



BEHIND-THE-
SCENES

CHAPTER 19

PARTY
PREPPING

“I'm starving. Let's take a break,” I suggest.

We peak into the kitchen. “Is it safe in here?” Tori asks.

Jaun, their chef laughs. “Yes. Your mother just left to check on the entertainment room remodeling.”

We step in, the rest of the staff busy dicing, peeling,

stirring, and kneading. We watch as Jaun dices onions so fast, I can't believe he still has fingers.

“Can I try?” I ask.

“Please.” He hands me the knife. I take an onion and start slicing carefully, finding the sharp knives and slippery onion layers quite a challenge. He gives me some tips, and I cut a

second onion much quicker. By the time I get to a third onion, my eyes are tearing up.

Jaun notices. He hands me a tissue and a pair of swimming goggles. I use the tissue immediately. Then I hold up the goggles. “Pool party?” I ask as the doorbell rings.

“To protect your eyes from

the onion,” Jaun says. A funny look crosses his face. He quickly replaces it with a placid one. I hear a burst of air from Livee's direction. Her lips are twitching. She covers her mouth with her hand and takes several slow deep breaths.

“What is it?” Tori asks, looking around the room. When

she reaches me, her eyes widen.

She fights a smile threatening to escape. I'm about to ask what the issue is when she glances over my shoulder. She quickly covers a look of panic with her hostess face. "Pete! How good of you to stop by."

"You invited me," he says, eyeing her strangely as he walks

in. “Does your panic mean you fixed the speaker?”

Tori throws on one of her quick smiles. “No. I was hoping you could help quick. If my mom discovers the problem, she’ll call the calvary. You mind taking a look?”

“Not at all,” Pete says, looking around the room and

spotting me. His eyebrows twist.

“Alysse?”

“Hey, Pete,” I greet, looking at Tori questioningly. “Glad to have you on board.”

“Why don't I show Pete the speaker while you go wash your hands?” Tori offers, jumping up from her seat. “We've helped in the kitchen enough.”

I look at her and then at my hands. “I guess they are a bit oniony”

She just nudges me. I walk toward the kitchen sink a bit baffled. Tori comes up behind me. “Oh, you don't want that sink. There's better soap in the guest bathroom? While you're there, you can check out the new

décor, tell me what you think.”

“O-kay.” I hesitate, looking all around me. Pete has tight lips, his eyes amused. The rest of the kitchen help is quiet with everyone determinedly working.

“Sure.”

I walk down the hall, and as I turn the corner, laughs break out in the kitchen. Now I briskly

walk to the bathroom, wondering
what that was all about.

I open the bathroom,
determined to find out when my
surroundings distract me. I don't
even recognize the room. All I
see is a vanity. Next to it is a
new wall. I walk around the wall
and see three toilets: one
American, one European, and

one I don't even know.

I go back to the vanity.

Instead of a sink, there's an elaborately carved table with an engraved stone bowl on top.

Small carved soap bars sit in a basket next to the bowl. A statue of a woman holding a vase stands on a shelf above the table. I look for the faucet, but can only find

the statue.

I walk up to take a closer look when water starts flowing out of the statue's vase and into the bowl. I play around with it, stepping forward and back, watching it switch one and off. I'm so fascinated, I forget the reason I came here. The only thing that saves me is glancing

up before walking toward the towels. I do a double take. That raccoon cannot be me!

I'm horrified as I scrub at the mascara I smeared all over my face wiping away onion induced tears. Each scrub does very little, having no make-up remover on hand. The most I can do is transfer raccoon eyes for sultry,

smokey eyes—not a fitting look for party prepping. I try one more time, this time with soap. It takes off the black, but it also stings, turning my eyes red.

I look back in the mirror. I look terrible. It's as if I've been crying for a few hours.

The staff is chit-chatting like best of friends as I come back in.

The moment they see me, the lively conversation simmers down a little. I just grab and knife and get back to work. Within minutes, Pete and Tori walk in from the backyard. “That was easy to fix. Too easy,” Pete says, looking pointedly at Tori as they join us at the table. “One wonders how an anchored

speaker can knock a few wires loose.”

Tori looks at him in mock shock. “Pete, I don't know how you could say something like that, but since you're already here, would you like to join us?”

She puts on an innocent smile.

“We were about to try samples of tomorrow's hors d'oeuvres?”

Pete looks at her with amused annoyance. “Already ate, thanks. Hey, Alysse. Decided against going goth?” He gives me a cocky grin.

I roll my eyes, determined not to blush. “Let's see how you do cutting up six onions.”

I hear a snicker among the kitchen staff. Then another.

“Oh, just get it out of your systems.” I put the knife down and fold my arms.

Everyone starts laughing heartily. Eventually I join them, wiping away new tears. At least there's no makeup to smear this time.

“Tori? Tori!” calls a panicked voice. “Did you re-ribbon the

presents?”

“Oh, no. She's back,” Tori cries in despair. “It's not too late for you Pete. You can sneak out before she finds out you're here.”

“I'm accustomed to tyrants,” he deflects, even as his JS starts buzzing.

“Tori?” the voice calls, drawing nearer.

“Last chance, Pete,” Tori warns.

His JS starts ringing and buzzing. Pete silences the ring and sighs as he reads his message. “Gotta go anyway.” He places a condoling hand on Tori's shoulder, shaking his head mournfully. “Good luck.” He nods at me with a wink. “We still

on tomorrow at nine?”

My eyebrows draw in. “So you can bring me straight back home? No. Seven-thirty,” I reply, firm.

He sighs again, shaking his head. “Fine. Just ruin my reputation.”

As he walks out, Tori spins on me, hands on my shoulders.

She's so elated, she doesn't even notice the impending "Tori!" about to enter the room. "Pete's bringing you to my party?"

I lean back, a bit surprised.

"Yeah. We're driving together."

"Driving together?" She lifts an eyebrow as her hands drop, her enthusiasm deflating like a balloon. "So, not a date?"

“No, just friends,” I reply as my heart does a little twist.

“Tori!”

We both jump, jerking our heads toward the door.

Mrs. Clement's red hair looks more like frazzled flames as she hurries towards us. “Please tell me you've fixed the party favors. The florist used the wrong

ribbon. They look dreadful!”

“Not a problem,” Tori reassures her mom. “We’re take care of it immediately.” She wraps an arm around my shoulder. “You can count on us.”

She wrings her hands. “I don’t know, maybe I should do them myself.”

Tori spins her shoulders and

nudges her towards the kitchen table. “What you should do is take a break and get some calories.”

“I suppose I should eat,” she says, dazed. Her eyes refocus, turning lazer beam.

“Hourdourves sampling! I haven't done it, yet!”

Jaun pulls out a chair for her.

“It's ready for your approval even now.” He claps his hands and several workers bring over trays.

As Mrs. Clement starts requesting more seasoning and salt, Tori leans towards Jaun. “I don't know how you have so much patience with her. She's never happy.”

Jaun winks. “I leave hers

bland on purpose. That way, she only asks for more salt instead of remaking all of them in some new style.”