

Kickass 411

Chapter 411

As I make my way over to the weights, I steal another glance at Karl's form. He's lifting heavy weights, his muscles flexing with each repetition. He grunts a bit, and sweat glistens on his skin. My heart races, and I feel a familiar warmth spreading through me.

"Hey," he says, smirking as he places down the weights for one last rep of deadlifts. "Quit staring."

"I'm not staring." I blush, turning away. "It's just a coincidence."

"Mhm," he teases. "Sure."

I swallow and pick up some light weights, trying to concentrate on my own workout, but my eyes keep drifting back to Karl. He's like a magnetic force, drawing me in. I know I should focus on my training, but it's hard when he's right there, looking so incredibly attractive.

Karl notices me struggling with my form and approaches me, his brow furrowed. "Hey, that's not how you do bicep curls," he says, shaking his head. "You're using too much of your shoulders."

Before I can answer, he comes up behind me, his body dangerously close to mine. His hands gently guide me, his touch sending a shiver down my spine as they run over my limbs.

"You're a bit rusty, Abby," he says, his voice low and intimate.

I clear my throat, trying to regain my composure. "Yeah, it's been a while," I admit, feeling a bit flustered. "I've grown flabby, too."

Karl gives me a stern look and steps closer, his hands resting on my waist. He makes me face the mirror beside us, and I meet my own gaze. "Abby," he says softly, pulling my shirt taut to reveal my waist, "you have a beautiful, curvy body with long legs and a slender waist. You're not flabby at all. Look."

I blush furiously at his words and quickly step away, feeling my heart pounding in my chest. “Thanks, Karl,” I mumble, not sure how to respond to his compliment.

He narrows his eyes, leveling me with a stern gaze. “Don’t call yourself flabby. Understood?”

I bite my lip, torn between embarrassment and gratitude. “Alright,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

But as I continue my workout, I can’t help but think about what Karl said. Maybe he’s right, and I’ve been too hard on myself.

And yet, there’s another thought that lingers in my mind. It’s not just about being fit; it’s about being able to protect myself, especially after what happened.

I finally gather the courage to speak up. “Karl, I appreciate your help, but there’s something I’ve always wanted to get better at—physical fighting. I’ve never been the best, and I think it’s time to change that.”

Karl finishes his set of weights and turns to me, his expression thoughtful. “I can train you in fighting if you’d like,” he offers. “But you’ll need to stay here for longer if that’s the case. You’d be better off doing a few weeks of training all at once rather than spreading it out.”

I hesitate, thinking about my life back in the city, my restaurant, and my friends. “But I might need to go back home soon,” I admit. “Maybe I can just take a class in the city.”

Chapter 412

Abby

After my workout, I head back to my room, feeling invigorated and a little sore in a satisfying way.

The hot bath is calling my name, promising to soothe my tired muscles, and I eagerly slip into the warm water, letting out a contented sigh as I sink down into the bathtub. The steam rises into little tendrils in the air, filling the bathroom and making the space hazy and thick.

But as I close my eyes and let the warm water wash over me, I can't help but think about Karl. The memory of him in the gym, his muscles glistening with sweat as he lifted weights, his soft grunts of exertion—it all makes my heart race.

My cheeks flush at the thought, and I can't deny the arousal that bubbles up inside of me.

"You want him," my wolf purrs, her voice low and husky. "You should call him in here."

My wolf's words make me groan a little, and I sink down lower into the tub, letting the water come up to my chin. "No," I answer, my cheeks flushing an even deeper shade of red. "He's in a meeting."

"But after..."

"I won't do it," I say, although the idea is tempting. "I shouldn't."

My wolf chuckles. "Why not? I thought you had an agreement, after all. Just casual, right? What's more casual than giving in to your primal desires?"

Her words are true, but I can't bring myself to call Karl in here now—not just for sex. Something about it feels... naughty. Instead, I allow myself to fantasize about him, about his lips on mine, about the way he came up behind me, his hands guiding me with a touch that sent shivers down my spine.

