

Kickass 401

Chapter 401

Abby

When I see the two bright beams of the headlights approaching, I don't hesitate for a second. This might just be my chance to finally get out of here and get some help before I potentially freeze to death.

I jump out of my car and wave my arms frantically, praying that whoever is driving the approaching red pickup truck will see me in this blizzard.

They have to; the lights are so bright that they're bathing the road in bright white light, making the thick sheet of snow falling down look almost nonexistent.

"Hey!" I call out, taking a major safety risk and jumping out into the middle of the road. "Hey, over here! Help!"

The truck doesn't seem to see me at first, and I brace myself, preparing to have to jump out of the way; but I keep waving my arms, jumping up and down while yelling frantically.

"Hey! Stop!"

Finally, the big red truck slows and skids to a stop just a few feet away from me, and my terror turns to instant relief. I quickly rush over to the driver's side, clutching my coat around my shoulders against the blistering wind.

"You alright, miss?" a gruff voice calls out through the cracked window.

"Oh, thank god you saw me!" I exclaim, my voice trembling from adrenaline coursing through my body. "I went into the ditch, and my car battery died, and I've been stuck out here for hours with no service. I just need a lift to somewhere where I can make a call for help."

The driver, a burly man with a scruffy beard, glances over at the passenger seat. It's now that I see another man is sitting there; he looks a little bit younger from the looks of it, but I can't see him very well from where I'm standing. The two men seem to exchange words for a few moments, and all I can do is bite my lip and hope that they'll empathize with me and help me out instead of leaving me here.

Finally, much to my relief, the driver turns back to me and nods with a sympathetic look in his eyes. "Of course, miss. Hop in. We'll take you to a place with better service."

I climb into the truck, feeling a wave of relief wash over me. The warmth inside the vehicle is a welcome contrast to the freezing cold I've been enduring out here. I glance over at the driver, offering a polite smile as I buckle my seatbelt.

"Thank you so much for helping me," I say, my voice filled with gratitude. "I really appreciate it. My name is Abby, by the way."

The driver nods, keeping his eyes on the road as he puts the truck into gear. "I'm Mike, and this is my buddy, Jake," he says, gesturing to the man in the passenger seat.

I nod, introducing myself to Jake as well. "Nice to meet you both," I reply.

"So," Jake says as Mike begins to drive, "what brings a lady like you all the way out here during a blizzard like this?"

It's only now that I'm out of the snow and the cold that I can finally chuckle about it. "You'll laugh at me," I say, rubbing my frigid hands together and holding them close to the vent, where warm air is blasting out. "But I went shopping for a party dress. I guess I should've checked the weather report."

Mike lets out a gravelly chuckle that sounds like iron being raked over hot coals. "You a city girl or something?"

I shrug. "Okay, maybe you got me," I say. "I'm from here, but I've been living in the city for over three years now. I guess I forgot just how treacherous it gets in the winter. But I'm lucky you guys showed up; three cars drove right past me!"

“Probably didn’t see you,” Mike says as he guides the truck around the snow-covered roads, his high beams cutting through the snow. “Hell, I almost didn’t see you either. Not until you decided to run out in the middle of the road and play chicken with my truck.”

His words make my face heat up. “Sorry about that. I was getting desperate.”

“Ah, it’s nothing.”

Mike continues to drive in silence, and Jake is just as quiet, too. Not that I mind; I’m just happy to be somewhere warm and safe. Soon, I’ll be able to call Karl and get out of this whole mess. I’ll be back in my bed soon enough.

But, as the truck continues down the snow-covered road, I can’t help but feel a sense of unease. Mike passes by an exit to the highway that would lead us to the nearest town, but he flies right past it.

Furrowing my brow, I glance out the window, my eyes catching sight of an open gas station nearby.

“Hey, I think there’s a gas station over there,” I mention, trying to keep my voice casual. “Maybe we could stop there? I saw a sign for free WiFi, and I could contact my friend over the internet.”

Mike glances at me, his expression tense. “Nah, that place doesn’t have any service,” he replies gruffly. “We’re taking you to a better spot.”

It’s then that my alarm bells start to go off. “I’m sure I saw a WiFi sign,” I insist, my voice trembling slightly.

Jake turns to me, his gaze unwavering. “Trust us, we know this area better than anyone,” he says, his voice low and intimidating. “We’ll get you to a place where you can make that call.”

I sink back into my seat, my heart pounding in my chest. Something doesn’t feel right. I can’t help but wonder where these men are really taking me. The initial relief I felt at being rescued has now transformed into fear.

Trying not to cause any concern, I carefully slide my gaze over to the door, only to see that the locking pin is down. When I slyly move my hand to the handle, thinking that I could jump out into the snow if need be and run back to that gas station, though, it doesn't open.

Chapter 402

Abby

The truck plows on through the relentless blizzard, and my anxiety continues to mount with each passing second.

The world outside the window is nothing but a white abyss, and I have no idea where we're headed. Fear grips me the further we go, and I can't shake the nagging feeling that I'm in serious trouble.

Slowly so as not to alert the two men sitting in front of me, I turn on my phone to check and see if I have service. But my phone screen illuminates the cabin of the truck, and before I can quickly shut the screen back off, Mike's eyes snap to me in the rearview mirror.

"No service here," he says, his eyes meeting mine.

"No service for a while," Jake chimes in with a slight chuckle. "You're out in the boonies now, city girl."

In a desperate attempt to act calm, I let out a slight chuckle of my own. "I just figured I should check," I say, swallowing. "Hey, um... I really would like to know where you're taking me, though."

