



# MAD DOG

VETERANS OF VALHALLA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# RJ GRAY

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# CHAPTER 1



## KAYLA

“*W*hy did I let you talk me into this?” Kayla whispered, her voice tinged with anxiety.

Amber, resplendent in a glamorous red gown, grinned mischievously. “Come on, Kayla! It’ll be fun! Besides, you need to catch up with old friends.”

“Old acquaintances, you mean,” Kayla muttered under her breath as she looked around the ballroom. Was she at her twenty-year high school reunion or a posh multi-million-dollar wedding reception? She tugged at the hem of the black minidress she’d borrowed from her childhood best friend.

Nothing Kayla owned would have been appropriate for the evening and she wasn’t about to drop a grand on a dress for one night. In their—no—in *this* circle, the one she’d run away from, anything less and you might as well be wearing rags. The dress, heels, and accessories Amber had forced her to wear easily cost five thousand dollars.

“Stop messing with it, you look great!” Amber smacked at her hand.

“You are a good three inches shorter than me, making this dress—”

“It’s called a minidress for a reason, and if I had your legs, I’d be wearing it every single Friday night.” Amber handed her a glass of champagne. “Take this and drink. Relax. We’ve known all these people since we were three.”

She wasn't lying. They'd all attended the same private preschool before going on to elementary, middle, and then high school together. Every member of her graduating class was a millionaire's kid. The heavy crystal stemmed glass she held contained the priciest of champagnes.

They grew up in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the Denver metropolitan area. Residents of Cherry River were wealthier than ninety-nine percent of Americans, and they let you know it. She went to a renowned and prestigious public high school zoned for their neighborhood's residents only.

Amber grabbed her arm, eyes shining. "Oh my God, look! There's Coach Anderson. Do you remember how he used to yell at us in gym class?"

Kayla forced a smile, scanning the room. A few familiar faces lit up in recognition, waving and calling out hellos. Kayla hadn't spoken to most of these people in fifteen years. Occasionally, she'd drop a comment on a social media post, but after undergrad, most of her high school friends married wealthy men, and looked down on her when she'd pursued a doctorate in veterinary science.

"Let's hit up the buffet," Kayla suggested, nodding to the appetizer and dessert set up on the side of the room. The invitation boasted, "Cocktails and caviar reception with a variety of hors d'oeuvres." A foodie at heart, Kayla planned on hanging out at the buffet, eating her weight in overpriced appetizers and imported chocolate before heading back to her parents' house. They were vacationing in Europe, so she had the place all to herself and was looking forward to a nice long soak in their hot tub.

"One hour and I'm out of here. Hot tub is calling my name," she told Amber.

"Spoilsport," Amber said, linking an arm through Kayla's as they headed toward the buffet. Kayla picked up one of the small plates and laughed.

"This will hold all of two bites of food." She offered a plate to Amber, who shook her head.



“Eat in this dress?” Amber laughed.

“Take the plate, walk behind me. I’m going to put my food on it, too. There are some empty high-top tables over there we can stand at.” Kayla nodded to the table with a wall behind it. She could hide out there.

“Sure. But we will work the room after you are done eating,” Amber said, holding out a plate for Kayla to place a smoked trout croquette on.

After placing the small plate, laden with as much food as Kayla could fit, on the table, Amber waved down a waiter and grabbed two more drinks for them. Kayla shook her head and waved the waiter back over to them.

“I’m driving tonight, can I please get a Coke?” She handed the waiter a five-dollar bill, and he smiled widely at her.

“I’ll keep them coming for you.”

As the waiter left, a whirlwind of energy approached them. It was Lori Anne Cunningham, the high school head cheerleader, president of the student council, and former homecoming queen. She wore a dazzling smile that seemed a little too bright and her platinum blonde hair looked unnatural on the natural brunette.

“Amber! Kayla!” Lori Anne squealed as she hugged them both, a bit too enthusiastically. “It’s been forever!”

Kayla managed a polite smile, though she felt like a deer in headlights. “Yes, it has.” They’d run with different crowds in high school; Kayla never counted her as a friend.

“Let me catch you up and then maybe you can tell me about your little life,” Lori Anne said.

“I think you meant a little about your life, not your *little* life,” Kayla corrected.

Lori Anne blinked slowly at her before launching into a monologue about her past twenty years. Kayla tried to keep her face emotionless as her former classmate listed her many accomplishments including sorority president, college homecoming queen, and now, she was a successful real estate

agent working for her husband's multi-million dollar real estate development firm.

It was hard to not roll her eyes as the woman painted a picture-perfect life with a veneer of fakeness.

As the conversation progressed, despite her college education and accomplishments, Lori Anne's words often lacked depth and common sense. She giggled excessively and was quick to dismiss any topic that required more than surface-level conversation. Her transformation from high school beauty queen to a modern-day Barbie doll was undeniable.

*We will never become one of those Stepford wives.*

Amber and Kayla made the pinky promise their senior year of high school as they looked out across the swarm of impeccably dressed mothers who'd gathered to gossip while they waited for the younger children to be let out of school. The girls were waiting to pick up their younger siblings.

Her classmates, the next generation of trophy wives, filled the room, and Kayla couldn't help but feel completely out of place. She'd left Cherry River, and outside of a few holiday trips home to see her parents and siblings, stayed away. Glitz and glam weren't her. She built her own life. One she was proud of.

As Lori Anne rambled on, she proudly mentioned her son, a high school football player starting varsity as a freshman.

"I graduated with a degree in fashion in May, got married in June and had Archie Ray on Valentine's Day. You are probably wondering, 'if she has a degree in fashion, what is she doing in real estate?'" Lori Anne didn't wait for either woman to say anything before continuing. "My husband bought me a boutique. I still get to dabble in fashion a couple of times a month when I drop in and decide what we are going to buy. But, when I got married, I fell in love with not only the man, but real estate too. Selling beautiful houses to beautiful people is just, so, fulfilling."

“I’m glad you found your calling,” Kayla choked out. She glanced around the room, hoping for an escape. Looking down at her now empty plate, she was about to excuse herself back to the buffet when Lori Anne spoke again.

“Speaking of my husband.” She waved over the large man who had been lurking in the background.

As the menacing figure, with dark hair, cold, calculating eyes, and a cruel smile approached, Kayla choked on the cracker with caviar she’d just taken a bite out of.

“Are you okay?” Amber asked, handing Kayla her glass of Coke. Kayla took it and drank slowly.

“Swallowed wrong,” she finally choked out.

Zach’s piercing gaze sent shivers down Kayla’s spine. He was the source of her painful past, a past she had hoped to leave behind forever. Why was he here? Oh, yeah. He was Lori Anne’s husband.

Quickly doing the math, Kayla’s stomach dropped. Zach and Lori Anne had a fifteen-year-old son, but she’d broken up with him twelve-years-ago. That could only mean one thing... Zach cheated on Lori Anne with her. Their entire relationship was a lie.

As Lori Anne introduced her to Zach, she forced a polite smile, her grip on her glass tightening. “Nice to meet you,” she said, her voice steady, as she extended her hand.

Zachary’s blue eyes locked onto hers, a sly grin playing on his lips. “Likewise, Kayla,” he purred. His voice was like sandpaper, grating against her nerves. Kayla shuddered, forcing herself to hold his gaze. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing her fear.

The room seemed to fade away as the memories of their past relationship flooded back with the touch of his hand. But Kayla couldn’t let on that she recognized him. She couldn’t let him know the impact he had on her life.

“Zach! It’s been ages! Zach sold my parents their new vacation property. Kayla was my childhood bestie. She’s a

renowned veterinarian in Grand Ridge now. She has a very successful practice,” Amber bragged.

“Grand Ridge? I’m not familiar,” Zach said.

*Fuck.*

Now *he* knew where she lived. As she stared off into space, Amber changed the topic back to her family’s new vacation property.

As they talked, Kayla’s body grew hot with anxiety. Suffocating from the tension between her and Zach, she grabbed her handbag and excused herself to the restroom. She made her way through the crowded ballroom and down the hallway, walked past the bathrooms, and out toward the entrance of the building, choosing fresh air over cold water.

She burst through the doors and into the cool night air, gulping it down in ragged breaths. Her heart hammered against her ribcage as she leaned back against the brick wall, unable to shake the feeling of foreboding hanging over her.

The parking lot was empty, music and laughter from the reunion muffled behind the doors. Crickets chirped in the surrounding bushes, a lone streetlight at the end of the lot buzzing as moths fluttered around its dim glow.

Kayla closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing. A twig snapped in the darkness. Her eyes flew open as a dark figure emerged from the shadows. Zach came to a stop before her, a predatory gleam in his eyes as he gazed down at her.

“Kayla,” he said, his voice low and dangerous. “What a pleasant surprise to see you here tonight.” He stepped closer, his eyes narrowing. “Now you know, I’m married. Lori Anne and I have built a successful real estate empire together.”

Kayla’s throat tightened. “Good for you. Why don’t you go back to your wife?” she replied, attempting to sound disinterested. She flattened herself against the wall, trembling under the intensity of his stare.

“Tsk, ts. I trained you better than that.” Kayla’s breath caught in her throat. She remembered all too well the pain, the

humiliation, the fear. The scars on her back were a constant reminder.

“You remember how to answer me correctly, don’t you, my little pet?”

She flinched at the endearment, stomach churning. She longed to wipe the smirk off his face, to tell Amber and Lori Anne the truth about this monster and all the pain he’d caused. But she couldn’t. She’d spent too long burying the past to drag it into the light now. She forced a tight smile. “It was a long time ago, Zachary.”

“Maybe.” He leaned in close, breath hot against her ear. “But you’ll always be mine. I was married to Lori Anne the entire time we were together, Kayla. She’s not like you. She is a ‘wham, bam, thank you, ma’am’ type of lay. I can’t play with her the way I did you. I miss it, you know. Having a piece of ass, I could do whatever I wanted to. I miss hearing you scream and beg. You were mine then and a part of you will always belong to me.”

Her heart pounded as she struggled to maintain her composure. Zach’s words were like a punch to the gut, reopening old wounds she had fought so hard to close.

“Fuck you, Zach. I will never be yours.”

Zachary’s eyes darkened. “You seem to be under the mistaken impression that you can talk to me however you’d like.” He seized her by the arms, fingers biting into her flesh.

Kayla struggled against his grip, panic rising in her chest. She had spent years putting the pieces of her life back together after Zachary tore it apart. She couldn’t let him destroy her again.

“Let go of me,” she demanded, her gaze sliding past him to search the shadows for any sign of help. But they were alone, and she was at his mercy.

Zachary gave her a rough shake, snapping her attention back to him. “I own you,” he growled. “I always have, and I always will. You’re my slave, my pet. My pain toy.” His eyes moved slowly, inch by inch, from her head to her toes, as if

assessing her like a piece of merchandise. The way he looked at her felt invasive, as if he were stripping away her privacy with each passing moment.

She felt exposed, vulnerable as his eyes lingered on her body. It was as if his gaze was trying to penetrate her. Once again, Zach had her feelings objectified and violated. The intensity of his stare weighed her down.

Her discomfort grew when he licked his lips as if he wanted to devour her. His laugh at her discomfort made her acutely aware of the need to distance herself from this man and his creepy, predatory gaze.

“I always knew you would be a veterinarian but why in Grand Ridge? I’ve never even heard of it. How small is the town?”

She’d blocked him on all social media years ago and never befriended Lori Anne. Why? They weren’t friends in high school, why would she be friends with her in adulthood? Kayla, for the first time ever, found herself wishing she’d been more active on social media. If she’d known they were married, she’d never have agreed to come to the reunion.

“I have nothing to say to you, Zach.” She shook free from his grasp and turned her back on him, dismissing him as she took a step closer to the front door. She needed to get inside where she’d be safe in a crowd of people.

He moved around to stand in front her, his presence oppressive. He moved closer to her, pushing her backwards until she hit the wall. “You never told Amber, did you? About us. About everything we shared?”

Kayla’s throat tightened, panic swelling inside her chest. No. She hadn’t told Amber—hadn’t told anyone... but Jane. Even then, she’d only broadly mentioned having been hurt by an ex-boyfriend.

The things Zach did to her, the way he hurt her...they were her deepest shame. She’d never spoken them out loud.

“There’s nothing to tell.” Her voice sounded strangely distant, as if it belonged to someone else. “We dated for a few

months in college. It didn't work out."

"You can deny it all you want, but you'll never escape me. I live rent free in your mind. I bet you think about everything I did to you and get off."

Kayla could barely see through the haze of panic and pain descending upon her. She had to get out of here before she shattered into a million pieces, the past she'd tried so hard to bury exploding into the light all around her.

*You're mine.*

And she feared it might always be true. He'd chained her to him with the nightmares that invaded her brain as she tried to sleep.

"You should be careful, Kayla. You know how easily I can make things...unpleasant. If you ever breathe a word of our past to Lori Anne or anyone else, I'll make sure you regret it. You remember what I'm capable of, don't you?"

Her voice trembled as she responded, "You don't scare me anymore, Zach." After all these years, she still wasn't sure she could escape him.

"You are a liar, Kayla. I will always terrify you. You tremble with fear in front of me as you remember how skillfully I played your body." He grabbed her arms once again, squeezing roughly.

His cruel words struck a chord of terror in her soul. The scars on her body throbbed as if in echo of the lash and the bite of the leather. She could feel the ghost of his hands on her flesh, hear the snap of the whip and her own broken screams.

Kayla squeezed her eyes shut against the memories, struggling to draw a full breath. She wouldn't break. Not again. Not for him.

"No," she said, gaze flashing open to meet him. She wrenched an arm free of his grip and slammed her fist into his nose while simultaneously lifting her knee into his groin.

Zachary grunted in surprise and pain, releasing her other arm to clasp one his hands over his face as he bent forward in

pain. Blood trickled between his fingers as he stared at her in shock and rage.

Kayla didn't hesitate. She turned and ran into the night, pulse pounding in her ears. She had escaped him once before. She could do it again. She would do it again.

Zachary's enraged shout followed her into the darkness. "You bitch! You'll pay for this!"

Kayla slipped off her heels and kept running. She sprinted across the asphalt, fingers fumbling in her small handbag for her keys. Her hands shook so badly, she could barely open the door.

*Inside. Start the engine. Lock the doors.*

Kayla sagged against the seat, drawing deep breaths to steady her nerves. Zach wouldn't follow her. Not tonight. She was safe, for now.

Shaking herself, she rewrote the narrative. She was a grown adult in charge of her own actions and happiness. She could escape this nightmare, and she would. She pictured Zachary standing alone, bleeding in the shadows and allowed the image to fuel her.

Pulling into the driveway of her parents' house, she changed her mind about staying the weekend. She needed to be home. Her home. Where Zach was not.

Quickly, she grabbed her suitcase from the front closet and sprinted to her childhood bedroom. In no time, she'd changed her clothes and left Amber's dress and jewelry on the bed.

She sent a quick text to Amber, apologizing and Venmoing her enough for dry cleaning and replacement heels. She'd text her the housekeeper's information tomorrow so she could pick up her things. After slipping on a pair of her comfiest tennis shoes, she locked up the house, bound down her parents' steps and into her truck.

As she drove back to Grand Ridge, tears welled in her eyes. The road ahead was blurred by her emotions, but the memories were painfully clear. She had escaped Zach once,



and she couldn't let him back into her life, not even as a memory.

Kayla's thoughts turned to Dr. Jane Wallace, her late mentor and close friend. It was Jane who helped her heal after Zach and then build a new life in Grand Ridge. She'd shown her kindness and support when she needed it most. She clung to the memories of Jane's guidance and strength, determined to protect the life she had fought so hard to create.

Her knuckles ached where she'd struck him, but she felt no regret. She had fought back this time. She was stronger now, thanks to Jane's love and patience.

She'd insisted Kayla take self-defense classes with her. She'd told her it was necessary to know how to protect herself, especially traveling to remote ranches and farms where she might come across unsavory characters.

Jane.

Kayla went to Grand Ridge to spend two years in residency under Jane's tutelage. She'd planned on moving to the east coast after getting her license and starting her own practice in Maine.