The water soothes me, but my thoughts keep drifting back to Karl, and I find myself lost in a daydream that leaves me breathless and wanting.

Before I know it, my hand is slipping down beneath the water, and my soft moans curl up into the air along with the steam.

...

The next morning arrives with a sense of anticipation. It's finally Saturday, the day of the masquerade, and I can't deny the fact that I feel secretly excited as I wake up. My dress and my mask seem to beckon

to me from the back of the bathroom door, just waiting for me to put them on. I think, after everything, it'll be nice to let loose a little bit tonight.

And after yesterday, I can't help but secretly feel the urge to see Karl again. I wonder how he'll look in his tuxedo, and what sort of mask he'll wear.

It's not long before I'm slipping out of bed and into the shower, followed by getting dressed in something casual for now: an oversized sweater and some leggings, just to lounge around the house until it's time to get ready for the party.

My body is yearning for coffee by the time I'm dressed, though, so I decide to head out.

Heading downstairs to the kitchen, I see Karl standing there, a look of exasperation on his face as he types furiously on his phone. My cheeks instantly flush red; I wasn't expecting to see him here, and I can't help but wonder if he might be able to tell from my bashfulness that I was just touching myself in the bathtub yesterday after our gym session.

But he seems lost in his own world, and I hesitate for a moment before pouring myself some coffee.

Curiosity gets the better of me, though, and I decide to break the silence. "Karl, what's wrong?" I ask, my tone filled with concern. "You seem a bit exasperated."

Karl lets out a sigh, his gaze still fixed on his phone screen. "The caterer had an accident and pulled out at the last minute," he says, the frustration evident in his voice. "I've been trying to find a replacement, but it's proving to be impossible on such short notice."

I take a sip of my coffee and ponder for a moment. It's clear that Karl is in a bind, and I hate seeing him so stressed. A thought occurs to me, and I decide to voice it. "Karl, I can cater for the party."

He looks up at me, surprise in his eyes. "Abby, absolutely not," he protests, shaking his head. "You're my guest, and I want you to enjoy the party without having to work. Besides, it's too short notice to arrange for catering. I think I might just need to do without food tonight."

“Karl, come on,” I sigh, setting down my coffee mug. “I don’t mind. Please, let me help.”

Karl sighs softly, his brow furrowing as he considers my offer. “Are you sure about this, Abby?” he asks, his voice filled with uncertainty.

I nod firmly. “I’m positive. And besides... A little work might be nice right now.”

A small smile tugs at the corners of Karl’s lips, but he quickly masks it with his usual Alpha-on-a-mission demeanor. “Okay,” he says. “Just let me know what you need, and I’ll send someone to pick up ingredients.”

Nodding, I grab a notepad and jot down a list of ingredients for a few dishes, taking into account the limited time we have. I focus on hors d’oeuvres and t***s, which is better for a party like this anyway.

Once I’m done, I hand the list to Karl, who looks it over and nods. “This looks good. I’ll make sure everything is picked up as soon as possible,” he assures me. “Is there anything else I can do?”

I purse my lips, thinking for a moment, then shake my head. “Nah, this is nothing,” I assure him. “I’ve handled worse than a few hors d’oeuvres and t***s plates. And let’s not forget that I designed this kitchen myself, specifically for catering these sorts of events.”

Karl smirks as he looks around at the clean marble countertops, the stainless steel appliances and sleek cupboards. It’s true; I did design this kitchen myself. It was my crowning glory of this house, and honestly, I miss cooking in here.

“Okay,” he says, pocketing the list with a nod as he begins to stride away. “I’ll get right on that list. And Abby...” He pauses in the doorway, shooting me a warm gaze that makes my heart skip a beat. “Thank you.”

Chapter 413

Abby

“Hey. Looking for a sous chef tonight?”

Karl's unexpected presence in the kitchen startles me, and my heart skips a beat as I turn to face him.

