makes my skin crawl. “Of course,” Emily says.

“Can I get you started with some drinks?”

“Two red wines, a cosmopolitan, and a gin and tonic,” Emily says, her tone dripping with fake sweetness.

“Coming right up,” I reply, making a note on my pad.

As I move away, my ears catch snippets of their conversation, laced with contempt. “Wow. Last time I figured it was just a fluke, but she’s waiting tables

“To think an ex-Luna doesn’t even get to run her own restaurant, but has to wait

There’s a giggle. “Maybe she can’t handle running the place. Probably gave it over to one of the men. She was always like that, you know. Letting Alpha Karl run everything, always giving him

As I listen to their words, my hands start to tremble. I head into the back room to catch my breath, my eyes stinging, the weight of their comments crashing down on me. Who do they think they are, coming into my restaurant and speaking about me

“Abby, you alright?”

I look up to see Karl standing there, his expression etched with

“I’m fine,” I lie, unable to hide the shake in my

“You don’t look fine.

Against my better judgment, I find myself spilling the story about Emily and her friends. His face tightens with each word, his eyes darkening like a

“I’ll handle this,” he says, setting his

“No, Karl, don’t make a scene,” I protest, but he’s already pushing through the swing door, his

I follow him out, my heart pounding as he approaches Emily’s table and pulls up

“Evening, Ladies.”

Emily and her friends perk up, their

“Alpha... Alpha Karl?” Emily exclaims. “What are you doing

Chapter 66

Abby

My office is silent as I scroll through the new emails that have landed in my inbox. My fingers drum on the desk, anticipating the one email that I’ve been waiting for the most—the details of the upcoming cooking competition.

And then, there it is, bolded and marked with high importance: Cook-Off Competition Details.

Taking a deep breath, I click on it.

The email is concise but packed with information. Attached to it is a long list, detailing every possible dish that might come up during the competition.

My heart rate quickens as I scan the list. Some dishes I recognize, ones I’ve made a thousand times over in my career, but others are unfamiliar, exotic even, presenting challenges I’ve never faced before.

I won’t know which three dishes I’ll be asked to prepare on the spot. Which means only one thing: I have to practice all of them. Every single one.

Grabbing a notepad, I jot down a list of ingredients I’ll need for the more exotic dishes, then turn my attention to the restaurant’s supplier portal, adding item after item to the shopping list. The ingredients range from the ordinary to the obscure. Each addition of expensive truffles, caviar, and fresh scallops makes my anxiety spike.

How can I perfect so many dishes in such a short time?

Once the orders are placed, I stretch and push back from the desk, glancing at the clock on the wall. It's getting late, but there's no time to waste. Without a second thought, I pull my hair into a messy bun and prepare to head to the kitchen to get

Before I can leave, however, a sudden page over the intercom draws me from my

"Abby, can you come up front for a moment? I need help with the register." It's Chloe, her voice

Closing my laptop with a sigh, I head to the bar where Chloe is standing. Frustration is evident on her face as she fiddles with the register. "Hey, what's going on?" I ask, striding up to

"It's this damn thing," she mutters, her fingers hovering over the register keys. "It's been acting up all

I step beside her and start navigating through the system. A few prodded buttons and adjusted settings later, the machine whirrs back to life, responding as it should. Chloe releases a breath she's seemingly been

"Thanks, Abby. I thought I'd have to do all the

"No problem," I reply, giving her a reassuring smile. "Anything else I can

She shakes her head. "No, that's it. But..." She hesitates, her eyes flickering with an unspoken thought. "Abby, about the other night... I shouldn't have snapped at you. Especially not over Karl."

I lean against the counter, crossing my arms. "Chloe, it's alright."

"No, it's not," she insists, her eyes earnest. "I'm your best friend, Abby, and I'm just... I'm worried about you. I don't want to see you get hurt again, fall into another toxic relationship."

Her words sting, echoing the fears I keep buried deep down, but I push them away, offering her a small smile. “Chloe, I already married Karl once, remember? Learned my lesson the hard way. It’s not going to happen again.”