But fate had other plans. It wasn't just veterinary medicine Jane taught her. She became a second mother to Kayla, and when she passed from late-stage colon cancer, left Grand Ridge Animal Hospital to her.

Her mentor had saved her once and given her the courage to build a new life. Kayla gripped the steering wheel tighter, blinking back tears. She wouldn't fail Jane's memory by giving into fear and running away. She wasn't the same girl she'd been a decade ago.

The familiar turns of the mountain road soothed her frazzled nerves as she climbed higher into the night. Closer to home.

The scattered lights of Grand Ridge flickered through the trees as Kayla crested the final hill. Her shoulders relaxed, the vice-like grip on the steering wheel easing.

*Almost there.*

As she turned onto Main Street, the familiar shops and restaurants welcomed her like old friends. The Rusty Crab, where she and her friends gathered for beers on Friday nights with a row of motorcycles out front.

Maddock.

She saw him sitting against the window, laughing with his friends.

They'd been on a couple of dates and he'd texted her to check on her before the reunion. Maddock was nothing like Zach, he was respectful and...safe.

As she drove by the quirky antique store Emma loved to browse and her little veterinary clinic, she let out a deep breath.

*Home.*

She was home.

Kayla parked in front of her house, a cozy log cabin with a sprawling front porch. Emma's Jeep was there, her friend no doubt waiting up to hear all about the reunion. She'd texted her from her parents' house letting her know she was coming back early and wouldn't need her to pet sit this weekend after all.

For a moment, Kayla sat in silence, staring at the golden light spilling from the windows. A place of refuge she once thought she'd never find. It was hers and hers alone.

Zachary couldn't touch it. He couldn't touch her. Not here. Not now.

Kayla stepped out of the car and onto the gravel drive, tilting her face up to the starry sky. The familiar scent of pine and earth filled her senses, cleansing away the lingering traces of Zach's cologne.

When she walked through the front door, her golden retrievers would wag their tails in joy. Emma would be there to greet her with a warm hug. There would be no questions, no judgment. Just love and acceptance from her best friend.

*Home.*

Not the childhood house she grew up in, not the room full of fake people and their boasting accomplishments. This simple cabin in a small, cozy town nestled deep in the majestic Rocky Mountains.

Kayla breathed deep again, letting the peace of this place seep into her bones. Grand Ridge had given her a new beginning. A chance to heal. To grow stronger, surer of herself and her own strength. She wouldn't let the run in with Zach ruin her peace.

## CHAPTER 2



## MAD DOG

The thick aroma of fried food hung in the air, mixing with the earthy scent of beer. Classic rock played on the jukebox, the familiar melody as comforting as an old friend. A few regulars bellied up to the bar, their raucous laughter occasionally breaking through the diner, and a couple of tourists played pool in the back room.

Maddock dug into his steak, the meat's juices running down his chin as he tore into the flesh with relish. "Damn, Corky's outdone himself again," he said around a mouthful. He reached for a napkin and wiped his chin.

Across the scarred vinyl booth, Lucky snorted and took a long pull of his beer. "You're a heathen."

"Jealous, brother?" Maddock asked with a sharp grin, not caring as a bit of mashed potato fell onto the table. Here in the dim light and rowdy Friday night atmosphere of The Rusty Crab, he could let his guard down. Be as uncivilized as he wanted. Who knew the best steak in town would be found at a bar and grill owned by one of his best friends? Corky mastered the grill, and everyone in town knew it.

Nick shook his head, eyes crinkling with amusement. "Some things never change."

A surge of warmth filled Maddock's chest, chasing away the ever-present chill as he looked at his brothers. Here in Grand Ridge, he was never alone. The veteran and retired special forces operator community; his neighbors and coworkers on Valhalla, or his motorcycle club brothers were

always there for him. Often, he found himself surrounded by a mixture of both.

His Spartan Watchmen brotherhood was one of the few things that kept him grounded these days, a tether to who he used to be. Who he still was, deep down under the scars and shadows.

When Corky texted him earlier about a fresh delivery of ribeye steaks from a local ranch, it took no time for Maddock to find a couple of people to meet him for dinner. Not that he wouldn't have sat at the bar alone and talked with Corky as he worked the grill but, tonight, he felt like company.

“You eat like you're trying to validate your nickname, like a mad fucking dog. I can see why they called you that-” Nick observed as Maddock wiped his face again. He only liked his steaks rare but would eat them mid-rare when Corky grilled them. Corky's steaks cut like butter and were seasoned to perfection.

“I remember the op in Kandahar where he earned his nickname and it had nothing to do with his eating habits.” Lucky said, gaze distant. “Shit went FUBAR fast. But we pulled through.” A smile tugged at his lips. “Mad Dog here went beast mode on the Taliban. Near got his fool head blown off too.”

Maddock shrugged, chasing a bit of potato around his plate. “All in a day's work.” The details of that day were etched into his memory, as indelible as the scar cutting a diagonal across his left thigh and right side of his stomach.

“You're too modest.” Lucky shook his head again. “If it weren't for you, none of us would have made it out of that desert.”

Heat crept up the back of Maddock's neck at the praise. He didn't deserve it, not when so many others had given everything and more. But he nodded, accepting his words. When he moved to Grand Ridge, he'd hoped to put it all behind him. Of course, as fate would have it, one of the first men he'd run into was his former Delta team leader.

Lucky, in tune with Maddock's discomfort, lightened the mood. "Sometimes I wonder how you can eat as much fat and grease as you do after the shrapnel took your gallbladder."

"The surgeon removed it, the shrapnel just sliced through it first," Maddock muttered. "And right after surgery, I couldn't eat anything good. Now, it's all fair game. Life is too short to eat like a fucking rabbit." He raised his beer in a mock salute before drowning the rest of it.

"Go grab Maddock another beer from the bar," Lucky ordered Nick. "Get one for me, too."

Nick was a new prospect, having recently bought a bike and wanting to join. New prospects were at the beck and call of members, although the Watchmen didn't overdo it like many other motorcycle clubs, and it was Nick. Everyone knew Bull and respected him.

"Nick hasn't been read into the bullshit yet," Lucky said. "What do you think about the newest drama?"

"I think it's a power play. Watchmen aren't One Percenters. We aren't about to merge with them just because they want to move drugs through Grand Ridge, and we sure as hell aren't disbanding. We've made it clear we don't want their type here. Any of our members who jump ship aren't worthy of being Watchmen. We are sheepdogs. Our job is to protect the community, at all costs. If it means protecting Grand Ridge from developing into a large city with a drug issue, so be it."

Lucky nodded, opening his mouth to respond but quickly changed his mind as Nick reappeared, setting down three fresh beers on the table. Maddock exchanged a look with Lucky; they'd talk more about this later.

He took a deep sip from his beer, a local blend from a nearby brewery, and savored the burst of flavor on his tongue. At this moment, drinking a good cold beer and eating the best fucking steak in the west with his brothers by his side, he could almost forget about the drama unfolding in the club, his current woman problem, and the ghosts that haunted his dreams.

Almost.

Maddock set his glass down, gaze straying to the rain-streaked window. Beyond the dim reflections, darkness had fallen over Grand Ridge, shrouding the quiet streets in mystery. So different from the barren, sun-scoured hills of Kandahar.

A wry smile curved his lips. Who would have thought he'd end up here, in this picturesque little town tucked between the mountains and sprawling ranch land? Not him, that was for damn sure.

After his medical retirement from the Army, he'd floated around without purpose, numb and adrift. It was by chance he'd met Hudson at an injured warrior's retreat his Veteran's Affairs case worker signed him up for. Hudson told him about his idea to form a community for retired special forces operators in Colorado. A local community he'd called Valhalla. It sounded too good to be true, and when he offered him a job, Maddock took it.

Once he'd arrived, Hudson introduced him to Mace, Nick, Lance, and Bobby. They'd pulled him back from the brink of darkness, given him a lifeline when he had nothing left to hold on to.

He owed them everything.

Hudson's call with the job offer came the night Maddock sat on his couch, staring blankly into the dark room after downing a bottle of Jack. His loaded handgun had been sitting on the table in front of him. He hadn't picked it up, or moved toward becoming one of the twenty-two a day, but he'd be lying if he denied thinking about it.

He'd moved on to Valhalla a week later before the residential houses were built. Living in the main house with a few of the others felt akin to living in the barracks, or maybe a frat house. They got to know each other really fast. Now, years later, he owned his own house on Valhalla and settled into life running security for both the ranch and the local BDSM club.



“Are you going to go to the back-to-school vaccine and sports physical event Samantha is hosting this weekend over at Community Hope?” Nick asked, referring to Hudson’s fiancée who ran a health clinic for low-income and underinsured patients. “She could probably use our help with security.”

“Was planning on it.” Maddock nodded. The volunteer work gave him purpose, a way to give back to the community. “You think the others would help out?” He posed the question across the table to Lucky. The clinic wasn’t in the best part of town and Samantha was held hostage not once, but twice there. The clinic had minimal paid staff. The nurses, doctors and security were all volunteers.

“Shit yeah.” Lucky didn’t hesitate. “Be happy to lend a hand.”

Maddock nodded his thanks as he took another drink of his beer. Motorcycle clubs often got a bad rep in society. But, after a decade of being a member, he knew it wasn’t indicative of most clubs. The Spartan Watchmen ran off many of the same values they had expected him to abide by in the Army. Loyalty, dedication, discipline, honor, and integrity.

The code of conduct, dedication to community service and even though they might not share blood, the concept of family—bonded through service and sacrifice—was the foundation of the club. They had each other’s backs, no questions asked.

Maddock took it all in, a tension easing from his shoulders. After years of living life on the razor’s edge, always on alert, it was the little things that grounded him now—the camaraderie of his brothers, the worn familiarity of Corky’s place. A contentment unfurled inside him as he finished off his steak, the conversation flowing easily between him, Nick, and Lucky.

They talked of mundane things, like work and rides and weekend plans. Pushing aside his plate, Maddock leaned back in the booth and listened to Lucky and Nick debate the merits of Harleys versus Indians. He chuckled at Nick’s outrage as he defended his Suzuki Storm to Lucky. The familiar argument over which brand was best was an old standby.

“Kayla rescheduled on me yet again today.” Nick’s mention of the woman Maddock had been casually dating caught his attention. “Said she had an emergency with one of Burke’s prize stallions. That’s twice this week alone. I don’t know. I think something else is going on. It’s not like her. Sure, she’s had an emergency or a birth here or there, but not like this. If she is overbooked, I wonder if she shouldn’t hire a second vet.”

Maddock frowned, worrying the edge of his glass. It wasn’t like Kayla to flake out on appointments or not return his calls and texts. They’d only been out on a handful of dates because their schedules were hard to pair up, but they communicated daily. At least they had. He’d had a hard time getting a hold of her for the last month, ever since she’d gone back home for her high school reunion.

His protective instincts prickled to life. It was one thing for her to avoid him. He’d prefer her to be direct and say she wasn’t interested than to blow him off, but he’d dated other women who’d done the same. He wouldn’t have pegged Kayla as one of them; she’d been pretty direct from the start with him. Yet, she’d started giving him the cold shoulder and responding more scarcely to his calls and texts. He’d wondered if she’d reconnected with her high school sweetheart or something. They’d both been incredibly busy this last month, and he’d made one too many excuses for her behavior.

To blow off Nick and the horses? She might be busy, it was her excuse in every text she’d sent him, but in the last several years, she’d never rescheduled more than once. If something was wrong, he wanted—needed—to know.

“Think I’ll swing by the clinic tomorrow, make sure everything’s all right.” Maddock kept his tone light, not wanting to worry Nick when it might be nothing.

He tamped down the urge to call her, to hear her voice and know she was okay. If Kayla was in trouble, he’d be there. He always would.

# CHAPTER 3



## KAYLA

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to spend the night?” Brent Burke asked, and his eyebrows drew tightly together as he studied Kayla. “There’s a blizzard coming, and we have plenty of room up at the house.”

“I’m sure. Weather app says I have plenty of time to get home before the storm hits.”

“I don’t know anything about an app. The sky and the wind disagree with you. See how the cattle are acting? I’d bet the storm will be here within the hour.”

Kayla smiled reassuringly at the older man. The ranchers around here used old wives’ tales, experience, and animal behavior to predict just about everything. They weren’t anything technology related. The app hadn’t let her down yet, so she hedged her bets and reassured Mr. Burke again as she settled behind the wheel of her truck.

“Maybe if I’d driven a car up here, but my truck has snow tires and is outfitted for Colorado weather, even freak early fall snowstorms.”

“It’s not too freaky. We get snow in these elevations in early October frequently. I’d feel a lot better if you stayed.” Burke tried again.

“I’ll call you when I get home to let you know I arrived safely.”

“Would you at least leave the trailer? I can have one of my men bring it down to Grand Ridge sometime soon.”

“It’ll be fine,” Kayla reassured him, confident in her ability to maneuver the mountain. She’d been driving up and down it for a decade through all four seasons.

As she drove down the mountain pass, she had nothing but time to think. She’d driven by Valhalla on her way up the mountain and knew she’d pass it going back home. There was only one way in and out of Grand Ridge from this direction. She wondered if Maddock was working security tonight.

No, he wouldn’t be, unless he covered for someone else. He’d asked her out on a date tonight, but she’d turned him down, even before knowing she’d be needed at the Burke ranch.

Maddock. Ruggedly handsome, with his crooked boyish smile making him look younger than his forty-five years. He’d wined and dined her, but, she knew, he was more comfortable at places like The Rusty Crab with a cold beer and a good bacon cheeseburger. She was too and told him as much after he’d taken her to an art show in town.

*“Now you tell me.”*

*His eyes twinkled with laughter as they stood on the sidewalk outside the art gallery. He’d reached for her hand and engulfed it in his hand that was stained from working on his, or someone else’s, bike. She’d noticed how large, rough, and manly they were and couldn’t help but wonder what hands like that could do to her.*

*“We could have done something more fun.”*

*“You didn’t have fun?” She’d teased him.*

*“The van Gough experience was...an experience,” he muttered. She couldn’t help but laugh at his expression.*

*With a sharp tug, he pulled her close to him. He took control from the start, his tongue probing into her mouth with an intensity that left her gasping for air. She felt his hands on her hips, pulling her closer. She melted into him as he intensified their kiss. It was like nothing she had ever experienced before—a mix of passion and control that left her dizzy with desire...*

The shrilling of her cell phone ringing interrupted her thoughts. Glancing at the truck's screen, she saw it was Maddock calling. Did he have a sixth sense or what? She sighed as she debated answering.

Maddock didn't deserve to be ignored. She knew her behavior since the reunion was abhorrent. But she was having a hard time talking with him. She wanted to lay out all of her pain and confusion in front of him and ask him to help her sort it out, but they weren't at that point in their relationship.

After attending the anniversary party at The Citadel with him, her BDSM desires flooded back to the forefront of her mind. She'd felt safe at the club with his friends, watching them play and enjoying their various power exchange activities. After running into Zach, she'd put those desires in a box and locked them up behind a steel wall.

She knew Maddock was a Dominant, and he wanted not only a girlfriend, but a submissive. Try as she might, she didn't know if she could ever allow herself the freedom to submit again.

Seeing Zach in person caused the terror to bubble up from her gut again, as if what he'd done to her happened yesterday and not years ago. Maddock wasn't Zach, and he'd done an amazing job taking things slow, at her pace, and making her feel safe. If only she hadn't driven to Denver and attended the reunion.

Now?

She knew she couldn't walk into The Citadel with the nightmares returning. She wasn't sure she'd ever be able to face the world she once loved and craved again.

*Man up, answer the phone and tell him you aren't interested. It's not fair to lead him on. He's a good man.*

"Hey, Siri, answer the phone." Before she lost her courage.

"Kayla?" Maddock's deep voice came through. Not an overly emotional woman, it shocked Kayla when she teared up. "Kayla, are you there?"

She swallowed hard, pushing the tears back. “Hey, Maddock. I am. I might lose you in a second. I’m on the pass.”