For a moment, we just look at each other. His easy smile and the mischievous glint in his eyes make my cheeks flush with warmth. The proximity between us feels electric, and I can't help but wonder if he can sense the rapid beating of my heart.

I glance at the bustling kitchen and then back at Karl. "Are you sure?" I ask, a hint of surprise in my voice. "I mean, you don't have to. I'm sure you have other things to be doing right now."

He chuckles, that deep, warm sound that never fails to make my heart race. "I'm sure," he replies, taking a step closer. "I want to help. Plus, cooking together sounds like fun, don't you think?"

I nod, unable to hide the smile that tugs at my lips. "Alright then, welcome to the team." I gesture to the ingredients laid out on the counter. "Let's get started."

We fall into a rhythm, working side by side, our elbows occasionally bumping as we move around the kitchen. There's a sense of camaraderie between us as we work, and I can't deny the thrill of having Karl so close. The tantalizing scent of the food fills the air, but it's Karl's presence that really fills my senses.

At one point, we both reach for a pot at the same time, and our bodies collide. My heart pounds in my chest as our faces are suddenly inches apart.

"Woah there," Karl coos, his brown eyes meeting mine.

"Sorry," I murmur. But before I can step away, Karl's arm is sliding around my waist, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me.

I can't stop him; he's picking me up gently off of the floor and moving me to the side, placing me back down behind him. The motion seems so fluid, so natural for him, and I'm left feeling weak in the knees.

With a sly smirk, he whispers, "You might want to stay out of my way, Abby. This is a kitchen, not a nightclub."

His words leave me breathless, and I can feel my wolf's yearning inside of me perfectly echoing my own desires. I manage to stammer out a response, "I'll try my best; so long as you stay out of my way, too."

Karl's smirk widens, and he releases his grip around my waist.

"No promises," he says, his voice low and husky.

I swallow, stepping away and averting my gaze before he can see the blush in my cheeks.

"He wants you," my wolf purrs, aroused by Karl's closeness just now. "You two should—"

"I need to focus," I answer as I return to my work. "No time for... that."

As we continue to cook, our closeness lingers, the tension between us simmering beneath the surface. The dishes start to take shape, and the anticipation builds. Finally, after what feels like both an eternity and a fleeting moment, we take a step back to admire our creations.

The sight of the beautifully prepared dishes fills me with a sense of accomplishment, and I can't help but smile. There's enough time on the clock for us to get ready, and everything looks perfect. I turn to Karl, our eyes locking for a moment, and we share a triumphant high-five.

"Great job," he says, his voice soft and sincere, although there's still a hint of that earlier mischief there.

"You too," I reply, my heart feeling lighter than it has in a long time.

Chapter 414

Over the next hour, I get to work scrubbing, shaving, plucking, and rinsing, followed by styling my hair and putting on my makeup. I opt for an understated shimmery eyeshadow since I'll be wearing a mask, and a plum red lip—a color which, thanks to Elsie, is now my favorite on myself.

Then, I carefully slip into the stunning midnight blue dress. It fits perfectly, just as I remembered. Now, all I need is the mask.

Standing in front of the mirror, I carefully slip the Venetian mask on and fasten the ribbons. My eyes widen as I finally see the finished product. It's...

"Beautiful," my wolf says, just as amazed as I am. "Abby, he's going to love it."

It's true; the hair and makeup I've done have transformed me into someone I hardly recognize. The masquerade gown fits perfectly, and the mask adds an air of mystery to my appearance.

"He won't be able to take his eyes off of you," my wolf continues. "That's for sure."

Blushing at her thoughts, I take a deep breath and smile slightly. "Remember, this isn't only for Karl," I find myself saying mentally, more to myself than to her.

And yet, no matter how much I try to hide it, I can't help but imagine what Karl's reaction will be.

Finally, with a deep breath, I decide that I'm ready for the party. I head out of the room, making my way down the grand staircase. But as I reach the top of the stairs, I pause, gazing at my reflection one more time in a nearby mirror.

Am I really ready for this?