"Don't worry," Mike says, averting his gaze back to the road once more. "We'll get there soon."

"Yeah, but where exactly is 'there'?" I press. "I have a right to know, don't I?"

The two men exchange brief glances, and it's then that I see it; the devilish look that flickers through Mike's gaze. God, how could I have been so stupid?

"Listen, lady," Jake finally says, turning around to shoot me a glare. "We're taking you to another gas station just a few miles up the road. Would you calm down and quit complaining?"

“I’m not—”

“Just... chill,” Jake says, his frown deepening. In the dim light of the car, the shadows of his face look even more demonlike.

I swallow and nod, not wanting to aggravate the men any further. But all the while, even as Jake lets out a huff and turns back around, my mind whirls. I need to have a plan just in case I have to escape.

The child lock on the door keeps me trapped inside, and I curse myself for not being more cautious. I have no choice but to rely on my wits and hope for an opportunity to escape. Maybe, once they stop, I can slip out and make a run for it.

But without my wolf form, I won’t be as fast as I could be. It would take all of thirty seconds for two big men like this to catch up to someone like me, especially if they shift.

“Come on,” I call out to my wolf mentally. “I really need you right now. You can’t just abandon me like this! You’re going to get us killed!”

But of course, as always, there’s no response. My wolf remains silent, dormant. I don’t even know if she can hear me, or if she’s sleeping peacefully, blissfully unaware of my terror.

As the minutes drag on, the truck suddenly veers off the main road and onto a narrow, winding path that disappears into the woods. Panic surges through me, and I instinctively try to open the door, but it remains locked.

“Stop that,” Mike hisses, shooting me another warning look through the rearview mirror. “What, do you think you’ll just jump out of here and into the blizzard?”

My heart pounds in my chest as I realize the gravity of the situation. I’m alone in the middle of nowhere with two strangers, and I don’t have my wolf form to defend myself. My only option is to fight with everything I have if it comes to that.

As he continues to drive, my eyes scan the truck for some sort of weapon. But there's nothing; no hatchet, no knife, no flashlight, not even an ice scraper.

I'm screwed.

The truck eventually comes to a stop in front of a remote cabin nestled deep in the woods. My fear intensifies, and I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I can't let them take me inside that cabin. I need to get out of here, but the odds are stacked against me. All around, there's nothing but trees and snow. I won't be able to outrun them, I'm sure of it.

"Here we are," Mike says, putting the truck in park. "Get out."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "I'm waiting here. Take me back to the gas station. Please."

Although my voice is firm, the two men just laugh. I watch in horror as Mike pulls the keys out of the ignition and pockets them, and then both men hop out of the truck. I unbuckle my seatbelt, prepared to jump out once they inevitably open the door.

And then, Jake swings the door open.

"Come he—"

Before he can finish, I whip my seatbelt straight into his face, the metal hitting him in the eye. He curses out loud and reels backwards, and I take the opportunity to leap out of the truck and into the snow, scrambling to my feet and running into the woods.

But it's not long before Mike catches up to me in three long strides. I feel hands around my wrists, and no matter how hard I fight, his grip is too strong.

“No! Let go of me!” I shout, my voice trembling with fear and anger. I kick and flail, doing everything in my power to resist his efforts to pull me to the cabin. Over my frenzy, I can hear the sounds of voices, and then I can feel another set of hands grab me by the ankles now.

No matter how hard I flail, their combined strength is overwhelming, and I soon find myself overpowered. With a final, desperate struggle, they yank me out up off of the snowy ground and drag me toward the cabin.

I continue to fight, tears of frustration and terror streaming down my face. “You can’t do this!” I scream. “Let me go! Please!”

Chapter 403

Karl

“God, Abby, where are you?” I murmur.

I’m driving carefully along the route that Abby would have taken, my knuckles white on the steering wheel as I peer through the blinding snowstorm. Panic tightens my chest with each passing moment. She should have been back hours ago, and the storm has only worsened as the time has passed.

“She had to have taken this route,” my wolf explains. “She’s taken it countless times before.”

I sigh. “I know,” I reply out loud. It just doesn’t make sense, though; if Abby had to stay at the shopping center because of the snowstorm, then she would have called me. The only scenario I can think of where she wouldn’t have called me is if she wound up somewhere with no service or...

If she’s hurt.

My heart pounds with the thought of that option. I shake my head as if to dispel the thought; no. I won’t believe that Abby’s hurt. She probably just pulled over somewhere, and I’m bound to find her soon.

Then, as I round a bend, I finally catch sight of a car half-buried in a snow-filled ditch. My heart leaps in my chest when I realize that it’s the car I loaned Abby earlier. She has to be sitting inside, waiting.

She's smart enough to know to do that. She knows I would always come for her, no matter what.

With a lighter feeling in my chest, I park my own car a safe distance away and trudge through the knee-deep snow towards her car.

The wind howls around me as I knock on the window. "Abby? It's me. Are you okay?"

But there's no response. The car is dark, and the door doesn't open. I can't see the interior of the car through the ice, and thinking that maybe she curled up and fell asleep while waiting for help, I open the door, my breath forming icy clouds.

But then my heart drops.

The car is empty, and my fear spikes. "Abby?" I call out, my voice swallowed by the storm.

There's no response, and I quickly scan the interior. She's not laying down in the back. All that's left is a shopping bag sitting on the back seat and a discarded emergency thermal blanket. Her purse is sitting on the passenger seat, and with a frown, I pick it up and rifle through it.