“You are on the pass?”

“Yes, I’m headed back from Burke’s ranch.” She heard Maddock swear under his breath.

“There’s a storm coming over the mountain. You shouldn’t be driving.”

“You sound like Burke.” Kayla laughed lightly. “Contrary to popular belief, I can handle my truck on the mountain. You wouldn’t have said the same to a man!”

“What? Yes, we would! Gender doesn’t matter; it’s a safety issue. None of the men I know would be foolish enough to tempt the pass with a blizzard heading our way. They’d know better.” The dominant tone in his voice sent shivers down her spine. The scolding was clear.

“I checked the weather before I left. The app told me I had plenty of time to make it back to Grand Ridge.” She explained. She wasn’t a reckless person. If the weather app hadn’t reassured her, she had plenty of time, she would have stayed back.

“How far out are you?”

“Maybe another forty minutes?”

“You won’t make it back before the storm hits. Damn it, Kayla. You can’t turn around; you wouldn’t outrun the storm if you tried. Please drive safely. Stop if you have to. Hang up and have Siri send me your location. Focus on the road and call me if you need me to come get you.”

“I don’t think any of that is necessary,” she told him. She’d been keeping him at arm’s length for a reason and if he rescued her...it would be harder to turn him down. “Listen, Maddock. I wanted to talk to you—”

“Kayla, sorry for interrupting you, but whatever you are about to say, you can tell me in person when you’ve safely arrived in Grand Ridge. Send me your location and do it now.”

His tone broke for no argument, and she heard the click of the phone, letting her know he'd hung up.

“Siri, send my location to Maddock.” She called out into the empty truck, knowing how unsafe it would be to actually pick up her phone.

Only about ten minutes passed between sending her location and the first bit of snow falling. Before long, it was coming down hard on her windshield. As the blizzard descended upon the winding mountain road, Kayla gripped the steering wheel of her truck, her knuckles white with tension.

The visibility was dwindling fast, the snowflakes dancing in front of her headlights like frenzied spirits. Burke and Maddock's words rang in her ears. She chided herself for only checking the weather app and not pulling up the actual weather channel.

It had been a long and exhausting day, helping Burke with a difficult horse birth. The foal was breached, but Kayla prevailed. The beautiful suckling was snuggled up under his mother when she left.

As the snow intensified, so did her unease. Her house was miles away, and the weather was taking a treacherous turn. The road had become slippery. She reduced her speed to a crawling pace, shuddering when the wind whipped at the trailer. She knew Valhalla was closer than her house, if she could just make it there, she had no doubt they'd let her stay the night.

In fact, she'd slept there before in a bedroom above the stables while monitoring a sick horse, and Nick told her she could stay there anytime.

A faint, nagging thought tugged at her mind. She had been avoiding Valhalla, hesitant to face Maddock. She could ignore his calls, had no problem shooting bullshit texts his way, but seeing him face to face? She couldn't lie to him. Would he take one look at her and know something was wrong? But now, with the storm threatening to engulf her, she had no choice.



The wind rocked Kayla's truck harder as she continued to white-knuckle the steering wheel, barely able to see three feet in front of her. Snow and ice pelted the windshield, the wipers struggled to keep up.

She huffed out a breath, her chest tightening with panic. Icy roads, near zero visibility—she could turn back and not risk seeing Maddock. But going forward was shorter. Maddock was right, she wouldn't be able to outrun the storm even if she turned around... and turning around on these narrow icy roads?

Kayla chewed her lip, torn. The rear tires slid, and her heart leaped into her throat. "Whoa, easy girl." She gentled the accelerator, regaining control.

There was no choice. She couldn't risk an accident, and her pride wasn't worth dying over.

"Siri, call Maddock." She waited for the ringing to come through her speakers, replacing the music she'd been listening to. The phone rang, and anticipation clawed at her chest.

"Kayla," Maddock's voice came through the line, laced with genuine concern.

"Maddock," she replied, relief flooding her voice. "This blizzard is getting worse. I need a safe place to stay for the night, and Valhalla is closer than my house. I'm going to head there if it's okay."

Maddock didn't hesitate. "Absolutely, come to Valhalla. I'll call ahead to Luke and let him know to expect you at the gate. Do you need me and Nick to grab the ATV and come get you? Can your truck make it?"

Before she could answer him, it happened. The world outside her windshield became a chaotic swirl of white. The tires hit a patch of black ice, and control slipped from her grasp. The truck skidded, spinning out of control as terror surged through her.

The truck careened off the side; the trailer jackknifing behind it, blocking the road. The world turned upside down as the truck flipped, metal and glass shattering around her. The

world tilted and spun, a kaleidoscope of white snow and dusky pine trees.

Kayla screamed as she was whipped from side to side like a rag doll. Her head slammed against the driver's side window, shards of glass slicing into her skin. She fought to maintain consciousness, her heart pounding in her ears like a frantic drum.

Through the chaos, her phone slid from its holder on the dashboard, its screen illuminated with Maddock's name. "Maddock!" She screamed, but in that moment, the only sound she heard was the deafening crash of metal against the unforgiving ground.

When the truck finally shuddered to a stop, she lay dazed and shaking, upside down amidst the wreckage. Blood trickled down her temple and into her eyes. She reached for the ceiling with her left hand, bracing herself. Stabilizing her feet on the floor, she reached for the seat belt buckle to release herself. Finally, she found it and pushed the button. Rubbing the dripping blood from her eyes, she eyeballed the windows.

She blinked heavily, trying to focus, the world was spinning around her. Black spots filled her field of vision. Turning the key in the ignition, she cut it off.

Think, Kayla.

Frantically, she looked around the truck for her phone. It was nowhere to be seen. She couldn't call for help. If she stayed in the vehicle and another car came around the bend, in these white out conditions, she could be hurt or even killed. But, if she got out, there was nowhere to go, and she could get lost and freeze to death in the snow. Temperatures inside the truck were dropping quickly.

She took a deep breath. Maddock had to have heard her crashing, and she knew, in her very bones, he was on his way to her. Groaning at the pain in her ribcage, she reached forward and flipped on her emergency lights and prayed for Maddock to get there soon.

# CHAPTER 4



## MADDOCK

In the deafening aftermath of the crash, Kayla screamed out his name before his phone went eerily silent. Maddock couldn't shake the chill permeating his body at the panicked sound of her voice.

His heart raced as fear coursed through him like a jolt of electricity. He turned to Nick, his voice steady despite the fear. "Kayla's in trouble. We need to find her." He pulled up the Find My Friends app and pinpointed her exact location. She wasn't far from Valhalla, only a couple of miles away.

Without hesitation, Maddock and Nick sprang into action.

They navigated through the snowstorm, their headlights cutting through the blinding white until they reached the security building on Valhalla. Inside the attached garage were several vehicles. Bypassing the ATV's, Maddock headed straight for the pair of passenger utility vehicles.

The full sized UTVs were Valhalla's most recent purchases. They cost as much as a car, but in the Colorado terrain, they were valuable assets. With four-wheel drive, all terrain tires, heavy duty frames and four-thousand-pound towing capabilities, it was the vehicle of choice for this rescue mission.

Maddock opened the door of the UTV and slid into the driver's seat. Nick quickly got in beside him. Maddock gripped the steering wheel tightly as the vehicle roared to life.

The blowing snow and slick roads were treacherous, and Maddock said a quick prayer as they approached her last

known pinged location on the app. He'd instructed Nick to call her phone but there'd been no answer. Maddock tried not to jump to conclusions, rationalizing all the reasons she might not answer. The most plausible was that the phone wasn't reachable or was damaged badly in the accident.

It didn't take long before they came upon the overturned truck and horse trailer. The sight of the wreckage leaning against the side of the mountain sent a chill down Maddock's spine. *Where was Kayla?*

Bringing the UTV to a stop, he and Nick quickly exited the warmth of the vehicle and rushed toward the scene of the accident. The freezing wind whipped at their faces as they pressed forward, the elements raging around them.

"Kayla! Kayla!" Maddock screamed her name into the wind, saying a prayer he'd hear her sweet voice answer him. He heard a banging sound coming from the truck and followed the noise around to the back window of the truck. Relief flooded through him when he spotted Kayla curled up in a ball.

Her teeth were chattering from the cold, she appeared dazed, and blood streaked down her face. But she was conscious. He'd take any good news he could get. "Are you all right?" he asked, his voice filled with worry.

She nodded, then winced in pain. Her hand flew up to her head, as if to stabilize it. Her voice shook when she answered. "I think so, just some bumps and bruises."

"There's blood on your face," Maddock observed. He kept his tone steady, not wanting to worry her.

"Small laceration from hitting my head on the window. Face and head wounds bleed a lot," she explained.

Maddock pulled at the door handle and swore under his breath when he couldn't get it to budge. "Nick, the door is jammed. Frame is bent." Maddock yelled over his shoulder as his friend approached. "We need to get her out another way."

"Window?" Nick asked as he walked around the truck, analyzing their options.

Maddock nodded. They both carried glass breakers on their keychains. “Kayla, I need you to face away from the window. Can you move over to the other side as far as you can?”

“Yes.” He waited for her to scoot over. Nick popped the button on the tool against the window and, with a loud pop the glass shattered. Maddock removed his coat, laid it over the frame of the window, and reached out for Kayla. Nick bent down and braced her other side, and together they carefully pulled her through the bent frame of the truck.

Maddock helped her to her feet, pulling her in for a tight embrace before pushing her out in front of him at arm’s length and looking her over. Satisfied there weren’t any broken bones, he moved quickly, swinging her up into his arms. He carried her to the UTV, concern etched in every line of his face. “I don’t like moving an accident victim in case of head or back trauma, but I didn’t see anything to indicate those issues. Let me know if you are feeling any pain anywhere.”

“I’m okay,” she reassured him. “I’m a doctor, remember?”

He peered down into her face intently. “We’re getting you out of here. Peter can check you over at my house.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll feel better after Peter looks you over.” Maddock wouldn’t budge, she’d be seen by a doctor as soon as possible. He sat her gently down in the backseat of the UTV. Nick handed him his coat and, after shaking it out violently, making sure there wasn’t any glass caught in it, he draped the heavy leather over her.

As they rode back to Valhalla, a feeling of protectiveness settled over him like a heavy blanket. He wanted to provide Kayla with a sense of safety and comfort...but wondered if she’d allow him that privilege. Things had been awkward between them since she’d attended her high school reunion. Could there be another man? A long-lost love from her past? She’d mentioned wanting to talk to him about something earlier when he’d called. He shook his head.

No.

She was his.

She'd been his since she'd saved Gretel and he'd damned well prove it to her. It was him, not another man out in the middle of a blizzard rescuing her from an overturned pickup truck.

"Dax notified the highway patrol," Nick said from the seat next to him. "They'll get someone out as soon as it is safe to tow the vehicle."

Maddock nodded, keeping a laser focus on what he could see of the road in front of him. They weren't far from Valhalla, but with the rate at which the snow was falling and how quickly the temperatures dropped, he knew they needed to get back, and fast. He wouldn't risk any of their lives by going faster than conditions allowed. The short distance between the east gate and the mountain pass took triple the time it would during normal weather.

Finally, they approached the remote gate. Pulling to a stop, he jumped out of the driver's side and rushed to the fence. He quickly typed in his personal security code and the gate pulled open.

Quickly, he ran back to the UTV and slid behind the driver's side again. Nick wouldn't have a code to get into the side gates. There were only three people who did. It wasn't because they didn't trust Nick, or any of the others, for that matter.

There wasn't a need for anyone other than security to have the codes to the utility gates. The gates all faced small back roads or wooded areas that weren't used for travel. If they needed them opened, they could call him, Jay, or Hudson and one of them would open it remotely from an app on their phones.

Returning to the vehicle, Maddock turned and smiled reassuringly at Kayla. "We're almost there."

Once inside the temperature-controlled garage of the security building, Maddock parked the UTV and hurried to

help Kayla out of the back. Her body trembled in his arms. He kept her cuddled tightly against his chest instead of putting her down. She fit perfectly in his arms.

“I can walk,” she said softly.

“I want to carry you.” His response was short and to the point.

He didn’t have to say a word to Nick. Their friendship was one that surpassed conversation. Nick knew Maddock was grateful for the help. He’d catch up with him later and let him know as much. For now, his thoughts were only on Kayla.

He carefully maneuvered through the shed over to his truck and placed Kayla in the passenger seat. He secured her seatbelt before getting in the driver’s seat. His house was only a few blocks away, but he drove at a crawling speed, the quick falling snow hindered the visibility, and the road was slick.

In less than five minutes, he pulled into his driveway and parked beside Doc’s truck. Maddock knew one of his best friends, head ER Doctor Peter Hanover, was waiting in his living room, exactly as he’d requested him to do.

Maddock released a long breath, thankful for making it home safely before exiting the truck and walking around to the passenger side of the truck and swung open the door. Kayla yawned. She’d fallen asleep in the short time it took him to drive from the security office to his home. Lifting her in his arms, he shut the truck door with his shoulder. She nestled her head on his chest, and he wondered if she was aware of what she was doing. Holding her tightly, he carefully carried her up the icy sidewalk and into the house.

Peter’s eyes widened slightly in an expression of concern when he saw the bloodied Kayla, wrapped tightly in Maddock’s protective embrace. He grabbed his doctor’s bag from beside the couch.

“Kayla!” Peter’s voice filled with both professional concern and genuine worry for his friend. He rushed forward to greet them. “Maddock, what happened? Your text wasn’t exactly informative.”



*Kayla's hurt. Meet at my house.*

Yeah, Maddock supposed, his text hadn't been exactly wordy. "Truck accident. It rolled over with her in it. She wasn't ejected."

He wanted to take her to his room where he could keep a close eye on her, but he decided instead on the guest bedroom, her comfort coming first. He nodded to Peter, who quickly followed behind him.

"We should probably take her to St. Mary's and get x-rays," Peter said.

"No—" Kayla said, lifting her head from Maddock's chest. "The roads—"

Maddock interrupted. "The white out conditions make the drive too dangerous. Unless absolutely necessary, the hospital should wait. The benefit needs to outweigh the risk."

Maddock gently lowered Kayla onto the bed and stepped back to allow Peter the room he needed to check her over.

Peter nodded, his gaze shifting back to Kayla. He crouched down beside the bed, his eyes assessing her condition. "We will stay here for now, Kayla. Let's take a look, okay?"

Kayla nodded, her eyes reflecting a mix of relief and apprehension. "Thank you, Peter."

With practiced care, Peter began his examination. He gently checked her vitals, his fingers brushing her skin with a reassuring touch. His stethoscope came out, and he listened carefully to her heart and lungs, a furrow of concentration on his brow. He pushed on her abdomen, asking her if anything hurt.

"Your heart rate is good and strong. Your blood pressure and lack of tenderness in your abdomen allows me to feel better about not rushing you to the ER."

As he worked, he spoke softly to both Kayla and Maddock, providing reassurance and explanation. "Okay, Kayla, I need to check for any signs of head trauma. I noticed a laceration on your head. We'll clean that up and make sure it

doesn't need stitches." His gaze met Maddock's briefly, conveying the seriousness of the situation.

Maddock nodded in understanding. "Do what you need to do."

"Instead of stitches, I'm going to use Dermabond to glue this wound together," Peter told them. It only took about a minute for him to apply the glue to the wound. It was transparent, the jagged edges of the deep laceration still visible.

After gluing the head wound, Peter continued his examination, asking Kayla questions about her symptoms and any pain she might be experiencing. He checked her pupils and coordination, all the while maintaining a soothing demeanor.

After a thorough assessment, Peter stood back and offered his diagnosis. "Kayla, it looks like you might have a minor concussion. It's important to take it easy for the next few days. Avoid bright lights and loud noises. Rest is crucial. Maddock, keep an eye on her. If she experiences severe headaches, nausea, or any worsening symptoms, don't hesitate to call me. Once the storm passes and the roads are clear, I'd like to make sure she doesn't have any injuries that we are missing. I don't suspect any organ damage, internal bleeding, or fractures, or I'd insist you take her to St. Mary's. But I'd like to get some blood work. Likely the bruises and scrapes are going to hurt more tomorrow than today. I can write a prescription for pain medication, but you won't be able to go out in these conditions to get it."