What will people think? Will they recognize me? What will this mean for my relationship with Karl? What will it mean for me, for Abby, for the life I've created without... him?

But as I stand there, looking at myself in the mirror and the dim light of the hallway, the sounds of the party already in full swing float through the air, beckoning for me. Maybe for tonight, just tonight, it's okay to give in to the fantasy a little bit.

And maybe, just maybe, I can just enjoy the party, enjoy Karl's eye's on me... Enjoy his arm around my waist, just like when we were married.

The lingering doubts are dispelled by a surge of determination. With renewed confidence, I take another deep breath and make my way downstairs to join the masquerade.

The scene that greets me is a dazzling spectacle. Guests dressed in elegant masks and gowns mill about, laughter and chatter filling the air. It's so much more than I expected, but it's so wonderful. It seems as though the idea of a masquerade was taken well, and I can see the excited guests touching their masks, playing along with the idea of mystery and intrigue.

And I blend in perfectly; no one bats an eye, and no one recognizes me. Here, I'm not Abby the failure, Abby the fraud, Abby the chef who ruined the Alpha gathering, Abby the ex-Luna.

Here, I'm just a girl in a Venetian mask and a midnight blue dress.

Chapter 415

Abby

Karl leads me onto the dance floor, his hand warm against my back. The soft strains of classical music fill the air, and the elegant masks of the other guests twinkle in the dim light of the ballroom. As we start to move together, his hand wrapped securely around mine, I can't help but feel a surge of nervous excitement.

"You look stunning tonight in that dress and mask, Abby," Karl says, his voice so low and thick that it's nearly drowned out by the music. "The color of that dress suits you perfectly."

My cheeks flush with a rosy pink sort of hue, and I'm glad to have the mask covering my face. I glance down at the intricate lacework of my dark blue gown and the delicate Venetian mask that hides my identity.

"Thank you," I reply, my own voice barely more than a whisper as well. "You look handsome as well. I like your mask."

Karl chuckles, reaching up to touch the simple black mask covering half of his face. "You're sure?" he asks. "I was worried it's too simple."

I shake my head. "No. It's perfect."

For a moment, we just sway along to the music, letting the soft orchestral notes carry us around the room. I almost forgot how natural it is to dance with him. We used to dance together so often, and we always fit together like two puzzle pieces.

Finally, Karl clears his throat as his eyes scan the room. "It seems as though your masquerade idea was a hit," he observes. "Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves."

I smile, feeling a sense of pride at the success of the evening. I glance around at all of the guests and take in their expensive gowns and tuxedos as well as their increasingly over-the-top masks. In the corner, one woman is wearing a mask fitted with bells and feathers, and a couple of other women are fawning over the intricacies of the mask.

"Well, you know me," I say, my tone a little more playful now. "I always have good ideas, don't I?"

He glances down at me, and there's a fond smile on his lips. "That you do," he agrees. "This masquerade will be remembered for a very long time, I'm sure. And it'll be good for the..."

As he speaks, his voice trails off. But I know what he was going to say: that it'll be good for the election. It seems as though he's trying to stay reserved, to not spend the night talking about the election.

"Thank you for doing this for me," I find myself saying. "I know it wasn't easy to set all of this up so quickly, especially with what happened the other day. And..."

Now, my voice is the one that trails off. Karl shoots me a curious expression with half of his face still obscured by his mask. "And what?" he asks.

I shrug, biting my lip. "I never asked how you are since the other day," I murmur. "How it must have been traumatizing for you, too. You've been so focused on me."

Chapter 416

"All I ever wanted was to make you feel like a princess," Karl says as the twirl ends and I come close again, so close that our bodies are pressing up against one another. "Nothing short of that."

As the music swells around us, our movements become more fluid, more intimate. The world seems to fade away, leaving only Karl and me in our own little world. I'm reminded once again of how things were; of the undeniable chemistry between us, the chemistry which I've tried so hard to deny over the past three years.

And at the end of the dance, our faces draw closer, and it's as if the universe is pulling us together. Our lips are mere inches apart, and I can feel the heat of his breath against my skin.