"Her phone is gone," I mutter, tossing the bag back down onto the seat. "Wallet, too. Maybe she left?"

Frowning, I straighten up and look around. And then I see it: footprints leading from her car out into the middle of the road.

My heart races as I follow the tracks, my boots sinking into the deep snow. Beside the footsteps, I see tire tracks, and it becomes apparent that someone picked her up. The realization sends a chill down my spine. Abby would never willingly get into a stranger's car, especially in weather like this.

But, maybe she really needed help. I shouldn't just assume the worst right off that bat.

However, I can't deny the feeling of dread in my stomach as I climb back into my car and follow the quickly-fading tire tracks. I hope that I find her somewhere, safe and sound, but something tells me that it won't be that simple.

After what feels like an eternity, I spot the glow of a gas station in the distance. My heart leaps with hope, and I pick up the pace, my tires skidding through the snow.

I reach the gas station, and the attendant inside looks up as I enter.

"Hey, did you see a woman come in here?" I ask, my voice urgent. "About this tall, strawberry blonde hair, wearing a blue jacket?"

The attendant, a middle-aged man with a worn-out expression, shakes his head. "No, sir, I haven't seen anyone in here for hours. This weather's keeping folks away."

I run a hand through my hair, my frustration building. "Are you sure? It's important. She might be in danger."

The attendant's expression softens, and he leans forward, his voice lowered. "Look, I've been here all night, and no one's come in. I'd have noticed, especially in this storm. Maybe she found shelter somewhere else."

My heart sinks, and I thank the man before heading back out into the storm. The tire tracks from whatever car Abby got into are barely visible now, covered by a fresh layer of snow. I curse under my breath, my mind racing for a plan.

I climb into my car and start the engine, hoping that maybe I can pick up her trail again. The snowfall shows no signs of letting up, and my anxiety only grows. I drive slowly, scanning the sides of the road for any clues.

What feels like hours but is really only a few minutes passes, and there's still no sign of Abby or the vehicle that took her. The tire tracks have disappeared entirely, swallowed by the relentless snowstorm. Desperation gnaws at me, and I realize that I need help.

I spot another gas station up ahead and pull into the parking lot. This time, there's a different attendant behind the counter, a young woman with a tired expression.

I rush inside, my breaths coming fast. "Please, have you seen a woman?" I blurt out without preamble. "She might have come in here recently."

The attendant looks up, her eyes widening as she takes in my disheveled appearance. "I haven't seen anyone, sir. Is everything okay?"

I shake my head, my voice tight with worry. "No, it's not. She went off the road in the storm, and I think someone picked her up."

The attendant's expression shifts to one of concern, and she leans closer. "Tell me everything you know. Maybe I can help."

I quickly explain the situation, from finding Abby's car in the ditch to the tire tracks leading away. The attendant listens intently, her eyes thoughtful.

"Listen," she says, "it's possible that someone picked her up. But I haven't seen anyone come in here all night, not with this storm."

Chapter 404

Karl

I drive on after two dead ends at both gas stations, my frustration growing with each passing mile. The tire tracks have all but disappeared, and the relentless snowfall has erased any hope of following them.

Try as I might, I also can't pick up Abby's scent anywhere. I know it's a useless effort because her wolf is dormant, but I still can't help but try. If only her wolf were active, she'd be able to release her scent at the very least to help me find her.

But there's nothing. Just snow, snow, and more snow.

“Come on, Abby,” I mutter to myself, clenching the steering wheel. “I can’t lose you in this damn blizzard.”

I continue to drive, scanning the surroundings in vain. The snowstorm shows no mercy, obscuring my vision and making it nearly impossible to track her. My thoughts race, trying to figure out what could have happened to her.

Did someone force her into their vehicle? Is she out there, lost and alone in this freezing wilderness?

No, it can’t be, I think to myself. She brought her phone and her wallet with her; surely she left the car willingly.

Still, I can’t bear the thought of Abby being in danger, and my frustration turns into a burning determination to find her. As I navigate through the winding forest roads, my senses are on high alert, straining to pick up any sign of her.

But then I sense it: a scent.

It’s faint, but it’s there.

I can’t rely on my human senses alone; it’s time to shift. With practiced ease, I pull the car over to the side of the road, ensuring it’s hidden from view. I close my eyes and focus on the transformation, allowing the wolf inside of me to take over.

In an instant, I become a sleek wolf with red fur, my senses sharpening as I pick up Abby’s scent more distinctly.

It’s a relief to have my heightened wolf senses at my disposal, and I waste no time following the fragile trail that leads deeper into the forest.

The scent is faint but unmistakably Abby’s, and I can sense a growing urgency. She’s out here, in the middle of fucking nowhere, and she’s in trouble. I never should have let her go off on her own. I should have paid more attention.

My heart pounds in my chest as I dart through the trees, the snow crunching beneath my paws. I have to find her, no matter what.

Then, as I sprint through the winding forest road, I catch a glimpse of a cabin up ahead.

The scent of Abby is stronger now, and I can feel that she must be inside that cabin. But there's something else, a sense of danger that I can't deny.

I don't think she's in that cabin willingly. This isn't a case of some kind strangers taking her home for a cup of tea and a few hours to wait out the storm. No, this is far worse.

I slow down as I approach the cabin, crouching low and moving with stealth. I can see the lights of the cabin flickering through the trees, and the smell of unfamiliar people reaches my nostrils.