"I'll be okay," Kayla said weakly. "I have a high pain tolerance."

"I have an abundance of ranger candy," Maddock said, referring to the bottles containing eight hundred milligram ibuprofen capsules he had in his medicine cabinet.

Kayla smiled gently as Peter reached down to hug her. "Thank you. I'm sure I'll be fine."

“You’re welcome, Kayla. Maddock, make sure she follows those instructions.”

“You don’t have to worry about it. She’ll follow them. She’s stuck with me until the roads clear. Thank you for being here. Are you going to make it home, okay?”

“The one block I have to drive to my house?” Peter laughed. “I’ll text you when I get there.”

“Thanks again, brother. I’m going to try and keep her awake. She was nodding off in the truck.” Maddock walked Peter to the door.

“It’s okay to let her sleep. I know growing up they warned us against sleeping with a concussion, but medicine has proven otherwise. Resting is going to be the best medicine she can take right now.”

“Roger.” Maddock nodded goodbye as he shut the door behind Peter and turned to head back to Kayla.

He didn’t know what it was Kayla wanted to talk to him about, but it didn’t matter. He’d prove to her that she was in good hands, and he was determined to do everything in his power to ensure her recovery and safety.

He went into the kitchen and grabbed a large bowl and a bottle of water and took them into his bathroom. Squirting a small amount of body wash into it, he filled the bowl with warm water. As it filled, he collected one of his large t-shirts, a washcloth, the ibuprofen, and the bottle of water.

After returning to the guest bedroom, he sat the bowl on the bedside table and wet the washcloth. When he reached for her, Kayla pulled back in fear.

“Kayla?” He knelt beside the bed. “It’s me, Maddock. I’d never hurt you.”

“Sorry.” She shook her head and then grimaced in pain. “I don’t know what got into me. I know you’d never hurt me.”

Confused by her reaction, but excusing it as posttraumatic stress from the accident, Maddock tried again. As tenderly as he could, he wiped the blood off of her face, arms, and neck.

“I brought you one of my soft cotton T-shirts. Are you okay with changing, or can I help you?”

“I can do it—” She scooted to the edge of the bed. When she swayed, he shook his head at her.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I’m going to help you out. You can’t wear these wet, bloody clothes to bed.” Maddock stepped in. “I promise to be a gentleman. Raise your arms for me.”

Her large brown eyes peered into his, and Maddock was taken aback by the hint of fear lingering in them. When had he ever done anything to cause her to be afraid of him? He’d never seen her look at him like that before, and it gutted him to the core.

“Kayla, are you scared of me?”

“What? *No.*”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I’m sorry, this headache—” She raised her arms in the air for him and he quickly removed her bloodied shirt and replaced it with his old well-loved Army Ranger tee. After he’d changed her, never once moving his eyes from her face, trying to reassure her that her privacy and boundaries were a priority to him, he picked up her dirty clothes.

“I’m going to put these in the utility sink to soak. The quicker we get them in, the less likely they will stain. Then I’ll be right back.” He handed her the water bottle from the table. “Peter said it was safe to give you these,” he shook out one of the ibuprofens and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said meekly.

He opened the home app on his phone and dimmed the lights. He reached forward and brushed a lock of hair from her face. “You’re safe now, Kayla.”

He busied himself in the laundry room, running hot water into his utility sink and soaking her clothes. As the blood floated into the water, he swore. If she’d been his, she’d never have taken the risk of driving in the storm. The consequences for her actions would have been too severe.

*She's here. She's safe.*

The anxiety he'd been feeling since their first phone call drained from his body. She was here, in his guest room and safe. He repeated it to himself, making it real.

He returned to the bedroom, intending to ask her if she was hungry. When he saw her asleep, Peter's words rang in his ears, rest was the best medicine. Pulling the blanket up and around her, he tucked her in and turned off the lights.

Laying in his own bed a few hours later, he was startled awake by Kayla's screams. Running to the guest room, he threw the door open. She lay in the bed, her head tossing from side to side.

"Let me out! Let me out of here! Someone, please, help me!"

Was she dreaming of the accident? Of being trapped in the truck? Maddock rushed to her side and gently shook her.

Kayla awoke in a cold sweat, her eyes wide with terror. Without hesitation, Maddock slipped into the bed beside her, his arms enveloping her in a protective embrace.

"It's all right," he whispered. "I'm here. It was just a nightmare."

"Maddock?" Her voice was husky from sleep. He reached up and cupped her face, being careful to stroke the uninjured side.

"Yes, baby. It's me. You were in an accident earlier, do you remember?"

"An accident?"

"You were trapped in the truck. I think you were dreaming about it."

"Oh, the accident." She blinked furiously, appearing to push the sleep from her eyes.

"My dogs—"

"They are fine. Dax called the emergency vet line and Amber answered. She has them."

Kayla visibly relaxed. “Thank you.”

“Of course. I know how much you love your dogs. I get it, I’m pretty fond of mine, too.”

As if Gretel was listening nearby, she came moseying in and jumped on the bed. “I can tell her to get off if she is bothering you,” Maddock said.

“Never.” Kayla patted her thigh and Gretel scooted closer, the large German Shepherd resting her head on the woman’s upper thigh.

“She’s such a good girl.” Kayla sighed as she petted her.

“How is your pain? Do you need another more ibuprofen? It’s been more than four hours,” Maddock picked up the water bottle from the bedside table and handed it to her.

Kayla took a long drink. “Do you have any Tylenol? I’ll alternative between the two. It’s better for your liver.”

Maddock nodded before leaving the room. He returned with the bottle, deftly opened it, and knocked a pill into his palm before handing it to her. After swallowing, she settled back onto the pillows.

“Look, Maddock, I am so sorry to be such a bother. I know you didn’t plan on rescuing me or letting me stay here. I’ll be out of your hair as soon as the roads clear.”

“You are not a hassle. I’m glad I can finally repay the favor. You saved Gretel’s life and came when I needed you.”

“I guess we are even then.”

Even. Nah, he didn’t want them to be even. He wanted her to know he’d come running whenever and however she needed.

“I’ll be here for you no matter what you need. I’m not keeping score. You need me, all you have to do is call.”

Her wince bothered him. “Look, Kayla. Earlier, you pulled away when I tried to wash your face and you’ve been looking at me in fear. You said you weren’t scared of me but if I’ve done something—”

“No,” she interrupted. “You’ve not done anything.”

“Then, sweetheart, I’m going to need you to talk to me. Because something isn’t right. Our last date ended amazing, or did I misread it? Because the way you wrapped your arms around my neck and returned my kiss wasn’t a sign that you were disinterested in pursuing this.”

“No, the date was great. I was thinking about it as I was driving earlier, actually.”

Then why did her voice sound so sad? The bags under her eyes were much too dark to have been caused by the accident. She was hiding something from him.

“I don’t expect much from my friends, but honesty is something I won’t budge on. When someone breaks my trust, it’s hard to get it back. Please don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying,” she sighed. “It’s just... I was going to talk to you about this...but I haven’t had a chance...”

Maddock pulled her back into his arms, until the back of her head rested against his chest. “Take a deep breath. It’s going to be okay. Did you reunite with a high school boyfriend at the reunion? I’m not going to be upset if you ended up having a one-night stand or anything. We never talked about being exclusive or even defined our relationship.”

“What? No. I didn’t date much in high school.”

Maddock scrubbed his hand over his face. Keeping his voice even, despite his growing frustration, he rubbed her shoulders. “Then what is it? What’s going on? Did I do something?”

“No. I—” She sighed, and her shoulders tightened under his hand.

“If you can’t talk about it now, I can wait.” He continued to rub her shoulders. “I’m not going anywhere and until this storm passes, you aren’t either. Right now, you need to rest.” He slid out from under her, making sure to put a pillow under her head. She obviously didn’t want to talk about whatever it was bothering her, and he wasn’t going to stress her out while she was injured.

“Do you want me to take Gretel?”

“No!” Her quick response made his eyebrows raise. What was going on with her? “I like the company,” she added.

Maddock nodded and as he left the room pulled the door shut. Thinking better of it, in case she had another nightmare, he opened it just a crack. He would come running if she needed him again.



# CHAPTER 5



## KAYLA

Gretel lifted her head when Maddock rose from the bed and dropped it back down when he left the room. The dog somehow sensed Kayla needed her more than her owner did. Kayla patted Gretel's head, as silent tears fell down her face and into the dog's fur.

Gretel's comforting presence did little to ease the turmoil that churned within Kayla's mind. As Maddock's footsteps faded down the hallway, Kayla remained curled up in the bed, trembling beneath the blankets. Although the snow fell outside the large window, the house was warm and the soft heavy blanket covering her produced plenty of heat. She shook from the night terrors and knew from experience it would be a while before her body calmed down.

Her heart raced as the ghostly grip of anxiety clutched her. Maddock assumed she'd dreamt of the truck accident, but he couldn't be further from the truth. It wasn't the crash that had her in its merciless grasp—it was the vivid memories of what Zach had done to her.

The dreams returned soon after the high school reunion and wouldn't leave her in peace.

She'd tried to leave him. The leaving was the worst part. She'd taken away his control, and in doing so, he became an obsessive stalker.

In the darkness of her thoughts, she revisited the nightmare of the past. He'd kidnapped her, and upon her escape, she'd run away...away from town, away from him. He'd convinced

her that no one would believe her if she called the authorities, promising to kill her if she ever dared to defy him. She never reported him. She'd been young and naive, terrified of what she'd endured.

Now, as a grown adult, she'd make different choices. If a man kept her captive in a steel dog kennel, she wouldn't hesitate to have him arrested. The mere recollection of what she'd experienced at his hands sent shivers down her spine, and her breath caught in her throat.

Desperate to escape the torment of her own mind, Kayla tried to go back to sleep. She tossed and turned, but her brain wouldn't shut down. The fear gnawed at her, refusing to release its grip. When she tried to release the weight of the past and forced herself to think of other things, the accident busied her mind with the list of tasks she now had to do. Call the insurance company, find out where the truck was towed to, assess the damages to the trailer, replace the trailer if necessary. Her brain was doing everything but shutting down and sleeping. Maybe, she pondered, it was a defense mechanism. Staying awake and thinking the millions of thoughts flowing through her mind seemed to be a better alternative than falling back asleep to where Zach controlled her dreams.

On top of her mind disobeying the order to sleep, her body wouldn't listen either. It screamed out in pain with every move she made. Peter wasn't lying when he'd told her she'd be sorer later.

After rolling over to her side, and a sharp pain shot up through her ribcage, she surrendered. The smell of coffee wafting through the air caught her attention. Maddock was up. She could continue to fret alone in a dark room, or she could seek him out and talk with him.

She'd be dreading the conversation. He'd taken her as his plus one to the local BDSM club's anniversary party a few months back. The Citadel, owned by Maddock's good friend Jay, was transformed into the perfect venue for a party. At the time, she'd really enjoyed herself. Surrounded by friends and

community members she trusted; she'd been surprised when her anxiety dissipated.

The way Maddock calmly explained the different scenes playing out around them and focused on safety impressed her. She knew he was a BDSM Dominant and attended the mid-week education seminars, sometimes instructing them. He moonlighted as security for private events at The Citadel as well as taking his turn as a Dungeon Master.

He'd been open and honest about his history, but she hadn't been about hers. At one point, the BDSM lifestyle had intrigued her. She'd enjoyed experimenting with a variety of different kink activities and attending munches with other kink-minded adults.

Until she met Zach.

He was her first, and only, Master. He'd groomed her, molding her into his slave, all the while she balked at the idea. She'd been in love with him, or at least, convinced she was in love with him, and wanted to please him. Slowly, he took away her ability to consent, and used their relationship as an excuse to abuse her.

She could never give a man that much control over her again. Ever. A few months ago, she'd contemplated slowly returning to the scene, as an observer. Maybe, eventually, she'd feel safe enough to play again. But only on her terms.

Then, she ran into Zach. It was as if she'd taken a time machine back to when she was nineteen. The emotional scars ran deeper than the faded physical ones. The terror of those three days, locked in a small dog kennel in his dad's remote hunting cabin, came flooding back to her.

Maddock had never given her an ultimatum. He'd never told her she'd have to consent to being his submissive or slave. And she doubted he ever would. But could a man like him, a naturally dominant special forces operator, be happy with a woman who wouldn't, or couldn't give him what he needed?

She wasn't the type of woman who could share, either. If they were together, she'd expect full loyalty. Intimate scenes at

a BDSM club, even if they were fully dressed, with anyone other than her, was off limits. She couldn't stand to see him flogging or tying up another woman. Doing a demo on stage for education was one thing, engaging in a scene for pleasure? Another altogether.

No, she couldn't ask him to give up something as important to his life as BDSM. It would be akin to asking him to leave his motorcycle club. And she didn't want to. She wouldn't ask him to change for her or give up something he loved. It wasn't fair to either of them. Someday, he'd come to resent her for it.

It was then that she made a decision, one that was long overdue. She slipped out of the bed, leaving the warmth of the covers behind. She needed to find Maddock, tell him about her past, and let him know, once and for all, they could only be friends.

Her heart broke, thinking of the words. She wanted more from him. The physical chemistry was undeniable, but it wasn't the sexual attraction drawing her to him. He was a safety blanket wrapped up in a six foot four, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound frame. Physically, he'd protected her, but it was the emotional safety she felt with him...the ability to be vulnerable without judgment she'd come to appreciate the most about their developing relationship. She could tell him anything and he would listen intently and validate her feelings.

What she had to do next gutted her. Walking away from the only man she'd ever felt safe with, wasn't an easy decision. Hopefully, she told herself, he'd be okay with remaining friends.

The smooth hardwood floor was cool beneath her bare feet as she padded silently through the darkened hallway toward the smell of the coffee. The only thing she wore was Maddock's oversized t-shirt, a tangible reminder of the protective care he'd given her.

Kayla spotted Maddock across the open living room, standing in the softly lit kitchen, staring out the window while the coffee dripped into the pot in front of him. She paused,

suddenly unsure of herself. Maddock stood topless. He was a work of sculpted art. The only imperfection was a jagged scar cutting across his six-pack abdomen. His skin was bronze, even in the winter, a testament of his outdoor adventures.

The sight of him, strong and steady, grounded her in a way nothing else could. And she wished it didn't. This conversation would be easier if he didn't evoke these emotions in her. She gathered her courage and approached him, her heart pounding in her chest.

Taking a deep breath, her voice barely above a whisper. "Maddock?"

He turned, his gaze locking onto her, his eyes filled with concern. "Kayla, are you okay? Did I wake you?"

"No, I couldn't sleep. I— Can I talk to you about something?"

"Anything. Do you want some coffee? It's about done."

"Sure, that sounds great."

"I know most people have those individual pod makers but I'm a purist. I like mine the old-fashioned way. I drink enough of it to brew a pot."

Were they really standing in Maddock's kitchen talking about coffee? Kayla's heart beat loudly in her ears as she anticipated his reaction to what she needed to say.

"Are you okay? You look like you are in pain. Do I need to call Peter?" His voice dripped with concern for her.

"No. It's not... It's not physical." Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked at him. Maddock had become her beacon of hope in returning to a life she once loved, now, after the reunion, she knew it was impossible. She could never go back.

With trembling lips, she spoke the words she'd been dreading. "There's something I need to tell you, and I hope you won't hate me for leading you on or wasting your time. I hope... we can remain friends after."

Maddock reached out, his hand finding hers, and he led her to a chair at the kitchen table. As she sat down, Kayla knew

that it was time to be honest with him.

“Are you married?” he asked, setting down coffee creamer and sugar in front of her.

“Married? No. I’ve never been married.”

Maddock visibly relaxed, poured two steaming cups of hot coffee and returned to the table. He sat across from her and took a long drink from the hot liquid.