I want to kiss him in front of everyone, and I know he wants to kiss me. Right now, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

But just as our lips are about to meet, I pull away at the last moment. Confusion and disappointment flicker in Karl's eyes, but I can't bring myself to explain. Instead, I offer him a weak smile and slip away into the crowd, disappearing like a phantom.

As I navigate through the sea of masks and gowns, I can't help but feel a sense of turmoil inside of me. My wolf stirs restlessly, questioning my decision.

"Why did you pull away?" she asks, her voice tinged with frustration. "That could have been perfect."

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words. "I'm not sure if I can stay here, in the countryside," I reply. "Getting together with Karl would make things... difficult. Too difficult."

My wolf is silent for a moment, and then she says, "Is that really it? Or are you just frightened of opening yourself up to him again, like you did before?"

Her words make a lump form in my chest. I need to breathe, need to think. The gardens out back call to me, and so I slip through the crowd and push open the double French doors leading to the backyard.

As I step outside, I'm greeted by a gust of cool wind and the serenity of the countryside.

The pristine blanket of snow covers everything in sight, and the distant twinkle of stars in the night sky fills me with a sense of peace. But there's also a hollowness, a longing for the vibrancy of the city life that I've come to enjoy.

I take a seat on a wrought-iron bench, the cold metal biting through the fabric of my gown. I can't help but remember how much I missed the tranquility of the countryside, but at the same time, I miss the bustle of the city now.

It feels as if I'm currently torn between two worlds, and I'm unable to fully embrace either of them.

And to hell with it: maybe I am afraid to open myself up to him. Maybe I'm fucking terrified because I can feel myself falling again, falling back into the way things were before, and maybe it'll just lead to another heartbreak.

Chapter 417

Abby

"Can I sit with you?"

Karl is standing in front of me, his mask in his hand, his hair tousled by the chilly wind. His brown eyes are full of concern, although I think he's trying to hide it just a little bit.

I nod, moving over to let Karl sit beside me on the cold metal bench. The night air nips at my skin, and I let out an involuntary shiver. Karl, without a word, shrugs his jacket off and puts it around my shoulders. I let him.

"So, what are you doing out here?" Karl asks as he sits beside me. "You just ran off, and now you've been sitting out here for upwards of twenty minutes."

"Have I?" I draw the jacket closer around my shoulders to keep myself warm. "I didn't notice."

Karl shoots me a curious look with a hint of worry behind his eyes. "Something's up with you," he says quietly. "Look, if it's about the other night, you're safe now—"

"It's not that," I interrupt, looking away as I bite my lip nervously.

"Then what is it?"

I take a deep breath, letting the cold air fill my lungs before I finally find the words to express what's been churning inside of me. "I'm... conflicted," I confess. "I like being here, in the countryside, with you. But I also like the city, the life I've built there."

Karl's brow furrows with curiosity. "Why are you thinking about this now?" he asks softly. "You should be enjoying the party, not worrying about what-ifs."

I hesitate for a moment, my gaze dropping to my feet before I finally muster the courage to meet his eyes. "Look," I say, "it's just that... My wolf only appears when I'm with you. That can't mean nothing, you know?"

Karl is silent for a long time, staring out at the snowy expanse in front of us. When I glance over at him, I can see how he's leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his jaw tight as he stares off into the distance. He's thinking deeply; I can tell.

Finally, he speaks.

"Look, Abby, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want you to stay here, with me," he murmurs. "I could provide for you; hell, I'd help you open a restaurant here. You'd only work if you wanted to—"

"But that's the thing," I interrupt, a hint of exasperation in my voice. "You want to provide for me. You want to help me open a restaurant here. I don't want to fall back into our old routines, of being your spoiled princess who gets handed everything. I worked hard for what I have now."

I feel a tear welling up in my eye, and I quickly blink it away. I turn my head to look out at the snowy backdrop, unable to meet his gaze.