My instincts scream at me that something is terribly wrong.

I stay hidden in the shadows, my fur bristling as I watch the cabin. My senses tell me that Abby is inside, and the urgency to reach her intensifies. But I can't rush in blindly; I need a plan.

I observe the cabin closely, noting any possible entrances or exits. I can hear voices coming from inside, but the words are too muffled to make out. The scent of men permeates the air, and I can tell there's more than one person inside.

With each passing moment, my frustration and fear for Abby grow. I know I can't wait any longer. I have to get to her, and I have to do it now.

And then I hear it.

"Let me go!"

It's Abby. All doubt has been removed from my mind.

I take a deep breath, summoning all my courage and determination. With a powerful leap, I burst out of the shadows and sprint toward the cabin.

My wolf form is a blur of motion as I approach the door, and with a swift, forceful push, I send it crashing open.

...

Abby

Panic courses through me as I struggle against the two men who have dragged me into this remote cabin.

My mind races, searching for a way out, but my efforts are futile without my wolf form. My heart aches for her presence, but she remains dormant, unresponsive to my desperate pleas.

I keep evading the men, trying to slip past them and make a run for it. But they're relentless, blocking every escape route I attempt. Frustration wells up inside of me as I curse the absence of my wolf.

She would have given me the strength and speed to fight them off.

"You shouldn't have trusted us," one of the men sneers, his grip on my arm tightening. "You city folk always think you can rely on strangers. That us country bumpkins could never do you any harm. Well now look at you."

I struggle against his hold, my voice trembling with fear and anger. "Let me go! You have no right to do this!"

But my pleas fall on deaf ears, and the two men exchange cold glances, their intentions clear. My heart pounds in my chest as I realize the dire situation I'm currently in.

These men won't let me go easily, and I need to find a way out before it's too late.

Chapter 405

Karl

I burst through the cabin door, my senses on high alert. My heart races as I take in the scene before me—two men standing over Abby, in the middle of what looks like a desperate struggle.

It's just as I force my way through the door in my wolf form that I see the light fade from Abby's eyes, and fury flows through me. She's just hit her head, and she's unconscious and bleeding. I need to act quickly.

I let out a fierce growl, baring my fangs at them as I begin to stalk closer. It's clear what these men brought her here to do, but I won't let them have their way with her.

The two men turn toward me, shock written across their stupid faces. They exchange glances, and then they shift as well; one of them, the other one, is bigger than me, but I'm not worried. I could take both of them with my eyes closed.

It's then that my wolf instincts take over, and everything becomes a blur of senses and instincts. The two men, their eyes filled with hostility, quickly begin to stalk toward me. But my gaze is fixed on Abby, laying motionless in the corner.

"I'm here, Abby," I think to myself. "I won't let these fuckers hurt you."

Time seems to slow down as I prepare mentally for the impending fight. The scent of pine and snow fills the air, along with the metallic tang of adrenaline. My heart races, and my muscles tense, ready for battle.

One of the men lunges at me, teeth bared, trying to bite my throat. I swiftly dodge to the side, narrowly avoiding his attack, and snap my jaws at his side, biting into his fur and flesh. He lets out a pained yelp.

The other man seizes the opportunity to attack, lunging at my exposed side and biting my hind leg. I shake my leg forcefully, forcing him to let go with a howl of pain.

With a fierce growl, I charge at the first man again, slashing the air with my claws. He dodges and we circle each other, waiting for a chance to strike.

Suddenly, he lunges again, aiming for my throat. I move aside just in time, and his teeth graze my shoulder. I retaliate with a swipe of my claws, leaving bloody marks on his flank. He yelps and stumbles back.

The second man, determined not to be left behind, attacks again. He charges at me, teeth bared, and we clash jaws, wrestling for control. The cabin's wooden floor creaks beneath our weight as we grapple.

With a surge of strength, I manage to pin him to the ground, my teeth dangerously close to his throat. He whimpers and surrenders, fear in his eyes.

But I can't relax yet. The first man, bloodied but angry, continues his assault. He lunges at me with fury, teeth snapping. I twist and turn, narrowly avoiding his attack.

Our battle intensifies, teeth and claws flashing. I fight with all my might, my determination unwavering. My only goal is Abby's safety, and I won't stop until I've eliminated the threats.

The fight is a brutal contest, a test of strength and willpower. I feel fatigue setting in, the strain on my muscles becoming more pronounced. But I push through, driven by instinct.

Finally, the two men seem to realize that they're outmatched. They whimper in submission and slink away, darting into the shadowy, snowy forest. They're not coming back. I'm sure of it.

I know that I should call the police, but it's no use; they're already gone, and the police won't get out here for hours in this blizzard. I can't waste any time with getting Abby to safety.

Breathing heavily, I turn my attention to Abby. She's still unconscious, her breathing shallow and uneven. Blood seeps from the wound on her head, staining the floor beneath her. Panic grips my heart as I shift back into my human form and fall to my knees beside her, nudging her gently.

“Abby, wake up,” I plead, my voice soft and desperate. “You have to wake up.”

But she remains unresponsive. I can’t waste any more time here. The snow outside is deep, and we’re in the middle of nowhere, but I need to get Abby to warmth and safety as soon as possible.

With great care, I lift Abby into my arms, cradling her gently. She’s so light, and I can feel her fragile heartbeat against my chest. Determination fuels my every step as I make my way through the thick snow, my vision blurred by the swirling flakes.