Kayla spent a little too long adding creamer and sugar to her mug before taking a couple of sips. The warmth of the coffee sliding down her throat felt good. Like the embrace of an old friend.

“Then I am sure whatever you are going to tell me isn’t going to devastate me enough to prevent us from being friends.”

She wasn’t so sure. “You were honest with me from the beginning. You told me about the motorcycle club and your interest in BDSM. I guess, maybe you saw something about me that made you think I would be interested in it, too?”

Maddock smiled at her. “Yeah. I guess I did.” He rubbed his chin with his fingers for a second. “Sometimes, I think we just know. We recognize the signs in people. You are a strong, independent, and intelligent business owner and veterinarian. But, I think, underneath it all, lies a submissive. I’ve watched how you interact with people; you are a caregiver. When I look at you, I see a tigress who wants to come home after a long hunt and have your man bite the back of your neck, hold you down and fuck you into submiss—”

Her gasp interrupted him. “Fuck, too much too soon? I’m sorry, Kayla. I saw how your body reacted at The Citadel and I thought...” He scrubbed his face with his hand. “Fuck.”

Kayla reached across the table and took his hand. “It’s okay,” she whispered.

“It’s obviously not. You look terrified. I’ve never misread someone like this before.”

“The night at The Citadel, I was excited by what I saw. You didn’t misread me. I enjoyed watching your friends’ scenes intimately with their partners. It was an honor to be trusted with the level of vulnerability going on around me. You didn’t misread me.”

“Then why do you look absolutely terrified?”

“Remember how I went home for my high school reunion?” She tried to figure out how to start this conversation. There wasn’t a good way to tell him all her deep, dark secrets.

“Yes. It’s when you started to dodge my calls.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I didn’t know how to have this conversation.”

“You said you hadn’t run into a high school love,” Maddock’s confused expression encouraged Kayla to get on with it.

“I didn’t. There wasn’t a high school boyfriend. Turns out, my college boyfriend is married to one of my high school classmates. Actually, as I found out, he was married to her while we were together. He cheated on her with me...for years.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure finding that out felt like a punch to the gut. I don’t understand, though. Are you still pining for this asshole? What did running into your ex-boyfriend with his wife have to do with you pulling away from me?”

“I’m getting there,” she answered softly.

“Sorry,” Maddock raised a hand in truce. “I’m terrible at this. I’ll sit back and listen, okay?”

She nodded her thanks. Kayla fought to keep her voice steady and to hide the agonizing memories that had been bubbling up inside of her. It was time to let them go. She began, “I met Zach at a BDSM club in Denver. I went with two of my friends. The club was having a The Next Generation event. TNG is a formal organization within the BDSM community for people ages eighteen to thirty-five. It was a chance for the younger crowd to get together without the sixty-year-old men hitting on all of us. Zach was there. He’s a



few years older than me and he just had an air of dominance about him. After a night of hanging out and talking we exchanged numbers.”

She closed her eyes as she remembered the early days in their relationship. “Things were great initially. He was tender and patient with me. He introduced me to different BDSM kinks and activities. We started off really slow and spent time at munches and parties. I thought he was the perfect man. He gave me a couple of instructions and I’d follow them. His instructions started to become harder to follow, like he went out of his way to find a reason to punish me. I didn’t know it back then, but now, hindsight and all...” She looked across the table to find Maddock staring at her intently. His grip on his coffee mug looked like he was trying to strangle the piece of pottery.

“It started off with a light spanking, but he slowly introduced me to heavier and heavier floggings and whippings until I couldn’t take it anymore. I’d be begging him to stop, and he wouldn’t. He’d tell me it was discipline, and I didn’t get a safeword for discipline. Then, one day, he bought me a beautiful ruby necklace. He told me I was his slave, and he was my master. I had no say in it.” Tears rolled down her cheeks as she wiped at them angrily. “He would always tell me that it was consensual, I gave over all my say to him willingly, and that I enjoyed the punishments as much as he did. Right into my face, he would say those things. As if I didn’t know the truth.”

She paused and took a deep breath, thrown back into the painful past by her words. She could hear his voice, see the vein popping in his neck. “He became more and more controlling, isolating me from my friends, taking away my phone, placing trackers on my car. One night when I was sleeping, he changed the password to my laptop and my bank account. When I talked back to him and told him it was unacceptable, went beyond what I consented, he whipped me so hard that my back bled for days. My friends told me later that they saw me holding on to my shirt in an attempt to stem the bleeding. I decided it was the last straw and broke up with him. He was enraged.” She scraped away a tear with the edge

of her hand and spoke more quickly as she remembered his final attack on her.

“I stopped returning his calls, answering his emails. Then one night, after clinicals, I was walking to my car, I felt a prick, and everything went black. He kidnapped me. He took me to his dad’s hunting cabin out in the middle of nowhere. He held me there for three days. Three days of being tied up and thrown into the dog crate they had for their hunting dogs.”

Her mouth twisted into a sour smile before continuing, “I wasn’t allowed clothes, he kept a gag tightly in my mouth. He’d pull me out and use me for whatever perverse pleasure he wanted, all the while telling me how I wanted it and if I wanted to know what it was like to be a man’s slave, he’d show me. He beat me bloody, left scars on my body from the edge play. On day three, he was in the middle of raping me when he got a phone call. He’d untied my hands because he wanted me to fight him. He got off on overpowering me. At that point, I was too numb to fight. The call sounded urgent. He threw me into the crate and left. He forgot to tie my hands, so I was able to escape. When I got to the road, I was able to flag down a car. Thank God, it was a woman. Although, I didn’t even feel ashamed about being naked anymore; it wasn’t like there was anything left of me worth protecting.”

Letting out a low growl, Maddock finally spoke. “Tell me you had his punk ass thrown in prison.”

Kayla shook her head sadly. “I convinced the lady to take me home. After I showered and put on clothes, my phone rang. He called me from an unknown number. He said he’d recorded all of our sexual activities during the time we dated and if I turned him in, he’d release them on the internet. He said he’d track me down and kill me, after he took care of my parents first. He said the BDSM contract I’d signed, would make charges impossible and besides, after reading it, no one would believe me anyway. I-I didn’t have the strength to fight him. I took an internship in Grand Ridge to get as far away from him as I could while still being able to finish my degree... and I never left.”

“Kayla, I—”

“Wait,” Kayla interrupted. “The reason I’m telling you all this is twofold. First, I need you to understand why I can’t engage in a BDSM relationship. At one time, I thought I wanted it in my life, and I was healed enough to explore again. Seeing Zach brought back all those memories and I realized I’m not, and likely will never be, able to participate in anything power exchange related. I would never ask you to stop engaging in an activity you love for me. I know it’s a deal breaker and you won’t want to continue dating me. I understand and don’t fault you. I needed to be honest with you, so you don’t waste any more of your time on me. Second, I pissed Zach off at the reunion and he’s been leaving me threatening emails and voicemails. He knows where I live now. If he shows up here, I cannot, I will not, allow him to use you to hurt me. Therefore, we can’t be together. But maybe we can be friends.” Phew. She spit it all out and laid it on the proverbial table. Hopefully, he’d understand everything and not be angry with her for leading him on.

“Are you quite done?” The low growl in Maddock’s tone was the first sign of danger. It wasn’t until she glanced up and saw the fire flashing in his eyes that it was confirmed.

“Um…” she chewed her bottom lip. “I don’t know what the roads are like outside, but I can call someone and try to go to my own house—” Her heart beat rapidly in her chest; he was mad. She could tell it was the tick in his jaw. Crap. She should have waited until the weather cleared. She knew, deep down, he wouldn’t hurt her. Maddock was a far cry from being one of the Zach’s of the world. But, how awkward to be trapped in his house while he was angry with her? She should have thought this through better.

“I know my timing sucks with the snowstorm. I’m sorry. I should have waited until the roads were clear to tell you. I can just stay in the guest room until it’s safe. You won’t even have to see me—”

“Sit down, Kayla. You aren’t going anywhere.”

# CHAPTER 6



## MADDOCK

“*I* said, sit down,” Maddock growled, rising quickly from his seat, and going around to where Kayla stood, staring at him with her mouth open. Wisely, she didn’t protest but sank back down in the chair she’d just stood up from.

The room felt heavy with tension as Kayla laid bare the painful truths of her past. Maddock listened intently, his eyes never leaving her face, absorbing every word, every emotion that poured forth from her trembling lips. The weight of her words threatened to suffocate them both. Like hell would he let her walk away, making the choice for him. He wasn’t going anywhere. He’d worked too hard to be in a place where he could be in a relationship.

His anger simmered beneath the surface, but he maintained his composure. He knew now more than ever Kayla needed his support. The old Maddock would have exploded, probably thrown something across the room in substitution for the violence he wanted to cause Zach. But he’d worked on anger management and control for the past two years. He was in a better place.

He took his seat and stared at her across the table while composing himself. Her breath held when they stared into each other’s eyes. “I hope you trust me enough to know I will never hurt you,” he started.

“I know. You’ve never degraded me. Zach wouldn’t have come and rescued me. In fact, he’d have called me names after and screamed at me for wrecking my truck even though he

didn't have any financial obligation to it. Actually," her voice dropped to a whisper, "I'm pretty sure he'd have told me I should have died for my actions and punished me, while injured." The way her body trembled validated her words.

Fuck.

He wanted to find the bastard and dismember him piece by piece. He picked up his coffee cup and slowly took several long swallows. Every time she spoke, it got worse.

Reaching across the table, he took both of her small hands in his. "You do not speak for me. I am not going anywhere. BDSM isn't a deal breaker for me like you've made it out to be in your head. You are worth more to me than kink is. You've been traumatized and hurt by your ex, and I won't minimize what you've gone through. I know an amazing kink friendly counselor who can help you work through it, if you'd like her information. Maybe, someday, you will want to explore it and allow me to replace the pain with happy memories. But, even if you never want to try, I am okay with it. Kink isn't a be all, end all, in my life."

"Are you...are you sure?" He saw for the second time, tears well up behind her eyes, further sparking his anger. The Kayla he knew was strong. Crying didn't make her weaker, but the bastard causing the tears didn't deserve them.

"I'm sure. I don't say things I don't mean. Second, I want more than a friendship with you, Kayla. I'm not tucking tail and running because some asshat who beats women might show up in town. Let. Him. Come. Because, if he does, he will find out what it's like to go against someone his own size. I promise you; he won't win. Listen to me when I tell you this. He will never hurt you again." It was a vow he wasn't taking back.

He watched as Kayla visibly relaxed in front of him. The weight of her confession drifted off of her shoulders. "If you think any man will get past me, or my brothers, and to you? Well, you haven't been paying attention to what goes on in Grand Ridge."

“Thank you.” The two soft words acknowledged his statements.

“Now, while I don’t need BDSM in my life, I am naturally dominant and I’m not sure I can turn that off. Is my bossiness going to be a problem for you?”

Her light laughter was a welcomed change from the tension in the room. “No, of course not. I’ve experienced it on our dates and hanging out. I wouldn’t want you to change who you are for me. Which is why I thought we’d be better off as friends. I’d feel guilty—”

Kayla screeched as Maddock grabbed her waist and lifted her, carrying her into the living room, where he sank with her in his arms onto the couch. Refusing to let her go, he moved her until she straddled him.

She opened her mouth to protest but he held up his hand without taking his eyes off her. “Hush. Let me say my piece.” He waited for her to nod before he continued.

“I’ve wanted you to be mine for years. It’s taken me a long time to go through counseling and get to a place of healing where I was whole enough to pursue a relationship. You were one of the motivators for me to work through my PTSD and anger issues. I still struggle, but now, I am in a healthy place with safe coping skills. I am not going anywhere if you will have me. You don’t have to go through this alone.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and said simply. “Thank you.”

He leaned in and spoke softly in her ear. “You’re safe now. I’ve got you.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

She relaxed into him with a sigh, and he felt the tension ease from her body. He held her wrapped in his embrace for a few minutes. He looked down as she drifted off to sleep. Slowly, he stood up with her in his arms and headed to his bedroom where he tucked her into his king-sized bed before laying next to her and wrapping his arms around her again.

His chest ached at the thought of how close he’d come to losing her, and there was a pit in his stomach from anger and

bitterness toward her ex. The fury bubbled beneath the surface as he processed the trauma she'd been through, and he held her tighter, as if he could shield her from all the darkness and danger in the world.

She rolled over and pressed her face against his chest. He rubbed her back as she drifted back to sleep. Normally, a cup of coffee, especially with how dark he made it, would keep him awake for hours. But her soft breathing acted like a lullaby to him and he too succumbed to sleep.

It was short lasted. An hour later, he was waking Kayla from another nightmare. She woke with a start, her eyes wide with panic as her eyes searched the room frantically. Maddock tightened his arms around her.

“You are safe. You are on Valhalla in my house.” He used grounding techniques he'd learned from his own therapy.

“Shh, I've got you.” His deep, rumbling voice filled the room as one hand stroked up and down her back. “Just a nightmare. You're safe now.”

She gulped in air, her wide eyes slowly focusing on him. “I'm sorry I woke you.”

“Don't apologize. You apologize too much.” He wondered if it was due to how Zach treated her. “I want to be here for you, for whatever you need. You are not a bother; you are not an inconvenience. I'd be upset if you didn't wake me when you needed me.”

“I was back in the cabin. Chained in the dark, inside the kennel, calling for help. He'd leave occasionally, and I'd scream out, hoping a hiker or anyone would hear me. No one came.” Her voice broke as tears spilled down her cheeks. “I hadn't dreamt of him in years, until I saw him at the reunion. I thought I was over this. Apparently... I'm not.”

“I'm here now. You're safe.” He smoothed her hair back from her face and lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Look at me, Kayla. You're with me, and I will never let anyone hurt you again.” There was conviction in his tone and



a fierce protectiveness in his eyes. She was his and not a damned soul would hurt her on his watch.

She let out a shaky breath and nodded. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t you dare apologize.” He interrupted. He’d correct her every time she did until she broke the habit. He wiped her tears away with his thumbs. “You’ve been through hell. It’s going to take time to move past that. But I’m here for you, for as long as you need. I’ve been going through counseling for a couple of years now, working on my own stuff. I’ve learned a few things about dealing with triggers. I can tell you what works for me, but it might not work for you.”

“I’d like to hear about it, if you are willing to talk.”

“A few years back, I wouldn’t have been capable of discussing it, but now... Now, I’m in a better place. I mean, it’s not my favorite thing to talk about but, it’s cathartic to discuss it. Sometimes, I feel the more I talk about it, the easier it is to let some of it go.” He wondered if he sounded like an idiot.

Her reassuring smile erased the fear. “I get it. I feel better telling you what happened with Zach. I’ve never told anyone before.”

“No one?”

“No. When it first happened, speaking it made it reality and I wasn’t ready for it. After going a long time without mentioning it, I buried it down and tried to forget about it, about him.” She swallowed hard; the emotion written across her face.

“I understand.” And he did, all too well. Some of his veteran friends, like Lucky, could talk all day about the battles they fought. Not Maddock. He spent years drinking away the memories and then unpacking them and working through it had felt akin to pulling teeth—painful. But now, in retrospect, he would recommend dealing with trauma as soon as possible. Packing it away caused it to be covered in layers of dust you have to wipe away before getting around to the root of the

issue. Answers buried too deep to get them out on your own. Damn if he'd not learned that lesson the hard way.

“I... I was scared of dating you.”

“Me? Did I do something?” Maddock searched his memory but all he could find was good interactions between them. Fun, playful and flirty.

“No. I was attracted to you from the beginning, but I worried about my judgment in men, even though it's been a decade. At first, Zach seemed caring, attentive; he said he was a real Dom who wanted to give me what I needed. I believed him. If I was so wrong about him, I could be wrong again.” Her voice broke as the memories surfaced.

Maddock rubbed her back with small, comforting circles. “It's okay. I understand. I've mistrusted my own judgment from time to time. But, not with you. I knew. The kindness and compassion you show the animals you work with won me over first.”

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. “Do you want to talk some more about it? Would it help?” he asked her.