Karl is silent again for a long time. When he finally speaks, his words are tight, terse. "That's not what I meant," he says quietly. "I just... I love you Abby. I want you back. And I want to take care of you. Is that too much to ask?"

I take a shaky breath, my heart pounding in my chest. "Karl, you... you broke my heart once," I say, the words heavy with my pain. "I'm afraid that if we get back together, you'll just break it again."

Karl's expression tightens, and I can see the pain in his eyes. He reaches out, his fingers brushing against my cheek as he speaks, his voice filled with regret. For a moment, I almost pull away, but I can't.

"Abby, I'm so sorry for what I did," he murmurs gently. "I never meant to hurt you like that. And I'd never do it again. You know what, don't you?"

I sigh and look away, my own voice trembling as I speak. "I know you don't want to hurt me, Karl," I say. "But... already, I'm falling back into old habits with you."

"Old habits?" he asks, pulling away.

"Letting you spoil me, feeling like a princess around you. Not thinking about my work." I swallow hard, the lump in my throat growing. "I'm scared that I might be falling again, and if I do, you'll just break my heart all over again. You're so focused on your Alpha duties, always busy..."

Karl falls silent for a moment once more, his gaze fixed on the snowy landscape as he contemplates my words. "I know my duties as Alpha have to come first," he finally says, his voice heavy with the weight of responsibility. "People are relying on me to lead my pack. And with the election coming up..."

"Look, I get it," I say, shaking my head. "But Karl, the point I'm trying to make is that neither of us is suited to make it work right now. We've got our own lives, our own responsibilities. My restaurant needs me just as much as the pack needs you, and—"

"But Abby, you know I'd go to whatever lengths are necessary to make it work," he suddenly interrupts. "You should know that by now."

Karl's words should soothe me, but they don't. I feel as if I'm being overwhelmed by conflicting emotions, the turmoil inside of me threatening to consume me.

"Karl, I just... I just don't know," I admit, my voice breaking. "Our lives... they seem to be pulling us apart. And I'm afraid that getting back together could just end in heartbreak all over again."

Karl remains silent for a while, his gaze locked onto the falling snowflakes as they drift lazily from the sky. The world around us is hushed and serene, as if nature itself is holding its breath, waiting for our decision.

Then, out of nowhere, Karl's mischievous grin reappears, and he says, "You know what, Abby? Maybe it's time to take a break from all this heavy talk."

I raise an eyebrow, puzzled by his sudden change in tone. "What do you mean?"

Karl's eyes sparkle with a hint of mischief. "How about we sneak off for a little while and run through the woods in our wolf forms? Let off some steam, just like old times. We can save the talking for another time."

Chapter 418

Abby

Karl and I glance over our shoulders one last time at the distant sound of the party before we burst into laughter.

He takes my hand, pulling me along after him. The cold night air nips at our cheeks as we run together, my heavy dress held up in one hand to keep it from slowing me down. The forest looms ahead, its dark silhouette seeming to beckon to me in the waning light.

Once we're hidden within the line of trees, we come to a stop, breathlessly looking at each other for a long few moments. Karl's brown eyes hold a mischievous glint, and his lips curl upwards into a playful smile.

"Ready, Abby?" he asks, his voice breathless and low. "To shift for the first time in..."

I nod eagerly, my heart pounding in my chest. “Yes,” I interrupt. “Yes, I am.”

Without another word, we begin our transformation.

It’s been years since I last shifted, and the anticipation makes the moment feel even more exhilarating. The sensation of fur sprouting from my skin, the elongation of limbs, and the sharpening of senses—it’s all an intoxicating rush.

And then, mere moments later, I’m in my wolf form for the first time in what feels like an eternity..

My senses expand, capturing the darkened forest in vivid detail. The rustling of leaves, the scent of pine, the cold earth beneath my paws—it’s all so vivid and alive. Karl stands in front of me, his red fur looking almost black in the dim light.

I nuzzle up against him, our fur brushing together, and we share a moment of unspoken connection. As wolves, words become unnecessary; our emotions flow through our touch and body language.