The journey back to the car is treacherous and slow. Each step is a struggle through the snow, which is up to my knees by now, but I can’t afford to stop. Abby’s life depends on me getting her out of this freezing wilderness.

Finally, I reach the car after what feels like an eternity, my breath coming out in heavy puffs. I carefully place Abby in the back seat, making sure she’s as comfortable as possible. I manage to get the seatbelt around her just in case and then glance at her one last time, my heart aching with worry.

“Hang in there, Abby,” I whisper, my voice filled with determination. “I’ll get us out of here.”

After climbing back into the driver’s seat and letting the car heat up for a few moments, I quickly shift the car into gear and begin driving, my focus solely on getting us to safety. The snow continues to fall heavily, reducing my visibility to almost nothing.

My heart races with each passing moment, fear for Abby’s life gnawing at me. The seconds feel like hours as I navigate through the whiteout conditions, my hands gripping the steering wheel tightly.

Chapter 406

Abby

The first thing I feel when I start to wake up is the throbbing pain in my head, followed by a profound sense of nausea.

It's as if I can feel the world making its rotations at that moment, the earth turning rightside up and upside down and repeating the process over and over again, and I'm just an unwilling participant in the vertigo of it all.

My eyes flutter open, and for a moment, all I see is darkness. Panic grips me as I try to make sense of my surroundings. My thoughts feel fuzzy, but then I start to remember.

The snow. The men in the truck. The cabin in the middle of nowhere. The fear, the struggle, and then the pain in my head.

And then it hits me—I'm not alone, and I'm in a moving vehicle again. Fear courses through me, and I sit up abruptly, my heart pounding in my chest. I can feel the car's movement, the road beneath us, and my mind races, convinced that I'm still with those men.

Up ahead, there's a man in the driver's seat.

A scream escapes my lips before I have the chance to stop myself, and my first instinct is to try to open the door, which isn't locked this time like it was before. The door swings open, and I'm hit with a burst of cold and snow. I sit up abruptly and start to unbuckle my seatbelt, prepared to leap out.

"Wait!" a voice says, frantic and worried.

"Let me out!" I shriek, my fingers clumsy from the cold and the ache in my head as I attempt to free myself from my seatbelt.

"Abby! Abby, calm down! It's me!"

I furrow my brow. That voice... That voice is familiar, but in my fuzzy state right now, I'm still too dazed and confused to understand what's going on.

But before I can react further or gather my bearings, the car screeches to a halt, and my terrified gaze locks onto the driver, who has just turned around to face me. My breath catches as his face comes into focus in the dim light of the car, and recognition slowly washes over me.

It's Karl.

"K-Karl...?" I breathe, my heart still pounding in my chest. I can't fully tell if I'm still unconscious, if I'm imagining this or not. Hell, maybe I'm even dead.

But then I remember: the flash of red fur when the door burst open, just before everything went black. So it was Karl after all. He came for me.

"Abby, it's me," he says, his voice gentle and reassuring. "I'm here. You're safe."

Tears blur my vision as I scramble to unbuckle my seatbelt, and so does Karl. We both leap out of the car and into the snowy road, and without hesitation, I throw myself sobbing into his arms. The hug is tight and desperate, as if we both need the reassurance that I'm safe now.

"Karl, I thought... I thought they had me," I stammer, my voice trembling as the memories of what happened in that cabin replay over and over again in my frantic mind. "I thought I was a goner."

His arms remain securely around me as he whispers into my ear. "But I found you, Abby," he says gently. "I'm here now, and you're safe."

I lean my head against his shoulder, feeling a mix of relief and exhaustion wash over me. He came just in time, and I can't help but feel grateful for his unwavering determination to find me in this snow storm.

But then I feel it. The nausea hits again in a sickening wave, and the world seems to tilt beneath my feet in a blur of pain and misery. My head throbs, and before I can stop myself, I'm turning away and...

Retching onto the side of the road.

When I'm finished emptying the contents of my stomach into the snow, Karl's voice brings me back to the present.

“God, Abby,” he murmurs, rubbing my back, “let me look at your head.”

Stiffly, I lean against the car and shut my eyes, breathing deeply to soothe my stomach and allowing Karl to look at me. I wince as his fingers trail over the spot where I was hit on the head. “You’ve got a hell of a bump there,” he says gently.

I can’t help but let out a wry chuckle. “Tell me about it.”

Karl sighs, then turns my head so I’m looking at him. He shines his phone flashlight into my eyes and curses under his breath. “I think you might have a concussion,” he says gently. “We should get you home now.”

I nod, even though the thought of getting back into the car with this nausea just makes my stomach turn even more, but I climb into the passenger seat anyway. Karl closes the door after me, and when he gets in, he shoves a bottle of water into my hands.

“Drink. We’re not far from home.”

As we continue driving, the tension in the car gradually eases. I sip the water, and it gives me a little bit of strength.

“How did you find me?” I find myself asking. “I thought the blizzard would have made it impossible.”

Karl sighs and shakes his head, his gaze never once leaving the snowy road. “When I saw the weather on the TV and saw that you hadn’t gotten home yet, I got worried,” he begins. “So I drove along the route you’d take to get to the shopping center, and I found the car.”

I swallow as I listen.

“I must have been right on your trail,” he continues, “because the tracks were still fresh, even in the snow. So I followed them, and eventually, I found you.”

"I'm such an idiot," I murmur. "If I had only waited a few more minutes..."

Chapter 407

Abby

The ride home feels like an eternity, my head still throbbing with pain and the world outside a blur of snow and darkness. Karl's presence beside me is a comforting anchor, and I try my best to focus on the sound of his voice as he reassures me that we'll be home soon.