She nodded slowly. With his arms around her, the words tumbled out in a rush. She told him of the manipulation and gaslighting, the times Zachary ignored her safeword and took things too far, the way she lied to her friends to keep them from finding out, but some suspected the abuse. By the end, she was shaking and sobbing against Maddock's chest.

“I'm so sorry you went through that. It is men like him who give BDSM a bad rep. The safe, sane, and consensual Doms don't get the same type of coverage in the media. You also read about the men who use BDSM as an excuse for their bad behavior.” His voice was rough with emotion. “I'll tell you this—if I ever get my hands on him, I'll kill the bastard.”

“No.” She grabbed his face between her hands, forcing him to meet her gaze. “Don't give him any power over you. Killing him would connect you two for all of eternity. I'd prefer you never cross paths with him.”

The anger faded from him, replaced by a soul-deep tenderness toward her. “I promise, I won’t seek him out. But I will never hesitate to protect you or myself if a threat occurs.” He kissed her softly, a mere brush of lips over hers. “You’re my priority. And I will do whatever it takes to help you heal and stay safe.”

“Thank you. I don’t know if I can ever fully move past what happened. But knowing you’re here for me makes the pain a little easier to bear.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” He pressed a kiss to her hair. “You’re strong, Kayla. Stronger than you realize. I’m proud of you.”

She tilted her head up, meeting his gaze. “I’m glad you didn’t let me push you away.”

“No. Not going to happen, little girl. You can’t get rid of me that easily.. But, when you are healthy and well rested, I’d like to talk about moving us forward in our relationship. Casually dating isn’t going to cut it for me, I need more.”

“I—”

Maddock interrupted her, “You are not going to think or talk about it right now. You are not in the headspace, and I will not take advantage of you.”

She sighed and he once again noticed the deep, dark circles under her eyes. “Sweetheart, how long has it been since you have rested well?”

“The day before the reunion,” she confessed.

“Peter said you needed rest to heal. Do you think you can go back to sleep without nightmares?”

“Will you stay here with me?”

“You are stuck with me,” Maddock said lightly. “I have to warn you, I snore.”

“Well then, I guess I’ll try, you know, if I can fall asleep with your snoring” she whispered as she snuggled into him, lifting her face as if she wanted him to kiss her.

He lowered his head a short distance and pressed his lips against hers. This kiss was different from the others, it was full of promise and new beginnings. He kissed her as if to heal her wounded heart and show her that love could be safe. He planned on showing her that she was worthy of being cherished and deserving of his protection.

Breaking the kiss, he gave her his most demanding look. "Rest now. Let me take care of you."

# CHAPTER 7



## KAYLA

*K*ayla paused in the doorway of Day & Night, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and pastries enveloping her. Through the crowd of friends chatting, she spotted Emma in a cozy armchair by the fireplace, two mugs of coffee on the table in front of her.

Emma looked up, brows creasing at the sight of Kayla hovering in the entrance. She waved Kayla over, her smile warm and welcoming.

Kayla wove between tables, tension coiling in her stomach with each step. Her conversation with Maddock about Zach gave her courage to tell others about the situation. She decided the next person would be Emma. They worked closely together and if Zach did show, he'd likely come to her work. The cabin she owned had belonged to Jane, and she'd been careful not to have a searchable address or phone number.

She slid into the chair across from Emma, wrapping her freezing hands around the mug Emma pushed toward her. The heat seeped into her palms, and she sighed happily.

"I'm going to have to buy a new pair of gloves. Hanson's goat destroyed mine this morning. I was an idiot and took them off to examine the new foal and turned my back." She took a long sip of the delicious warm coffee.

"You're late and didn't call. Which is unlike you." Emma's tone was gentle, free of accusation. "Everything okay?"

Kayla stared into her coffee. How could she possibly explain the tumult of emotions churning inside her? The joy

and fear and longing that warred whenever she thought of Maddock.

“Kayla?” Emma covered one of Kayla’s hands with her own, giving a comforting squeeze. “You know you can talk to me.”

Kayla looked up, meeting Emma’s patient gaze, and the words tumbled out. “I don’t even know where to begin. When I was in college, I dated a man, and he was abusive. I thought I’d moved on, you know, recovered, from the trauma of the relationship. As you know, I started to casually date Maddock...” She took another long sip of her coffee.

“And I’ve never seen you happier! The days after your dates you came into work positively glowing. We were all happy to see the joy on your face. I’d about given up hope that you’d ever date anyone,” Emma said.

“You know I stayed with him after my accident a few days ago? We were able to do a lot of talking and I told him about my ex. When I went back to Denver for my high school reunion, he was there. Turns out, he’s married to a former classmate, and he’s been married to her since before we met.”

“What? That asshole!” Emma looked genuinely angry on Kayla’s behalf.

“It’s not even half of it. At the reunion, he threatened me. He pinned me against the wall, and I might have kneed him.”

“Good for you!” Emma cheered. “He deserved it!”

“The day after, I started to get messages on my social media from ghost accounts. It’s like he has unlimited access to making fake accounts. I’ll block one and he’ll make another. I’m almost positive he’s the person who calls the office and hangs up if anyone but me answers.”

“You told Maddock all of this?” Emma asked.

“I did. I thought about getting a protection order but he’d walk right through a piece of paper. He’s incredibly powerful and rich. I know it would motivate him into action. He thrives off of control and I’m trying to ignore him. I was afraid he’d go after Maddock, so I tried to end things with him...”

“Maddock is a big boy; he can take care of himself!” Emma proclaimed. “Tell me he didn’t let you walk away! He’s the best thing to have happened to you in a very long time.”

“No,” Kayla shook her head. “He was adamant that I didn’t get to make that choice for him. He was incredible for the two days I stayed there. We didn’t do anything, you know, because of my concussion and bruises. But he took such good care of me. I can’t believe how attentive and patient he was. He woke me from every nightmare.”

“Nightmare?”

“Yeah, those started up again after running into my ex.”

“Kayla, you know you can tell me anything. I wish you’d confided in me sooner, but I’m glad you are telling me now.” Emma’s tone was gentle and full of concern as she asked her best friend the hard questions. Kayla was grateful that Emma wasn’t upset; she’d never shared any of this with her.

“I’m sorry I never shared with you before. It’s incredibly difficult to talk about and I didn’t want you to look at me differently, like I’m weak or a victim or—”

“Never. I think you are strong and brave,” Emma reassured her.

“Things with Maddock are getting serious. He made it clear he wants us to be a couple and exclusive.” Her voice shook, betraying her anxiety. “We’ve been spending so much time together and it’s been amazing but...I picked Zach. I decided he was a good man. I know, in my heart, Maddock is a good person, but my brain keeps saying ‘what if you are wrong’ like you were with Zach?”

Emma nodded, her brows furrowed with understanding. “It’s bringing up a lot from your past. You never trusted another man enough to be in a relationship with them since Zach. I can tell you, what I know from Maddock is all positive. I’ve seen how he looks at you and you know how gossip is in Grand Ridge, if he’d done anything wrong, we’d know about it. It’s hard to give someone a chance after being hurt, but... I think if you are going to trust anyone, he’s the



one. You deserve to be happy. Both of you do, after everything you've been through."

"I know." Kayla fiddled with the napkin on the table, thinking of Maddock and the way he looked at her. "It's just still difficult to believe I can have this. That I'm worthy of it."

"You are," Emma said firmly. "Maddock sees that, even if you can't."

Kayla released a shuddering breath, the knot in her stomach loosening. Emma always seemed to know exactly what she needed to hear. She gave Emma's hand a grateful squeeze. "I'm scared to trust him, even though I know he's nothing like..." She trailed off, old wounds threatening to reopen.

"Maddock isn't Zach." Emma's voice was firm and sure. "Sometimes, you need to look at a person's actions. They speak louder than any words they could ever say. He's proven to you he's dependable, showing up on time to every date and coming to you when your truck rolled over. He's protected you, cared for you when you were injured. Now, let him help you heal."

"I hear what you are saying." Kayla looked up, meeting Emma's earnest gaze. "It's just hard to believe I could find love again and trust myself."

"You deserve to be loved, Kayla," Emma said softly. "And Maddock is a good man. He's patient and strong, and he will love you with all his heart, if you give him the chance." She smiled, her eyes gleaming with conviction. "Don't let fear hold you back from the happiness you've found. And don't let that bastard prevent you from having the future you deserve. He might control your past and your nightmares, but you can choose to control your present and future. Take the ball and bounce it right out of his court."

Kayla knew, deep down, that Emma was right. It was time to leave the past behind and embrace the future. The fears came with the idea of the two coming together and causing chaos.

“I guess I can’t live on this edge of anxiety much longer. The, ‘what if he shows up,’ is ruling my life. He’s controlling me, emotionally and psychologically. To regain that control, I have to give myself permission to live my best life.”

“Exactly!” Emma nodded. “Your best life includes having an amazing and healthy relationship with the man of, let’s face it, many women’s dreams.”

Kayla giggled. “He is pretty hot.”

“Yeah. Understatement of the year.”

Kayla smiled, a lightness returning that had been missing for so long.

“Thank you, for always knowing what I need to hear.”

Emma’s answering smile was bright and joyful. “That’s what best friends are for.”

“We should probably get back to work,” Kayla said. “By the way, I’ve made a counseling appointment for tomorrow morning. It’ll only take an hour, but if there’s any emergencies during it—”

“I know what to do.”

Kayla nodded her thanks.

“So,” Emma said, a teasing lilt to her voice. “Does this mean you’re ready to give the big, bad biker dude a chance?”

Kayla laughed, the sound light and carefree. “Maybe I’ll invite him over for dinner tonight. You know, to thank him for taking care of me.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll appreciate your gratitude.” Emma wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“Emma!” Kayla swatted at her friend’s arm, cheeks flushing. Still, she couldn’t contain her smile. For the first time, thinking about being with Maddock filled her more with warmth and anticipation than fear.

Emma chuckled, unrepentant. “What? You can’t blame me for wanting the juicy details!” Her expression softened into

one of affectionate encouragement. “Go get your man, Kayla. You won’t regret it.”

Kayla knew how lucky she was to have a friend like Emma. Emma was right there beside her for every struggle and every triumph, a never waving pillar of support. “I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she said, voice thick with emotion. Emma was more like a sister than a friend.

“You’ll never have to find out.” Emma squeezed her hand once more before rising from her seat. “Now, I should head back to the clinic, and you have to go check on Mrs. Lyon’s new litter of puppies. Call me after?” Her meaning was clear. Kayla knew Emma would be waiting to hear all about her dinner with Maddock.

Kayla nodded. “I will. Thank you, Emma. For everything.”

“Anytime. Don’t forget, I want the details.” With a wink, she turned and strode out of the coffee shop.



Kayla took a deep breath, feeling lighter and more hopeful than she had in weeks. Maddock had proven his interest to her and shown her he could be trusted with his patience, honesty, and support. Maybe it was time she finally believed him.

She rose from the table and walked out of the Night & Day and into the chilly afternoon air. She pulled her jacket tight around her shoulders. The sun peeked through the clouds, casting a golden glow over the trees that matched her mood.

The rental truck rumbled to life, heat blasting from the vents. As she drove out to Valhalla, anticipation and nerves dueled in her stomach. So much was at stake, but Emma was right. She deserved to be happy.

The gates of Valhalla came into view, symbols of the safety and community Hudson had built. She smiled at the sight of the sprawling property, alive with activity.

And there, in the center of it all, was Maddock. She knew he’d be working the gate today, and Valhalla was on her way

to check on the puppies. She wanted to see him.

His gaze swung her way as the truck rolled up to the gate, lips curving into a smile that made her pulse leap. Damn. He was hot.

He stepped out of the gate and strode forward to meet her. “Hey, babe. I wasn’t expecting to see you. Something going on with one of the animals?”

“No. I’m on my way out to check on Lyon’s new litter and wanted to see you.”

“I will never understand using full size poodles for hunting, but I’ve heard they are amazing bird dogs.” The dimple that appeared in Maddock’s left cheek when he smiled gave him somewhat of a boyish charm, lessening the hard lines on his face.

Kayla smiled up at him, reaching to twine her fingers with his. “I’ve missed you. Do you want to come over to dinner tonight?”

He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a tender kiss to her knuckles. “I’d love to. What are you making?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead,” she confessed.

“It could be PB&J and I’d be happy. It’s the company that matters.”

Kayla blinked back happy tears, and wondered where all the emotions were coming from these days. She’d check the calendar, maybe she was PMSing. She wasn’t used to being this emotional.

“Does seven work for you?”

“It does. I’m looking forward to it,” Maddock told her, leaning into her truck and kissing her gently on the lips. “See you then, Sunshine.”

“Sunshine?”

“Yeah. Every time I see you, it feels like the sun is shining onto my day. Even if it’s gray and storming.”

She smiled as he opened the gate for her to turn around. She waved and drove off to see the puppies. Today was going to be a great day.

Her phone rang as she drove. Looking at the caller ID, she saw it was a local number and commanded SIRI to answer it. At least half of her patients came from word-of-mouth referral.

“You think you can physically assault me and not be punished? Your actions deserve consequences, slave.”

Zach.

Her heart dropped like a rock into her stomach, beads of sweat broke out on her forehead. She gripped the steering wheel as hard as she could.

*He doesn't control me. He doesn't control me.*

“How did you get this number?”

“I have my connections. There is no where you can hide, bitch.”

*Don't give him the attention or reaction he seeks.*

She disconnected the call and blocked the number. She didn't stop shaking until she arrived at Mrs. Lyon's house.



Kayla's house was nestled in a quiet wooded area. She'd inherited it when Jane died and it was the perfect escape for her. The little cabin was bathed in white snow but inside exudes warmth and comfort. The living room boasted cozy, overstuffed armchairs and a crackling fireplace that filled the air with the scent of burning cedar. A painting of the cabin with the serene forest landscape with Kayla's two golden retrievers on the porch, adorned the wall, a gift left in the house by Jane.

Tonight, Kayla was determined to show her appreciation to Maddock for his taking care of her for the two days after the accident. A lesser man might have taken advantage of having

her there and made sexual advances. Not Maddock. He played the part of a concerned nurse well.

She also wanted to convey her readiness to take their relationship to the next level, to be exclusive and officially his girlfriend. He'd not brought it up again while she recovered. He'd been determined to make sure she was well rested and mentally able to commit. Another indicator to Kayla that he was safe.

The shadows of her past with Zach still lingered, casting a long, cautious shadow over any thoughts of BDSM, but she knew he'd been honest with her when he said he could live without it.

Tonight, she wanted everything to be perfect. She could tell Maddock about the call tomorrow. Turning up the music, she swayed to the beat of the blaring eighties rock music.

In the cozy kitchen, bathed in the soft glow of pendant lights, Kayla meticulously prepared dinner. The tantalizing aroma of garlic and herbs filled the air as she sautéed fresh vegetables in a sizzling pan. The herb roasted chicken cooked in the oven and a pot of potatoes boiled for mash next to the vegetables. She hoped Maddock would like the down home meal she was preparing after making the trek to her house in the snow.

The table was set with care, adorned with a simple blue and white tablecloth and hand painted polish pottery.

As the final touches were put on the meal, Kayla's heart raced with anticipation. She had rehearsed what she wanted to say to Maddock countless times, but now, her words felt weighty and wrong. She'd ditch the script and speak from the heart.

When Maddock arrived, she greeted him with a warm smile. "Hi!" she suddenly felt shy as he walked into her house, his presence bigger than life. The black t-shirt hugged him in all the right places and she suddenly wanted to ditch dinner and do something else altogether with him.

“Something smells amazing, Sunshine.” He kissed her cheek. “And I’m starving.”

“I hope you like chicken. I know you are a steak and potatoes person. You’ve ordered it on every date we’ve gone out on,” she laughed. “But I hope chicken and potatoes will do.”

“I love chicken.” He winked at her.

“I roasted it with lemon and fresh herbs. I also made those cheesy biscuits I know you like.”

“Sounds delicious. When do we eat?”

Maybe the old saying that the fastest way to a man’s heart was through his stomach was true.