And then, with a shared understanding, we bolt forward, racing through the forest.

The thrill of the chase courses through us as we weave between trees, our instincts taking over. We jump over fallen logs and navigate the snowy terrain effortlessly. Every step feels invigorating, a sensation that I didn’t realize I was missing so much.

At one point, I slip behind a tree just before Karl rounds a bend in the path. I can hear him stop, looking around and sniffing the air curiously.

He can’t see me.

Then, with a soft growl, I bolt out from behind the tree and playfully tackle Karl, and we tumble into a soft bed of snow.

We nip at each other's fur and growl with excitement as we roll through the snow like two kids on the run. The world becomes a blur of snow and black sky, but all I can see is Karl wrapped around me.

And in this moment, I feel an undeniable attraction to him. It's as if the sensations from yesterday in the gym all come rushing back tenfold, and I can't help but think about how I'd let him take me right here, right now, in the snow.

But then we pull apart, breathless and out of sorts. Karl darts away, and I scramble after him, excited to see where he's leading us.

I follow Karl for a while longer, the sky gradually darkening overhead. Eventually, we slow our running to a trot, and then a side-by-side walk. The tranquil silence of the woods surrounds us, broken only by the soft crunch of snow beneath our paws. Eventually, we come to a complete stop alongside a frozen creek.

A moment later, we're both back in our human forms. I'm still clutching Karl's jacket around my shoulders, but the air feels strangely warmer here in the woods.

"Remember this place?" Karl asks as he steps a little closer to the creek's edge, looking down at the frozen water.

I nod. "Of course," I say. "This was where we shared our first kiss."

The two of us fall silent for a while, just taking in the sights around us. The snow makes the forest so quiet, but I don't mind. It's a good sort of quiet, one that's filled with the memories of our first kiss here.

"Feeling better?" Karl's voice breaks through the silence, pulling me out of my memories and back to the present.

I let out a sigh, my breath forming a visible cloud in the chilly air. "A little," I admit, my voice soft. "But don't think I'm letting you off easy. We've still got so much to discuss later."

Karl nods in agreement, his hand reaching out to gently cup my cheek. He leans in, pressing a sweet kiss to my forehead. His lips linger, warm and comforting, before he begins to kiss my fingers one by one.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice trembling.

He pulls me closer, wrapping his arm around my waist. “I know you’ve been wanting me lately,” he murmurs, his breath hot against my ear. “And I want you too, Abby. We don’t need to pretend.”

I hesitate for a moment, my heart racing as his words sink in. But the attraction between us, the magnetic pull, is undeniable. I close the gap between us, pressing my lips to his, and the world falls away as our kiss deepens.

After a few moments, our lips pull apart, and we stare breathlessly at one another in the dim light of the forest.

“Karl, I—”

“Quiet,” he growls softly, cupping my face in his hands once again. His brown eyes seem to glint in the light, reflecting the white of the snow. “We don’t need to talk.”

I nod, realizing that he’s right. There’s no reason to talk now, no reason to ache over what might or might not happen.

Chapter 419

Karl

When we’re finished, I stand up in the snow, feeling the exhilaration of our secret rendezvous coursing through my veins.

My chest heaves as I catch my breath, and I reach out to help Abby to her feet. Her eyes meet mine, and we share a contented smile. There’s something about being out here in the wilderness, away from the constraints of the party, that feels liberating.

Or maybe it's just the sensation of her body wrapped around mine that's exhilarating.

I pull her close, my lips finding hers in a lingering kiss. She tastes sweet, her lips warm against mine. It's a sensation that I've learned to not take for granted, because I don't know when I'll feel it again.

Somehow, though, after three years of being apart, making love to Abby still feels so familiar, so comforting. It feels as though hardly any time has passed; and especially now that her wolf has returned, our connection has only grown.