“I know,” she says softly, “but it’s just... you deserve so much better, and I can’t stand the thought of him hurting you again.”

I reach out, gently squeezing her hand. “I appreciate your concern, Chloe, but I’m not a teenager anymore. I can make my own decisions, and I don’t need to be monitored or told what to do.”

Chloe holds my gaze for a beat, a mix of emotions swirling in her eyes, before she gives a slow, reluctant nod. “I understand.”

“Thank you,” I say, my voice soft, before turning away.

But as I make my way back to my office, Chloe’s words reverberate in my head. A part of me is warmed by her concern, but another part is frustrated. This entire situation, I realize, is like walking on a tightrope, balancing between concern and independence, friendship

I don’t want this to strain my friendship with Chloe. Our bond means more to me than she

But at the same time, I want—no, need—her to trust me, to trust my judgments and my decisions. I’m not the same Abby who fell for Karl’s charms all those years ago, who got lost in a relationship that cost me my self-worth and got my heart broken. I’ve grown, learned, and changed. Why can’t my friends see that? Why does it feel as though all of my friends just see me as a fool who would so easily fall for a guy that’s bad

As I sink back down into my office chair, though, a thought comes to mind. A memory, rather. The feeling of Karl’s hands on me, the taste of his lips. Our intimacy in the kitchen, which we haven’t spoken

A mistake. A wonderful, horrible, delicious mistake. And it can’t happen

...

The kitchen has long since fallen quiet, with the last employees heading home for the night. I'm here alone, standing in front of the gleaming counter with a pile of ingredients and a printed-out list of the dishes in front of me. I'll still need to wait on some of the more exotic dishes, but I can still practice the ones I'm prepared for, like boeuf bourguignon and braised

Cracking my knuckles, I begin with the dishes I'm less familiar with, meticulously following the

Chapter 67

Abby

The tension in the room feels palpable, a thick curtain of unsaid words and unexplored emotions hanging in the air between Karl and me. My grip tightens on the knife handle as I glance at the chaos of ingredients strewn across the counter.

"Tell me first," I blurt out, wanting to avoid the inevitable confrontation as long as possible. "What are you doing here? The restaurant closed hours ago."

Karl sighs and shakes his head, walking past me and over to the line. I watch as he bends down behind the counter and disappears for a moment, muttering to himself, before he stands back up and holds something up in the air: his wallet.

"Dropped this earlier," he says, slipping it into his pocket. "Wanted to come back and make sure it was here. Now it's your turn. What are you doing here at..." He glances at his watch. "One o'clock in the morning?"

I swallow, glancing around at the ingredients and half-cooked dishes all around the kitchen. The sink is full of empty dishes from failed attempts, the trash can is practically overflowing with said failed attempts, and the various successful attempts are lined up on the adjacent counter for pictures to keep in mind for presentation ideas.

"I, um..." I find myself choking up slightly. "I'm just practicing," I half-lie. "Wanted to test my skills."

Karl raises an eyebrow. "And waste all these ingredients? You're not that type of chef."

I nearly curse out loud. Karl is right; I've never been the type to

Even in the past, when I've gone on creative cooking sprees, I would never just throw things away when the dishes don't turn out perfectly. There's a food pantry right down the street that I visit frequently to donate dishes, and when I lived with Karl, the servants and guests were always

"You might as well tell me, Abby." Karl finally breaks the silence, his voice tinged with impatience. I can tell that he's onto me, and probably has been for some time. Probably since he found me hugging Ethan and Chloe. "You've clearly been up to something huge here lately, and I'm starting to feel like I'm the last to know. Why keep me in

Sighing, I put the knife down, my eyes meeting his. There's no point in avoiding the inevitable any longer. I might as well rip off the band-aid now. "Okay, fine," I mutter, wiping my hands on my apron. "I'm one of the finalists to compete to cater the

His eyes widen for a fraction of a second before his expression smooths over into something I can't quite decipher right now. "That's great, Abby. I'm proud

But something's off. His voice lacks the warmth I had hoped for, and his smile isn't quite reaching his eyes. I can sense what I feared all this time—that he'd prefer that I go to the Alpha party with him instead of

"You don't sound like you mean it," I prod, my own words edged with a surprising bitterness

"What? I said I'm proud of you," he retorts, clearly irritated now.