“The chicken is resting and almost ready to be carved. So, about five minutes? Want to open a bottle of wine while we wait?” she asked him as she led him into the kitchen.

“Gladly.” As he opened the wine, the conversation flowed casually. “You know, Sunshine, I was afraid you were going to be a vegan.”

“Me? A vegan?” She laughed. He’d nodded approvingly when she ordered a cheeseburger on their first date.

“I thought since you are a veterinarian...”

“I love animals. I’m all for eating humanely raised or hunted animals. I mean, I would never be a veterinarian for a ranch that abused their animals or kept them in inhumane conditions. I’m pretty picky about hunting. I believe all the killed animal that can be used, should.”

Maddock nodded. “I agree.” Together, they carried the food to the table, and settled in, the flickering candles casting dancing shadows on their faces.

Kayla served the meal, the chicken tender and flavorful, the vegetables perfectly crisp and sighed in relief. Maddock smiled appreciatively at the spread. “This all looks great, babe.”

“Try it before complimenting me,” she laughed. “I don’t get the chance to cook as often as I would like. My grams taught me whenever I would go to her house. She passed away a few years ago but I like to think I keep her memory alive every time I make one of her recipes.”

With a mouthful, Maddock said, “These are the best mashed potatoes I’ve ever had.”

“It’s the combination of sour cream and cream cheese.” She speared a piece of chicken and took a bite. It was to die for. Moist on the inside with crispy skin. She said a silent thanks to her grammy.

“I wanted to thank you, for being there for me and letting me stay with you after the accident,” she began, her voice steady. “You’ve been my rock, and I can’t express how grateful I am.”

Maddock’s eyes softened and he reached out across the table to brush his fingers against her cheek, a gentle caress that spoke volumes. “I’m just glad I could be there for you. You mean the world to me. The thought of you being out there, alone, in pain...” His voice drifted off and for the first time, Kayla truly understood how much she meant to him.

Their conversation flowed effortlessly from there, the touches of their hands and shared laughter speaking louder than any words. The silences that fell when their mouths were full weren’t awkward, she didn’t feel the need to fill them with pointless words. It spoke volumes to her that even in the silence, she felt secure.

After she served up the warm brownies topped with vanilla ice cream for dessert, Kayla finally gathered the courage to express her desires for their relationship. “Maddock,” she began, her voice shaking slightly, “When I was recovering at your place, you said casually dating wasn’t going to cut it for you. You wouldn’t allow me to give you an answer then but wanted me fully rested. Well, even though I still have some of the bruises and cuts from the accident, I can say in all confidence that I am of sane mind to talk about it now. I want us to be exclusive, to be together officially. But I need you to



understand that it might be a long time before I can do anything BDSM-related.”

Maddock nodded, his eyes locking onto hers. “Sunshine, I’m willing to wait as long as you need. What I need from you is honesty and trust. And, most importantly, I need you to believe that you deserve happiness and love.”

“You sound like Emma,” she teased.

“Emma must be very smart,” he teased back. “How another person treated you doesn’t have a thing to do with your worth, Sunshine. You are worthy of love and affection. I don’t think it is me you’ve had trouble trusting, but yourself. You mentioned how it was hard to trust your judgment after you dated that asshat. I’ve seen your judgment. You’ve picked women who support you as friends, you make life and death calls about animal welfare on the regular, you are financially secure and a damned good business woman. I’d say there is nothing wrong with your judgment.”

“Thank you.” The words wouldn’t come. The enormity of emotion she felt couldn’t be put into words, so all she said was thank you. It was a complete sentence, after all.

As they cleared the dinner table together, a slow smile spread across Maddock’s face, brighter than the sun breaking through the clouds. He pulled her into his arms, holding her close against his chest.

“I’m going to show you every day you made the right choice.”

Kayla melted into his embrace, listening to the strong, steady beat of his heart.

She was home.

# CHAPTER 8



## KAYLA

The crackling fireplace cast a warm glow over Maddock's living room, where Kayla nestled into his side on the sofa. His arm curled around her, broad hand splaying over her hip in a possessive claim.

Kayla sighed contently. "Thanks for dinner."

"It wasn't homemade like your chicken but Corky did put together a great lasagna for us."

Kayla sighed, the tension easing from her shoulders for the first time all day. Here, in the sanctuary of Maddock's arms, she could almost forget the threats coming more aggressively. Almost.

Her phone vibrated again in her pocket, like a viper waiting to strike. She tensed, her heart kicking into a gallop. Maddock's hand tightened on her hip.

"What's going on, Sunshine?" His voice rumbled through his chest, vibrating against her cheek.

Kayla hesitated, loath to spoil their perfect evening. But she couldn't lie to him. Not anymore. "He's been calling more and more. When my phone rings, there's a fifty-fifty chance it's him."

Maddock cursed under his breath, his hand flexing into a fist. She didn't have to see his face to know his eyes would be stormy, his jaw clenched.

Her fault. All her fault.

Guilt twisted her stomach into knots as a heavy silence fell between them. She had to tell him the truth, before the threats escalated further. Before it was too late.

Kayla placed her hand over his fist, feeling the anger pulsing there. “He called yesterday and I answered the phone...”

His head dipped, breath hot against her ear. “And? What did he want? Why did you answer?”

“It was a local number. I thought it was a patient. I... I can't trust any numbers. He managed to call today and somehow cloned the clinic. When I answered expecting it to be Emma, it was him. I don't know how he's doing it and...” Kayla took a deep breath, steeling herself against the reaction she feared was to come. “Yesterday, he said I deserved to be punished for assaulting him at the reunion. I know from experience how he holds onto insult until he gets the justice he believes he is owed. The calls...they're getting worse. More frequent. More...” She faltered, loathing to say the words. “More violent. I know he has powerful connections...”

Maddock went rigid against her, fury rolling off him in waves. But when he spoke, his voice remained deceptively soft. “How many times today did he call you?”

“I don't know...dozens. I stopped answering the phone. I think I need to change my number, but so many of my patients have it and what if there's an emergency and they can't get a hold of me?” The admission spilled from her lips in a hushed whisper. “I didn't want to worry you...or bring you into my drama.”

“Damn it, Kayla!” He surged to his feet, dragging a hand through his hair. Chest heaving, he paced the length of the room. “Any problem of yours is a problem of mine. We're a couple. I can't help you if I don't know about it. You don't have to take him on alone.”

Maddock whirled on her, eyes blazing. “I need you to trust me, Sunshine.”

“I do trust you! I just...” She faltered again, hating how weak her excuses sounded. “I didn’t want you to worry until I was sure the threats were real. Until it got bad enough that I couldn’t handle it on my own. I can hang up the phone or ignore his calls all together.”

“And when were you planning to tell me? After this psycho showed up on your doorstep?” He dragged a hand down his face, the anger fading into something deeper. “You can’t keep protecting me, Kayla. I need to know these things so I can protect you.”

Her throat tightened as she rose on shaky legs. “You’re right,” she said softly. “I should have told you sooner. I’m sorry.”

A heavy silence fell between them. She wondered if he was thinking about what he would do if they’d been in a Dom-sub relationship. She had no doubt keeping this from him would have been punishment worthy. She visibly gagged at the thought.

In a second, he was beside her. “What’s wrong?”

“I-I thought you might be thinking about how you’d punish me for holding it from you if we were—” she confessed.

“Kayla, I would never hurt you. Even if we were in a power-exchange relationship, everything would be consensual. I’m not going to lie, my hand itches to turn you over my knee and spank your ass for hiding this from me, but I know you aren’t ready for it. That wasn’t what I was thinking about. I was thinking how I’d like to find him in a dark alley.”

“That’s all?”

“What’s all?” Maddock’s eyebrows drew together in confusion.

“Your hand on my butt? You weren’t thinking about using a whip and lashing me until I bled?” That’s what Zach did.

“For fuck’s sake.” He gathered her in his arms. “Never. Not once in my life, have I drawn blood for punishment or play. I’m not really into whips but if I was, it would be to draw

out cries of pleasure, not to tear the skin off your back. I am sorry the bastard did that to you and I wish I had a time machine to go back and remove you from his clutches.”

Did he mean it? “You’ve never spanked with anything else?”

“My belt and a wooden spoon are the only items I’ve ever used for punishment on a submissive’s bottom, Kayla. The butt and top of their thighs might be sore for a day or two but I’ve never injured anyone or caused them to be afraid of me. Every one of them has had a safeword.”

“During punishment?”

“Especially during punishment. Your safety is always paramount.”

“Oh.” She felt the tension in his body and couldn’t blame him for being furious.

Her throat tightened. “You have every right to be angry. I should have told you about the threats. Keeping you in the dark wasn’t fair to you.”

He sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “For our relationship to work, I’m going to need you to be open and honest with me, Sunshine. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’ve not been in a relationship since Zach. He overreacted to everything. I kept a lot from him because he had a way of turning everything around and making it an excuse to punish me.”

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you; I’m not Zach.”

“I know. I can’t explain it to you. I know you aren’t Zach but he programmed me to be a certain way and even though it’s been a decade, I have to deprogram myself from the thoughts he instilled. I’m working on it.”

“That’s all I can ask for. I’m not always the most patient man, especially when it comes to your safety, but I care about you. A lot.”

Kayla felt the knot in her stomach start to unwind. She squeezed his hand, meeting his gaze. “I know I have...a complicated past but I’ll be more open and forthcoming from now on. I will stop trying to protect you without including you in the discussion.”

“That is all I can ask from you.”

Kayla sighed heavily against him and stood in his strong embrace for a few minutes. He smelled so good and damn if his chest wasn’t chiseled like stone. “I know this is going to sound... weird. The timing is off, but—”

“You can tell me anything.”

“It’s not a tell so much as...” She’d spoken to Paisley about this during counseling. She’d not had meaningful sex since Zach. Sure, she’d gone on a few dates, even had a couple of one-night stands, but nothing with anyone she trusted.

Her recent nightmares had been very sexual and she’d hoped maybe, if she slept with someone she cared about, it would help diminish them.

“You probably aren’t aroused right now but...could we change the subject and get you there?”

Maddock’s deep laugh filled the air around them. “Sunshine, it takes me less than a second to get hard with you around. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” His hand dropped from her waist to squeeze her butt and she squealed.

Maddock took her hand and led her down the hallway to his bedroom, her heart pounded with each step. At the threshold, she paused, suddenly nervous.

Maddock brushed a stray curl behind her ear. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for.” She almost choked; she’d been the one to suggest it.

She shook her head. “I want this. I want you.”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, slow and deep. Arousal sparked through her, and she melted into him, her doubts fading away.

When they came up for air, Maddock scooped her into his arms. Kayla squeaked in surprise, then laughed as he carried her over the threshold like a bride on her wedding night.

He kicked the door closed behind them and laid her on the bed, following her down to blanket her body with his. The solid weight of him anchored her, chasing away her fears.

She tugged at his shirt, craving the feel of bare skin. He drew back enough to pull it over his head, revealing his tattoos and the scarred flesh over his abdomen.

Kayla traced her fingers down the vicious mark. “Does it still hurt?”

“Not anymore.” He covered her hand with his. “You’re the only one who can hurt me now.”

Her breath caught at the raw honesty in his words. She pulled him down for another searing kiss, pouring all the trust she felt for this complicated, caring man into it.

Tonight there would be no more walls between them.

Maddock reached over and tugged at the hem of Kayla’s shirt. She lifted her arms and let him pull it off. He worked quickly, removing her bra, scooting down between her legs and pulling off her pants and underwear.

Her breath hitched as Maddock’s hands traveled up her now exposed flesh, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. She felt exposed and vulnerable, yet safe. He kissed her deeply and then his lips traveled down her neck, leaving a trail of soft kisses.

Kayla fought the rising anticipation as Maddock took control. She took a shallow breath as his lips got closer to her vagina.

“Are you okay, Sunshine? Do you need me to go slower?”

She shook her head at him. God, she needed this, and he was just the right man to replace the hellish memories with good ones. Closing her eyes, she forbid herself from thinking about anything other than the perfect man who’d just nestled his head between her legs and lowered his mouth to her—



“Oh my God!”

He chuckled, the warm breath blowing on her clit.

“If you like that, you are going to love this.” With mischief dancing in his eyes, he stared at her as he made love to her clit with his tongue.

Dear heavens. She clenched the sheets with her fist, arching her back straight off the bed. His tongue flicked over her clit with a steady tempo, a hand went under her butt and a finger from his other hand dipped into her wetness.

“Deliciously wet,” he told her before continuing to torture her clit with intentional movements.

“Please, Maddock!” She needed him inside of her. Her body craved more than just his finger. He raised up over her and, with a slow thrust, filled her.

“Is this what you want, Sunshine?”

“Yes! Oh God! Yes!” His thickness stretched her, and she wiggled her hips slightly under him. He reached down and held her hips still.

“Maddock! I need...” Fuck. What did she need? She needed the memories of the past washed away by his cock. She needed his seed spilling into her. She needed-

Pulling out of her, he slammed down hard into her wetness. Claiming what was his.

*That.*

She needed that.

As they moved together, their bodies entwined in a dance of violent passion, Kayla felt herself slipping further and further into the heat of the moment. Maddock’s voice whispered in her ear, urging her on, encouraging her to let go and let the moment take over.

He slipped a finger between their bodies and, as his cock owned her pussy, he stroked it. The sensations of his finger on her clit mixed with his powerful thrust kept the pleasure building until she felt like she was going to explode. The

entire world stopped spinning around her as waves of intense pleasure swept through her body.

He went still over her and thrust once more. Her orgasm milked every ounce of cum out of him. He roared her name into the bedroom, like a lion claiming a lioness.

As her orgasm faded, Maddock rolled them over and snuggled her to his chest. As she listened to his strong heartbeat, she felt content and complete.

That night, as they laid together, naked in his bed, Kayla thanked him. “I know I’m not an easy woman to be with. I’m sorry for the trouble you got when you asked me out.”

“You are the strongest, bravest woman I know,” Maddock said fiercely. “Don’t ever apologize for who you are. Everyone has a past.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“With all my heart. You survived hell and came out the other side. Now you have a chance to heal and find happiness again.” He kissed her tenderly. “I want to be there with you, every step of the way, for as long as you’ll have me... and you better have a damn good reason to try and get rid of me next time.”

Joy bubbled up inside her, chasing away the last shadows of pain and doubt. She smiled, tracing the lines of his face with a fingertip.

“Then you’re going to be stuck with me for a very long time, Maddock Russell.”

He grinned, eyes gleaming with promise. “Exactly what I was hoping to hear. Besides, I think it is you who is stuck with me.”



Kayla woke slowly, blinking against the sunlight streaming through the windows. For a moment, she was disoriented,

confused by the unfamiliar room. Then she felt the warmth of Maddock's body curled around hers and remembered.

A smile curved her lips as she snuggled deeper into his embrace. Last night had been beyond anything she could have imagined. The intimacy they'd shared went far beyond the physical.

Maddock stirred behind her, his arms tightening around her waist as he pressed a sleepy kiss to the back of her neck. "Morning, Sunshine."

"Good morning." She rolled over to face him, tracing the lines of his rugged face. "How did I get so lucky?"

"I ask myself that every day I get to be with you." He kissed her, slow and deep.

Just then, her phone rang on the nightstand, the harsh sound shattering the moment. With a sigh, Kayla reached over to grab it, expecting to see Emma's name on the caller ID. She didn't have any patients on the schedule for the Saturday morning, but emergencies and births happened randomly and Emma had the on-call phone this weekend.

Instead, the display read "unknown caller." Her heart dropped.

"I'm not sure, but it's probably him."

Maddock's eyes darkened with anger as he snatched the phone from her hand. "Don't worry, I'll handle this."

"Maddock! Wait—" Her protest fell on deaf ears. She'd discussed with Paisley how domestic violence perpetrators liked control and attention, and she'd been doing everything in her power to ignore him. Which was why he'd escalated with the frequency of his calls.

Before she could protest, he answered the call, his tone icy. "Who is this?"