Finally, I see the lights of the mansion come back into view like a lifeline in a stormy sea. We pass through the tall security gate and into safety once more, then pull into the driveway. Karl turns off the engine and stops to glance at me.

"Ready?" he asks, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

I nod, too tired to steep. He quickly gets out of the car and comes around to my side, helping me out. But as soon as I step onto the snowy ground, my legs give way beneath me, and I stumble and fall, the world spinning around me.

"Abby!" Karl exclaims in alarm, catching me before I hit the ground.

I clutch onto him, feeling dizzy and disoriented. "Karl, I don't feel so good," I mumble, my voice weak.

He doesn't waste a second. With gentle strength, he scoops me up into his arms, cradling me like I'm a fragile doll. I rest my head against his shoulder, feeling the warmth of his body seeping into mine. Despite the pain and discomfort, I can't help but find comfort in his arms.

As soon as we enter the house, Alice and Elsie rush over, their faces filled with worry. "Is she okay?" Elsie asks, her voice trembling.

Karl nods, his expression calm and composed. "She's going to be fine, but she needs some care right now. Can you bring me warm water and a washcloth, run her a warm bath, and get her some herbal tea? Also, please call the doctor."

Alice and Elsie nod in unison, and they scurry away to attend to his requests.

Karl carries me up the stairs and gently sets me down on my bed, and I let out a sigh of relief as I sink into the familiar softness of the mattress.

"I'm gonna undress you now, okay?" Karl asks.

I nod stiffly.

He starts to peel off my soaked clothes, and it's only then that I realize just how cold and wet I am from the snow. Embarrassment floods over me as I lie there in my underwear, but Karl doesn't seem to notice or care. He's too focused on making sure I'm okay.

"You're lucky you didn't get hypothermia or frostbite," he says softly, his fingers brushing against my skin as he helps me out of my wet clothes.

I can't help but blush, feeling a bit bashful without my clothes in front of him. "Thank you for saving me," I murmur, my throat still sore from the screaming earlier.

He smiles, his eyes warm and caring as he continues to undress me. "You're strong, Abby," he says gently. "You fought those men off all on your own until I arrived. I'm proud of you."

His words should make me feel better, but in reality, they only serve to fuel the anger and frustration that have been simmering inside of me. If only I could have shifted sooner, maybe it never would have happened. I scold my wolf mentally, my thoughts filled with disappointment.

"You shouldn't have left me all alone like that," I growl at her in the back of my mind. "You should have been there when I needed you the most."

"Abby," she whines, "I have no choice. Without him by our side, I'm not strong enough."

Her words make me even angrier. The thought that I could be dead just because of my fated mate not being right there just isn't fair, and it's also not fair that I might have no choice but to officially get back with Karl for my own safety; and despite what happened today, I'm still not sure if I'm ready for a step that big.

Karl finishes undressing me and begins to tend to my head with a warm washcloth. "Hold still," he says gently, dabbing at the sore spot where I was hit.

I wince at the touch but do my best to obey. "I'm sorry, Karl," I whisper, my voice laced with guilt. "I should have listened to you earlier instead of going out and risking getting caught in the snow. All over a stupid dress."

He sighs and reaches for my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "You couldn't have known, Abby," he says gently. "Just let it be a lesson; never forget that I'm always going to find you. If something like that happens ever again, just wait for me."

Tears prickle at the corners of my eyes, and I turn my head away to hide them. Karl's words are comforting, but I still feel like a fool.

If only I had waited just a few more minutes, none of what happened with those men ever would have happened. I never should have gotten into their car. I never should have been so trusting.

After tending to my head, Karl helps me into the warm bath that Alice has prepared. The hot water soothes my aching body, and I let out a contented sigh as I sink into the tub. Karl stays nearby, keeping a watchful eye on me as I soak but also giving me some privacy.

When I'm done with the bath, Karl helps me into a fresh set of pajamas and tucks me into bed. It's then that there's a knock on the door, and Karl gets up to answer.

"Good evening," the doctor says as he enters, his gaze falling on me. "Let's see what we've got here..."

The doctor begins examining me, going through the motions of prodding at my head, checking my eyes, asking basic questions and inspecting my nose, ears, and throat. He finishes by checking over my extremities for any signs of frostbite.

“You’re in good shape,” he says as he packs up his instruments. “Just take Tylenol for your head, and keep hydrated. You’ve got a minor concussion, but thankfully nothing else. If you start to feel like you’ve got a cold, though, come and see me. I’ve prescribed you some antibiotics to keep pneumonia at bay, but I want you to keep an eye on your condition.”

I nod, watching him intently. “Thank you, doctor.”

Chapter 408

Abby

The next day dawns with a mix of relief and trepidation. Karl and I are sitting in the living room, waiting for the police to arrive. I can’t help but feel a knot of anxiety in the pit of my stomach. Reliving the events of yesterday, recounting the trauma...

It’s not exactly something that I’m looking forward to.

Karl, noticing my worry, reaches out and takes my hand. His touch is warm and comforting, and it eases some of my anxiety. He held me all night last night—no sex, no strings attached, just his warm presence beside me.

And I think I needed that more than I realized.

“You’ve got this, Abby,” he says gently. “I’ll be right here through the whole thing. We’ll catch those assholes and put them behind bars.”

I nod, grateful for his support. “I sure hope so,” I reply, my voice trembling slightly.