"Yeah, but your tone says otherwise. What's going on, Karl?"

He hesitates, running a hand through his hair. "Look, I wanted to go to the Alpha party with you. As your date. This whole catering thing sort of ruins that, though, doesn't it?"

For some reason, even though I expected this sort of response from him, I'm still taken aback. I guess there was a part of me that hoped that he really has changed, that he would be genuinely happy for my success instead of making it about him.

"You're upset because you wanted to go to a party? Seriously?"

"It's not just any party, Abby. The Alpha party is a big deal. I thought it could be something special for us," he shoots back, his eyes locked onto mine. "And besides, you promised. Or did you forget?"

My heart pounds in my chest. "I didn't forget," I say. "But this competition... It could be huge for my career. It's going to be on television and everything. I'm sorry, but I hoped that you would understand."

"Of course I understand," he says, turning away from me for a moment. "But what about us? Don't I mean something to you too? I thought you wanted to go with me." His voice rises with each word, filling the

"Us? There is no 'us', Karl," I murmur. "I've told you countless times before that it's not going to happen

"Have you, though?" His voice is low and strained, like he's trying to hold himself back. "Because it feels to me like you've just been keeping me on a string this whole time, giving me vague promises and hoops to jump through. And let's not forget what happened the

I wince at his words. The memory of our night right here in this kitchen whirls through my mind, reminding me of how it felt to have him close like

Even thinking about it now makes my wolf begin to stir ever so slightly. But I've already decided that it can't happen again. I made a promise to my friends, and most importantly, to myself. Fool me

"We wouldn't work," I say, blinking away the tears that are threatening to come. "Our lives are too different now. And you broke my heart, made my wolf go to sleep. I still can't forgive

"So don't forgive me," he replies, throwing his hands up in the air. "But you can't deny what's happening between

Chapter 68

Abby

The night weighs heavy on me, each mile that separates Karl and me adding to the burden I didn't think I'd ever have to bear again. I spend the rest of the night tossing and turning in bed, trying to bury the memories of our argument and the sting of his words. It's infuriating that he would have the audacity to be mad about my accomplishment.

He should be thrilled for me.

Shouldn't he?

...

I wake up the next day with dark clouds lingering in my head, mirroring the ones outside my window. I head straight to the kitchen to work it all off. When emotions get messy, the kitchen has always been my sanctuary. But today, even my sanctuary seems to be turning against me.

The day passes by in a blur. Before I know it, the restaurant is empty, the day having been a whirlwind of rushes and demanding customers. Finally, I find myself alone amidst a storm of spices, ingredients, and equipment. At least now, in the empty kitchen, I can think.

But the thing is, I've attempted this delicate souffle five times now. It keeps collapsing.

"Damn it!" I snap, tossing my whisk into the sink with an unwarranted amount of aggression. My apron follows, flung across the counter as I grip the edge, my knuckles going white.

This is one of the key dishes I want to practice for the competition. I've never had good luck with souffles, and it seems as though that bad luck is still getting in the

My heart is pounding like I've run a marathon, and I feel so stupidly vulnerable standing here, defeated by eggs and sugar. Tears of frustration are dangerously close, and I hate myself for

I can handle a hectic dinner rush, a dysfunctional kitchen, a competition. But to add Karl's drama onto it? It's

"Stop being such a drama queen, Abby," I chastise myself aloud, rolling my eyes at my own melodrama. That's when I hear it—a soft clearing of a throat. My body stiffens; that sound has dug its way into my senses more times than I can

Looking up, I find Karl standing at the entrance of the kitchen, his posture stiff and his eyes

It's amazing how someone can fill a space even when they're trying to make themselves smaller. He has this gravity about him, always has, pulling things toward him whether he means to or not. And right now, that gravity feels like a

My pulse quickens as our eyes lock. There's a lingering moment where neither of us speaks, and everything unsaid hangs heavy in the air between

"I saw the lights were still on. Thought you might be here," he finally says, taking a hesitant step into the

"What are you doing here, Karl?" I ask, my voice laced with more bitterness than I intend. I cross my arms, taking on a defensive stance I wish I didn't

He sighs, his eyes darting to the discarded apron, the mess in the sink, and the ingredients scattered across the counter like evidence of a culinary crime scene. "I came to talk about last night."