I remember back when we first met, her skills in bed showed nothing but inexperience. So did mine; I had had a couple of girlfriends before her, but none of it ever really meant anything. Abby was a virgin, but she learned quickly. We couldn't keep our hands off of each other—at least, not up until the dreaded panties incident. Thanks to Gianna and her scheming ways, everything was ruined.

But things are looking up for now. And I've got Abby back by my side. Maybe it's not perfect, but it doesn't matter. I'm not stopping until she's mine again.

Finally, I'm the first one to break the silence. "Ready to head back to the party?" I ask, my voice a low murmur. I don't want to leave, but I know that people will be looking for me back at the house.

It is my party, after all. I should be there, no matter how badly I want to stay here in the woods with her, and preferably with no clothes on.

She nods, her gaze dropping to her dress. "Oh, no," she murmurs, running a hand through her hair. "My dress..."

My eyes follow hers. The dark fabric is wet around the hem, where the tuxedo jacket didn't protect it from the snow. I feel a pang of guilt for potentially ruining her dress, and I bend down to help brush the snow away.

"I'm sorry," I mutter as I attempt to clean off her dress using the inside lining of my tuxedo jacket, which is soaking wet now as well. I guess I won't be wearing my jacket for the remainder of the party, but I don't mind. It was worth it.

But Abby just giggles, a sound that warms my heart like nothing else. "It'll dry off soon enough," she says, her smile radiant. "I'll sneak upstairs and use my hairdryer if I need to."

Her words make me laugh. It's moments like these that remind me of what I've been missing all these years, what I want back so badly.

I can't help but think to myself that I have to make her mine; I have to have her by my side always. I'll do whatever it takes to prove to her that I'm serious about us, that I'll never break her heart again.

But how do I show her that?

Chapter 420

Marcus gestures discreetly toward a corner of the room, and I follow his gaze. My eyes narrow as I spot two figures in elaborate masks, standing amidst the partygoers. It takes a moment for me to make out who they are, but then it becomes clear as day.

It's Ethan and Gianna.

I feel a surge of anger and frustration. What are they doing here? I hadn't invited them, and I certainly don't want them at the party.

"I can kick them out," Marcus says, his eyes flitting knowingly between me and Abby. "But you were gone, so I wanted to wait..."

Marcus' offer is tempting, but I hesitate.

I can't deny that this is a potentially explosive situation. Kicking them out could be worse than just letting them stay, no matter how good it would feel to boot them both out into the snow after everything that's happened.

But instead, I take a deep breath and shake my head. "No, Marcus," I say quietly. "Let them stay and enjoy the party."

Marcus looks surprised but nods in understanding. He knows that there's more to this than meets the eye, and he trusts my judgment.

As Marcus walks away, Abby turns to me, shooting me a quizzical expression behind her mask.

"Are you sure about this?" she asks, glancing over at Ethan and Gianna. "After what they've done?"

I sigh, running my hand through my hair. It's not so much what Ethan has done, but rather what Gianna has done; Ethan is just a misguided, and perhaps even a little bit of an idiotic, fly caught in her web.

"It's the easiest route to just let them stay," I say quietly, following her gaze. "And besides, causing a scene and kicking them out would just ruin this party. And this party is for you, after all."

I can see Abby blush a bit beneath her mask. "And for the election," she says cautiously, as though trying to gauge my reaction.

Her words almost make me frown, although I manage to hide my disappointment.

I hate that it's come across this way; that this party is just to make myself look good in the election. Yes, that's part of it, but it's mostly for her. I wanted to remind Abby what she was missing, remind her how important she is to me.

I wanted to remind her that if she comes home to me, where she belongs, then she'll get to live the life she deserves.

But then again, at the same time... I can't help but wonder if she even wants that. It seems as though this restaurant life of hers has her by the throat, and there's no convincing her to leave.

I restrain myself from sighing and decide not to mention it. Not now, at least. Instead, I put my arm around Abby, pulling her close to me as we continue walking. I lean in to whisper in her ear.

“Just stay by my side tonight,” I murmur as I continue guiding her through the crowd of people. “That’s all I ask; don’t leave me.”