The police car pulls up in front of the house, and two officers step out. They make their way up the driveway and ring the doorbell. We exchange a glance, and then Karl gets up to answer the door. “Wait here,” he says, giving my hand one last squeeze. “I’ll be right back.”

I wait patiently in the living room, watching through the archway to the foyer as Karl makes his way over to the door. He swings it open to the two officers standing there: both female, thankfully.

“Good morning,” one of the officers says, offering a polite smile. “I’m Detective Anderson, and this is Officer Ramirez. We’d like to ask you both some questions regarding the incident yesterday.”

Karl nods and invites them inside, then leads them over to where I’m waiting. I stand, wringing my hands nervously. “Hello, officers,” I say with a tense smile. “Thank you for coming.”

Detective Anderson shoots me a warm look and shakes my hand. “You must be Abby.”

We all settle in the living room, and Detective Anderson takes out a notepad while Officer Ramirez records the conversation on a small digital recorder.

“Alright, Abby, if you could please start by telling us everything that happened yesterday,” Detective Anderson says.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. “Well, it all started when I went to the shopping center to buy a dress for a charity event. It was snowing heavily, and I got caught in the blizzard on my way back. I had no service and was caught in a ditch.”

I recount the events in detail, describing the hours of waiting in the freezing cold, my desperation, the cabin, the two men who had kidnapped me, and the struggle that ensued. My voice wavers at times, and I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes as I relive the terror of being held captive.

But all the while, Karl is beside me, and his hand never leaves mine. He stays silent, like a rock for me to lean on.

Officer Ramirez glances at me sympathetically but continues to record my statement. Detective Anderson nods, urging me to go on.

“I fought the two men as hard as I could,” I continue. “But... my wolf has been dormant, you see. So I didn’t stand much of a chance.”

Karl watches me, his expression filled with concern and support.

“And then,” I finish, my voice still trembling, “Karl somehow found me. Just before they...”

Detective Anderson nods, jotting more down in her notepad before she turns to Karl. “And Karl, can you please recount your version of the story? How did you find Abby?”

Karl takes a deep breath, his eyes never leaving mine. “I had been worried about Abby when she didn’t return home from the shopping center. The weather was getting worse, and I knew she could be in trouble. I decided to go out and look for her.”

I take in a shuddering breath and scooch a little closer to Karl on the couch, moving out of instinct. My wolf stirs inside of me, comforted by his presence. I can feel her there, pulling us closer, and right now I allow it.

“I searched for a long time in the blizzard,” Karl continues, “but the trail seemed to go cold until her scent suddenly came to me... and it led me to the cabin in the woods. When I arrived there, I could hear voices inside, and I knew something was wrong. I had to get her out.”

My eyes widen as I hear this. “You picked up my scent in the storm?” I ask, astonished.

Karl nods, a small smile on his face. “Yes, I did. It was very faint, but I followed it, and I found you.”

His words leave me reeling ever so slightly. I guess I should have known, but it still takes me by surprise. I just can’t believe that he managed to pick up my faint scent, even in the blizzard, and was able to find me.

Detective Anderson and Officer Ramirez continue to ask us questions, and we provide all the details we can recall. The whole process is grueling, but we push through it, determined to help the police catch those men. As a final note, Karl gives them the license plate number of the truck that the two men were driving, and the officers look pleased.

Finally, the officers wrap up the interview, thanking us for our cooperation. “We’ll do our best to track down the suspects,” Detective Anderson says. “You’ve both been very helpful. It’s unlikely that this was a premeditated crime, but it’s very possible that your report may just save others in the future.”

I nod, letting out a soft breath of relief. More than anything, I'm just glad to keep other women from experiencing what these men tried to do to me. I was lucky, having Karl there to save me at that last moment. But not everyone can be so lucky.

As the police officers leave, Karl turns to me, his eyes filled with curiosity. "Can I ask you something?" he asks.

"What's up?"

Karl pauses, then takes a deep breath. "How is it possible that I picked up your scent last night? I thought your wolf was dormant."

Chapter 409

Abby

The tow company finally arrives, bringing my car—well, Karl's car—back from the snowy ditch where it had been abandoned during the incident. I stand by, anxiously watching as they unload the car and bring it back to its rightful place in the driveway.

Karl stands beside me, his hands tucked into his coat pockets, a warm and amused smile on his face as he watches me fret over the car. When the tow truck driver finally finishes unfastening the car and placing it back in the driveway, Karl and I walk over to take a closer look.

"There's no damage as far as I can see," the tow truck driver says as we approach. "But you're welcome to take a look for yourself."

Karl nods and takes a step closer, inspecting the car for any dents or scrapes, but thankfully there are none. "Looks good to me," Karl says with a smile. "Thanks for your services."

The tow truck driver gives Karl a curt nod and returns to his truck to get our bill. As we wait, I turn to Karl, feeling a pang of guilt in my chest. "I'm so sorry for running your car into a ditch," I say, my voice filled with genuine remorse. "I really couldn't see anything on that road."

Karl chuckles, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he shakes his head. “Abby, it’s really fine,” he reassures me. “There’s no damage, and the most important thing is that you’re safe.”

I offer a weak smile, still feeling bad about the whole situation. “At least let me pay for the tow truck,” I offer, reaching for my wallet.

But before I can do anything, Karl stops me, gently placing a hand on mine to prevent me from getting my wallet. “No need, Abby,” he says, shaking his head. “I’ve got it all covered.”