I roll my eyes, the back of them practically sore from how many times I've done that in the past 24 hours. "Of course you did," I murmur, the words coated with a layer of irony I can't help but slather on thick.

He flinches at my tone, and I almost feel bad. Almost. "Abby, listen—"

“No, you listen,” I cut him off, my pent-up emotions spilling over like a pot left unwatched. “Do you have any idea how much this means to me? This competition, this opportunity—it’s everything I’ve worked for. And you want to make it about you, about some party?”

“Abby, that’s not fair. I didn’t—”

“I don’t care what you did or didn’t mean to do, Karl,” I snap, stepping closer to him. “Right now, this is about me and my career, and if you can’t be happy about that, then I don’t know what to say.”

“Listen, I just came to talk,” he finally says. “If you don’t want to, I understand.”

I can’t look away from him; his presence is too overwhelming, too filled with a history I’ve been trying to ignore. “You came to talk? Really? Because last time we talked, you made it abundantly clear how you felt about my success.”

His eyes narrow, stung by my accusation. “I am happy for you, Abby. I wish you would

“How can I believe it?” I retort, gripping the edge of the counter to keep my hands from shaking. “Your entire demeanor changed. You said yourself that the competition would get in the way of the

Karl looks down, exhaling slowly like he’s measuring each breath, weighing each word before it leaves his mouth. “You’re right. I said some stuff last night that I shouldn’t have, because I was angry. But I am happy for you, Abby. Way more than you realize. And

My eyes meet his, searching for any sign of insincerity. All I find is a quiet regret that somehow makes me even angrier. “Sorry doesn’t just erase things, Karl. You being angry about my success tells me you’re not supportive of me, and I don’t have room for that kind of negativity in my life

He looks up, his eyes intense and unwavering. “I want to be supportive, Abby. I messed up. Let me make

“You really want to support me?” I can’t keep the skepticism out of my voice. “Or is this just another attempt to win me back? Because those are two very different

He steps closer, closing the gap between us, and I involuntarily hold my breath. “I can’t lie and say I don’t want you back. But above all, I care about you, Abby. That’s never changed, even when everything else

His words touch something raw inside me, a nerve I thought I’d killed off long ago. I look into his eyes, and for a moment, just a moment, I let myself believe him. “You caring about me and showing it are two very different things. You have a funny way of showing you

“I know,” he says softly, “and I’m sorry for that. I never wanted to hurt you. That’s the last thing I ever wanted to

Chapter 69

Karl

“Watch it, you’re massacring those veggies,” John calls out, glancing over from the stove where he’s sauteeing some garlic and mushrooms.

I chuckle, adjusting my grip on the knife. I’m supposed to be julienning some peppers, but instead I’ve lost my train of thought and accidentally begun dicing them instead. “Yeah, well, they had it coming.”

John grins, shaking his head. “Y’know, you’re not as unfunny and stupid as I thought you were.”

“Could say the same about you,” I reply, gathering the sliced vegetables into a bowl.

Who would’ve thought? John and I, mortal enemies turned reluctant allies. A couple of weeks ago, we could barely stand to be in the same room, but time and circumstances—and angry bosses—have a way of forcing you to reassess your priorities.

“It’s all about collaboration,” John continues, his tone more philosophical than I thought the brute would be capable of. “You can’t make a great dish with just one ingredient. Same with a kitchen. Everyone’s got to pull their weight, contribute their flavor for the bigger picture.”

“You should put that on a plaque or something.”

“And have everyone roll their eyes? Nah, I’ll stick to cooking,” he laughs, adding a splash of white wine to the pan, filling the air with a rich, aromatic scent.

The door to Abby’s office opens, and for a moment, my world narrows. She steps out, her eyes scanning the room as if looking for something—or someone. When her gaze falls on me, my heart leaps in anticipation.

But she averts her eyes, quickening her pace as she walks out of the kitchen.

The atmosphere turns brittle around me. John notices, his eyes narrowing. “Hey, snap out of it! You’re burning the

“Sorry,” I mutter.

I refocus on the task at hand, on the sound of the scallops sizzling in the pan, but the weight of last night hangs over me like a dark cloud. We’d argued, voices raised, over her decision to compete in that culinary contest despite our earlier agreement. I’d felt betrayed; she’d felt cornered. And

The wolf inside me stirs, restless. “You messed up big time,” he says, a growl wrapped in

“I know,” I reply, my mind a swirl of regret and confusion. “Trust me.

As the day winds down, as the kitchen grows quieter, the realization sinks in deeper. Abby isn’t just the co-owner of this restaurant. She’s not just another chef. She’s someone I care deeply about, someone whose dreams and desires should mean as much to me as my

And yet, I let my insecurities, my fears, get in the way. I shake my head, frustrated with myself, with the wedge that’s been driven

“I’m heading out. You good here?” John asks, snapping me back

“Yeah. See you tomorrow,” I say, forcing a

He nods, casting a somewhat concerned glance my way before exiting the kitchen. Alone now, I take off my apron and hang it up. My eyes catch Abby's office door, still closed, a barrier in more ways than

For a moment, I almost knock. But then, I decide that right now, I think I'd rather have a drink.

...

The kitchen is closed, but the bar always stays open for a couple of hours longer. I sit at the counter, nursing a glass of whiskey that tastes a lot like failure. My eyes catch my reflection in the glass, the questions there unanswered, piercing. Should I have reacted the way I did to Abby?

I just wish that she didn't have to make things so complicated. This isn't what I planned.

"She's succeeding in life, Karl," my wolf murmurs, his voice a gravelly echo in my mind. "You should be proud. Not territorial."

"Proud?" I almost snort, swirling the whiskey in its glass. "She knew how much that party meant to me—"

"And you know how much this competition means to her," my wolf retorts. "If you ever plan on winning her back, you need to show support. Show that you care. And not just about yourself."

"I do care for her," I shoot back defensively, but my wolf has already withdrawn, leaving me alone with my thoughts and my drink.

As if on cue, Chloe, one of the bartenders, walks over to refill my glass, her eyes cold, judgmental. It's as if she's trying to pour that disdain she feels for me into the glass along with the liquor.

"What's with the look?" I ask, setting down the glass harder than I mean to. "You're serving up judgments now instead of drinks?"

“Considering who’s asking, I think I can manage both,” she snaps, her

My eyebrows shoot up, surprise mingling with a touch of indignation. “I’m missing something here,

“Missing something? Oh, you mean like how you missed being supportive of Abby when she needed it?”
Her voice drips

So she knows.

“Abby tells me everything, Karl. I know what went down last night, how you made her feel. After all you’ve put her through, you’ve got the nerve to get angry about her

I feel like I’ve been slapped. Chloe has always been direct, no-nonsense, but this feels like a confrontation I wasn’t prepared for right now. For a moment, I almost consider being vindictive and asking if Abby also told her about the night that we almost hooked up in the kitchen, but I decide against it.

“Save it,” she cuts me off, stepping back from the bar. “If you want to make amends, you better do something more impressive than drowning your sorrows. Abby’s had enough, and I swear if you keep

“I realize I made a mistake, okay?” I say, my voice tinged with both frustration and desperation. “I want to make it up to

Chloe scoffs, shaking her head as she turns away. “You’ll never make up for it, Karl. Not in Abby’s book, and not in mine. Especially not if you’re going to stomp all over her moment in the

“So what do you suggest?”

Chapter 70

Abby

“Let me help you.”

Karl's words hit me like a ton of bricks. Karl, of all people, wants to help me prepare for the competition that we were only just arguing about? I can't believe it.

"You're joking," I murmur.

Karl shakes his head, his eyes darting down to the failure of a souffle sitting between us. "Nope. Not joking. Do you want my help or not?"