I watch as he pays the tow truck driver, feeling a mix of gratitude and a touch of embarrassment. He hands the driver a wad of cash, and with the payment all set, the driver hops back into his truck and drives off.

“Karl, you don’t have to keep paying for everything,” I say quietly, my cheeks tinted with a hint of pink.

He gives me a sideways glance, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “What do you mean?”

I blush a bit deeper, struggling to find the right words. “I mean, you’ve been so generous since I’ve been here. You showered me with gifts, paid for meals, even offered to pay for my dress, and now this. You’re... spoiling me.”

Karl’s expression softens, and he gives me a warm smile. “Abby, it’s not about spoiling you. I just feel like, as a man, I should step up to the plate, especially after everything that happened between us in the past—all of the mistakes I’ve made. If I can make your time here a little more comfortable, then I want to do that.”

I look down at my feet, feeling touched by his words. “Thank you, Karl,” I murmur, my voice barely more than a whisper. “But you really don’t have to do all of this. I can pay for myself if the need arises.”

Karl tilts his head, studying me for a moment before he speaks. “I know you can pay for yourself,” he says. “But I want to pay for you whenever I can. Will you let me?”

I meet his gaze, and for a moment, I feel a rush of emotions welling up inside of me. Karl has always been protective of me, even though we're divorced.

"Alright," I say with a weak smile and a soft sigh. "Thank you, Karl."

"It's nothing. Really."

We walk over to the car, and I begin to take my belongings out of it. My dress, a little cold still from the night in the car, is still perfectly intact. The mask isn't cracked or anything from the cold, which is a relief.

But as I look at them, a thought crosses my mind.

"You know," I begin, "what about the holiday party in a couple of days? After everything that happened, do you think I should go?"

Karl considers my words, his brow furrowing slightly. "Abby, it's entirely up to you. Of course I want you there. But if you're not comfortable going, then don't feel obligated to attend."

I chew on my lower lip, debating with myself. On one hand, I don't want fear to control my life, as that would just be letting those two guys win in the end. But on the other hand, the idea of attending a party, even a holiday one, seems a little daunting after what happened. Right now, I just kind of want to curl up in bed and not see anyone.

But then, my wolf stirs inside me, and I can feel her urging me to go.

"You should go, Abby," she says, sounding hopeful. "It'll be good for you. And for your relationship with Karl, too."

I almost blush. "There is no relationship," I reply. "Not yet, at least..."

My wolf bristles in response. "Come on, Abby. You know what you want."

I hate to admit it, but my wolf is right; I do want to attend the party, to be by Karl's side. And besides, wallowing in bed probably won't help in the slightest. I came out of that situation last night mostly unscathed, and I should just focus on that instead of on what could have happened.

Finally, after a moment of contemplation, I nod. "You know what, Karl? I think I will go to the party. It might be nice to dance, enjoy some good food and drinks, and just forget about everything for a while."

Karl smiles, looking a bit relieved. "I'm glad to hear that, Abby. And if you ever change your mind or need to leave early, just let me know. I won't hold it against you."

I return his smile and thank him for understanding. As he heads back inside, mentioning a meeting with his campaign manager, Sarah, I'm left alone once again with my thoughts.

Chapter 410

Abby

I wake up early the next morning, my body feeling surprisingly refreshed despite the events of the past few days. The room is bathed in a soft, golden light filtering through the curtains, and I can hear the gentle rustling of leaves outside the window.

With a yawn, I stretch my limbs, feeling the tension in my muscles from the ordeal slowly dissipate.

Tomorrow is Saturday, the day of the holiday party. My dress is hanging on the back of the bathroom door along with the mask, and I roll over, looking up at the way the fabric gleams in the golden rays of the morning sun.

But then, my thoughts from last night start to float back. I want to get back into training again, and I'm feeling better now.

So why not get started today?

Deciding to make the most of this peaceful morning, I decide to head over to the home gym in the mansion. It's been a while since I've worked out, and I'm itching to move my body. So, after quickly

brushing my teeth and pulling my hair back into a sleek ponytail, I grab the leggings I've packed. I furrow my brow as I see that I've only packed an oversized t-shirt, which isn't the most ideal workout top, but it's all I have.

Once I'm dressed, I make my way over to the gym. The tall double glass doors let the sunshine seep through into the hallway, and as soon as I swing them open, the smell of leather and metal hits my senses and sends a rush of nostalgia through my body.

As I step inside, memories flood back.

Karl and I used to work out in here together all of the time; in fact, up until the distance started growing between us, working out together was part of our daily routine. Karl would always lift heavy weights while I would opt for things like yoga and calisthenics, and we'd finish with a hot, sweaty run on the treadmills...

Followed by other hot, sweaty activities right on the mats.

I can't help but blush as I let the door swing shut behind me, remembering everything that went on here back before the divorce.

It doesn't help any that the room hasn't changed much since I was last here, either. The state-of-the-art equipment still gleams, and the walls are lined with mirrors.

Sighing softly to myself, I grab a yoga mat from the rack and unroll it on the floor, ready to start with some gentle stretches before moving on to some light cardio and weights just to get my body used to the feeling again.

As I begin to stretch, I hear the door open, and I look up to see Karl walking in.

My heart skips a beat as I take in his appearance. He's shirtless, his muscles defined in the golden rays of the sun coming through the enormous windows. His dark hair is tousled, and there's a determined look in his eyes.

I quickly avert my gaze, feeling a blush creeping up my cheeks. "Morning," I greet him, trying to sound casual. "I didn't expect to see you here."