Part of me wants to accept his offer, but another part of me, perhaps the more logical part, decides that maybe it's not the best idea. I'm angry right now over my argument with Karl and this damned souffle, and I know that I wouldn't exactly be the best kitchen partner tonight.

"I'm fine, Karl. Just a little tired," I reply, forcing a smile. "Besides, you've been working all day. You can head home."

"I don't want to go home," he says quietly, sliding the souffle back toward me from across the cold metallic counter. "I'm not tired, and home is boring. Let me help."

I pause. I know that I should push him away and keep working on my own, not only so I can focus fully on my preparations for the competition but also so we can both cool off after our arguments. But something stops me. Maybe it's the sincere look in his soft brown eyes.

"Sure," I finally mutter, nodding. "I guess I could use some help."

Karl doesn't need to be told twice. I watch for a moment as he slips off his jacket, revealing his sinewy biceps peeking out from beneath his short sleeves. I have to look away before I get too attached to his image, and refocus my attention on my fourth attempt at making a souffle while he washes his hands.

Before I know it, the eggs and other ingredients are laid out before me, my whisk deftly beating the eggs into a

"You know, I used to make souffles as a kid," Karl says out of

“You made souffles?” I can’t even begin to keep the surprise out of my voice. Karl rarely ever cooked when we were together, and he certainly never brought it up to me. “You never mentioned that when we were

“My mom used to make them all the time when I was little. It was my favorite dessert. She eventually taught me how to make the best souffles ever,” he confesses, almost shyly. “Would you like me to whip

My curiosity gets the better of me. “Sure. I’d love to see

Karl sets to work, skillfully separating the egg yolks from the whites, stirring the flour and butter, and then folding everything in with care. I watch in amazement; the man has finesse, and it’s clear this isn’t his first time at the

The oven dings, and Karl retrieves the dish, setting it on the counter. The souffle has risen perfectly, its golden top a promise of the fluffy, airy delicacy

He dips a spoon into it and extends it toward

I accept the spoonful, the flavors bursting in my mouth—cheesy, eggy, and utterly perfect. The use of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese gives the souffle a savory tang, but Karl incorporated just the right amount of sugar so that the two opposite flavors meld together into a symphony

Our eyes meet, and for a moment, all the tension, the arguments, they vanish. There's just the two of us, and the culinary creation between

“Thank you, Karl. This is amazing,” I finally manage, breaking the spell and turning away.

“It was nothing. I was glad to help.”

As I walk back to my apartment later that night, a stray thought enters my mind.

Could Karl be the sous chef I need for the competition? He's been getting better, and he knows how to handle himself in a kitchen. And, even though we have our moments, we also know each other well; I know for a fact that we could function together as a well-oiled machine under pressure.

But I quickly shake off the idea. No, he doesn't have enough experience. It would be silly for me to choose him as my sous chef.

Right?

...

The next morning, Chloe greets me with a steaming cup of coffee as I walk into the restaurant. "Morning, boss lady. How are you today?"

"Good, actually," I say with a grin, gratefully accepting the frothy coffee. "Had a successful night last night."

"Oh?" Chloe asks, leaning on the bar as I take a seat on one of the stools, her own coffee in hand. "How so?"

I shrug and take a sip. "I was struggling with a souffle recipe. But you're not gonna believe this; Karl showed up and offered to help. It's crazy. He's actually a master at making souffles. Who

Chloe's face tightens. "Karl

"Yes, why?"

"I told him to stay away from you, Abby. I thought I was doing you a favor. But apparently he just doesn't

I blink, surprised and a little annoyed. "You told him

Chloe shrugs. "He was moping about how you decided to go through with the competition. I told him that he should just piss off,

Her words make my head reel. While I understand the sentiment behind them, something about it makes me angry; maybe it's because I only just told her that I needed to be trusted to make my own decisions, not have decisions made

"What?" she says, sensing my terse look. "Something

I swallow. The words come out harsher than I mean them to. "Chloe, it's not your place to tell him to stay away

"I was trying to protect you, Abby. You and I both know that you don't make the best decisions when it comes to men. And especially not when it comes to