Kayla's pulse raced as she strained to hear Zach's reply. She visibly relaxed when a female voice was heard coming from the other end of the line.

“No, we don’t need an extended car warranty.” Maddock angrily hit the end button on her cell phone and handed it back.

“Maddock, you can’t snatch my phone out of my hand and answer it. Domestic violence perpetrators want control and they want the attention and satisfaction the fear of their victims gives them. Ignoring him is the best course of action.”

“You’ve been ignoring him for weeks now, Kayla. He’s not going away until someone makes him.”

“Please, just leave it alone for now.”

“I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all.”

“Can we please talk about something else? Anything else? I’m so over him controlling our lives.”

“Yeah, Sunshine. But instead of talking...” He rolled on top of her and lowered his head into a deep kiss. “I can think of some other things I’d like to do with you.”

# CHAPTER 9



## MADDOCK

Maddock found Kayla in Valhalla's barn, checking on a pregnant mare. He leaned against the post and watched her work. Damn, she was beautiful. Her hair was pulled up in a bun on top of her head, exposing her high cheekbones. His penis grew hard in his pants and he shifted, trying to get comfortable. There wasn't any time right now to satisfy his urges.

"There's a gathering at the clubhouse tonight. The guys wanted me to invite you. Lucky insisted my girlfriend be introduced to the brothers. Although, most of them know you or at least of you."

Kayla's hand stilled on the horse's flank. He wondered if she was scared. Biker's clubs could get an unfair reputation. She took a deep breath, turned, and met his gaze. "Will you be with me the entire time?"

"Every second except for a few minutes while we are in a meeting but I will be right on the other side of the door if you need me. I want you to meet the others, and their old ladies." Maddock stepped closer, tilting her chin up with a calloused finger. "You've got nothing to prove, Sunshine. Just be yourself. I'll ask Nick to bring Vee with him, so you will know at least one of the women. You've met Trinity at Night & Day?"

"Yes, of course. And, babe, it's called Day & Night."

"Yeah. I do that all the time." He smiled at her. "She and Lucky are dating, or something of the sorts so she'll be there,

too.” He wasn’t entirely sure what was going on with the two of them, and it wasn’t his business.

“Okay,” she said softly. “I’ll come.”

Maddock’s lips curved approvingly. “That’s my girl.” He bent to drop a kiss on the top of her head. “You won’t regret it. The guys will love you; I promise. I’ll let you get back to work. Pick you up at seven?”

After confirming her availability, he kissed her goodbye, on the lips this time, and strode over to where his bike was parked in front of the barn. Before straddling it to head to lunch, he sent a quick text to Lucky, confirming Kayla’s presence at the meeting. Once he arrived at The Rusty Crab, he slid into the booth across from Jay. Jay took his glasses off and stuck them in the front pocket of his shirt and closed the lid on his laptop.

Maddock couldn’t help but chuckle. He knew underneath the white button-down suit shirt, Jay was all muscle. They worked out together frequently.

“You remind me of Clark Kent,” Maddock said.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“When he takes off his glasses, he turns into Superman? You are like a computer geek and yet you take down hardened criminals. I don’t know. It works in my brain.”

“What are you smoking?” Jay grinned. “Natasha actually said something similar once. I told her if she bought me a cape, I’d paddle her ass.”

“Hey, Maddock. What can I get for you?” Delilah set a Coke in front him, very familiar with his mid-day drink choice and smiled warmly. Neither man cared if she’d overheard them, she was all too familiar with both of their lifestyle choices.

“What is Corky’s lunch special today?” Maddock asked.

“He’s using up the corned beef and making Reuben sandwiches. It’s his whiskey roasted corned beef served on rye bread, topped with homemade sauerkraut, homemade

Thousand Island dressing, Swiss cheese and homemade dill pickles.”

Maddock’s mouth darn near watered at the sound. “I’ll take it.”

“With french fries and slaw?”

“Sounds good to me. Jay?”

“I’ll do the same with onion rings instead of fries, please, Delilah.”

“You’ve got it.”

As his friend Tank’s girlfriend scurried off to put in the order, Maddock turned to Jay. “What did you find out about Zach? Does he own a real estate empire like Kayla thinks or was that one of his many lies?”

Jay leaned in closer, his expression telling Maddock all he needed to know before he even opened his mouth.

*Fuck.*

He’d really hoped both Zach and his wife had exaggerated his success.

“His wife didn’t exaggerate his net worth, that’s for fucking sure. The man is worth millions, if not billions. I’d bet The Citadel he’s involved in tax evasion and his net worth is more than what I’ve found online. As far as his power... It’s worse than we thought. Zach is not just some wealthy businessman with a real estate empire. He’s got deep connections in a dangerous crime syndicate, and he’s been arrested multiple times for assault against women. Many in the BDSM community. I don’t have to tell you how I feel about that. Nothing against him has stuck, and they’ve thrown everything but the kitchen sink. Most of it has been scrubbed from his record.”

Maddock knew better than to ask how Jay found the information. “I think we call Dax and get him involved. There’s a detective out of Denver, one Lindsay Beamer, who seems to be invested in getting Zach off the streets. She’s



personally arrested him half a dozen times. If Dax reaches out to her, she might have information that isn't searchable."

Maddock's jaw clenched as anger and concern surged through him. He wanted to call Kayla and make sure she was okay, which was ridiculous. He'd left her fifteen minutes ago. She had already been through so much at the bastard's hands and he'd be damned if he touched another hair on her body.

"Assault? How the hell has he been getting out of those charges?" Maddock's voice was low and dangerous, his fists clenched.

Jay sighed, running a hand through his hair. He waited for Delilah to drop off their sandwiches and refill their drinks before continuing. "Money and connections. He's got some high-powered lawyers and influential people in his pocket. It's been keeping him out of prison, but that also means he's slippery, and we need to be careful. Then, there's the fact the victims either go silent or go missing. No victim, no crime. Something, or someone, is making them change their mind about pressing charges or is silencing them another way."

Maddock's eyes darkened with worry for Kayla. "Kayla can't be anywhere near this guy. I was going to give him a call and talk to him man to man, but based on this information, I don't think it would do anything but inspire him to harass her more."

Jay nodded. "I agree. We need to figure out how to sever any ties between them and keep her protected. I'll dig deeper into his criminal connections and see if we can find any leverage against him. In the meantime, I'll text you the name of an app to help with the phone calls. I have a feeling, even if she changed her number, he'd find her. The app is in beta from the new tech guy that Rider's hired. It can tell if a number has been spoofed, if it's from a telemarketer or from the original source. It's not exactly legal...yet. But, it will block out all numbers not coming from a legit, traceable source and all legit calls will be traced and the data stored. The app will block out calls from Google or internet numbers as well. It should severely limit harassing calls. I'd recommend installing it on the on-call cell phone for her veterinary clinic and have the

office number forwarded to the on-call cell phone. The app doesn't work for landlines yet.”

Maddock nodded. “How much personal information does it collect? She'll be worried about her patients' privacy.”

“The app has a few different options. In this case, I'd recommend the GPS location and IP address. It's nothing too invasive, but if Zach were to use his personal cell phone, we'd know at minimum the towers the call bounced off of. I wouldn't be suggesting this to Natasha in this situation. It would be an order.”

“Yeah, well, you are Natasha's Dominant.”

“You aren't Kayla's? I thought you two were in a relationship now.”

“We are.” Maddock scrubbed his face with his hand.

“I've known you for a long time, Maddock. You've been head of security and a dungeon master at The Citadel, not to mention the number of classes you've led and Top socials you've attended. I find it hard to believe you would be content in a vanilla relationship...” Concern etched across Jay's face.

Maddock stared down into his sandwich, while it looked delicious, his appetite had waned considerably. He pushed his plate aside, his thoughts consumed by Jay's words as he watched his friend take a bite of his sandwich. He knew Jay was right, he couldn't imagine himself being happy in a vanilla relationship either. But seeing Kayla in so much pain had made him rethink everything. He couldn't deny that he wanted to pursue a BDSM relationship with Kayla, but his desire paled in comparison to his priority to keep her safe both physically and emotionally. He didn't want to put her through something that would remind her of the trauma Zach had caused her. Kayla came first. Maddock sighed and looked up at Jay.

“I'd be lying if I told you I didn't want to pursue a BDSM relationship with Kayla, but she's not ready for it right now,” he explained. “After what Zach did to her, she's traumatized. I don't want to push her into something she's not ready for.”

When we were at The Citadel for your anniversary party, she seemed open and excited by the lifestyle but seeing the bastard at her high school reunion changed everything. She locked up those desires and threw away the key.”

Jay nodded slowly, a pensive expression on his face. “I get it, brother. It’s a tricky situation. I’ve worked with submissives and slaves who’ve been raped and abused and helped them to take their control back. Paisley told me once part of it was exposure therapy. Some people believe it works, others don’t. I mean, it should be something she consents to and a mental health professional signs off on.”

Maddock frowned, considering Jay’s point. “I don’t know. She seemed pretty adamant that she wasn’t ready for anything like that right now. I don’t want to use BDSM as a way for her to cope with trauma. It’s not healthy.”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting,” Jay countered. “What I mean is that BDSM can help her reclaim power and control in a consensual way. It could be therapeutic for her if done correctly.”

Maddock chewed on his bottom lip, considering Jay’s words. He had heard of BDSM being used as a form of therapy before, but he wasn’t sure if it was the right thing for Kayla. “I don’t know, Jay. It’s a lot to think about.”

“I’m not saying you should rush into anything,” Jay said quickly, sensing Maddock’s hesitation. “But maybe keep it in mind for the future. I think it could be what she needs to really move past all this. Letting her control the narrative every step of the way. I don’t want to be insensitive and compare abuse to falling off a bike... because I know it’s absolutely not the same thing. In my experience, some assault victims can never heal until they’ve reclaimed their sexual identities for themselves. Others, will never be able to perform certain sexual acts again without thinking about what happened to them.”

Maddock took a drink of his Coke and finally picked up his sandwich. He took a large bite and as he chewed, he thought about what Jay said. They’d had sex and she’d

allowed him to be in control the entire time. Sex, it would appear, wasn't the issue. He hadn't asked her if she'd had sex since Zach, but considering the number of years it had been, he assumed she had. They'd both thoroughly enjoyed the act.

Maybe, it was the idea of physical punishment or confinement which scared her the most? He definitely had a lot of thinking to do.

"I'm not trying to sway you one way or another, but one more piece of unsolicited advice?"

"Sure." Maddock wiped his face with his napkin and took another bite from the sandwich. Corky could make anything messy. He barely tasted what he knew would be a delicious combination, his mind was too busy to add another item to his thoughts.

"I know you really like Kayla, but I know you. You won't be happy in a vanilla relationship no matter how much you like a woman. It's like asking a fish to give up swimming. To some people, it would sound stupid because they think of BDSM as a hobby or an activity to play. For those of us who have it in our blood, who live the lifestyle regularly and who need the balance given by a power exchange dynamic, it is as much part of us as our arms and legs. Without them, we'd have to learn to live life in a different way, likely not as enjoyable as before. I'm not saying it can't be done or that you can't find enjoyment without it but-" He took a bite and chewed slowly before continuing, "Some of our friends could do it, sure. They dabble in it and could take it or leave it. You? Not a chance in hell."

"I get it. But I'm willing to wait until she's ready." Maddock took another drink from his Coke. "I'll do whatever it takes to make sure she feels safe and loved. It comes first. I appreciate you always being honest with me," Maddock said sincerely. His friend spoke the words he'd been too afraid to think. He didn't want to lie to Kayla and wasn't sure he had. But, he knew what Jay said rang true. Was there a possibility of a balance? He knew he'd give it up, hell, give up an arm or a leg happily, to be with her.

“Regardless of the BDSM situation, we need to tell her about Zach. She deserves to know the truth and I won’t install anything on her phone without her permission.” Maddock said.

“I wouldn’t suggest you do. I was just saying in my relationship, it wouldn’t be an option, although, you know, Natasha does have a safeword and could use it even with this and I would respect her limits.”

“Which is what separates us from the Zachs of the world.”

“And it’s why I am so thorough with my membership requirements for The Citadel. I don’t want an unsafe douche canoe ruining it for everyone else,” Jay said.

“I’ve worked very hard on controlling my anger and learning coping mechanisms to do so, but Jesus, Jay. I’d like to drive to Denver and lay into Zach.”

Jay agreed, taking a bite of his sandwich, and then continuing, “The best thing to do is to have a plan in place. We can’t just drop this bombshell on her without being prepared to protect her and deal with the fallout. From what I could find, he’s pretty busy. I imagine he’s getting off on the intimidation and harassment. If we block him from her, perhaps he will move on and find another victim to target—although—like you—I’d like to put him down like a rabid animal. The other option is we block him from harassing her and it causes him to escalate further, possibly even show up here.”

Maddock nodded, his mind racing with a mix of anger and determination. He’d promised Kayla that Zach would never hurt her again, and he intended to keep that promise, no matter the cost.

# CHAPTER 10



## KAYLA

*A*s Maddock's bike rumbled through the mountains toward the clubhouse, Kayla held tight to his waist. She'd worn jeans and a fitted top like he suggested, not wanting to seem out of place. Her pulse raced with each bend in the road, wondering what she'd find.

The clubhouse was a log cabin nestled between pines, smoke curling from the chimney. Harleys and bikes Kayla couldn't identify crowded the lot, and raucous laughter spilled from inside. Maddock cut the engine and squeezed her hand. "Ready? You look beautiful."

It was the second compliment he'd given her on her looks since he'd picked her up. She wondered if he was nervous, too. She took a bracing breath, catching the scent of beer and barbecue. Her stomach growled and Maddock laughed. "There's some delicious BBQ in there. Pitty smokes the best pork shoulder, ribs, and brisket you will ever eat, but don't tell Corky that."

Slipping off the bike, she laced her fingers through his. "Ready."

Maddock flashed a grin and together they approached the open doorway.

Inside the clubhouse, the air was warm and welcoming. Men in leather cuts lounged around a massive stone fireplace, drinking beer and swapping stories. Their partners or "old ladies" as Maddock explained to Kayla, mingled together on

couches, sharing knowing smiles and gestures that spoke of long held friendships.

A few heads turned as Maddock and Kayla entered. Then a stocky man with a beard and an eye patch pushed to his feet, arms spread in welcome.

“Maddock, you son of a bitch! You finally brought a lady with you.” His gaze settled on Kayla, bright with interest. “Aren’t you a pretty thing.”

“That’s Rowdy. He’s harmless,” Maddock breathed into her ear.

“Rowdy. You are going to scare her.” An older man with a thick white beard speckled with black walked around the bar and held out a hand to her. “You must be Kayla, I’m Lucky. I run this ragtag bunch. Any friend of Mad Dog’s is a friend of ours. Make yourself at home.”

A chorus of greetings filled the air as Maddock made introductions. Kayla’s nerves eased at the easy camaraderie and lack of suspicion in their smiles. These were Maddock’s MC brothers, bound by military service, combat and living life on the edge. She could understand why that tie ran so deep.

“Have a beer, make yourself comfortable,” Lucky said, clapping Maddock’s shoulder. “We’ve been dying to meet the woman who finally thawed our boy’s frozen heart.”

Heat rose in Kayla’s cheeks, but she laughed. “You make it sound like he was the Abominable Snowman.”

“Near ‘nough,” a bald man grunted. “Thought we’d have to get him one of those mail-order brides before he decided to ask you out.”

Maddock shot his friend a dark look, though amusement lurked in his eyes. “Enough, you assholes. Why don’t you give Kayla a break and go roast a few more hot dogs?”

“Now don’t be like that,” Lucky said, winking at Kayla. “We just want to make sure your girl’s got a sense of humor in case she’s fool enough to stick around.”



A smile tugged at Kayla's lips as she squeezed Maddock's hand. It seemed she'd passed the test - and for once, facing the unknown hadn't seemed so daunting. Here was a new family who understood in ways most never could, bonds forged through hardship that endured.

Maddock led Kayla over to a worn leather sofa, settling in beside her as the club members resumed their revelry. He slung an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close against his side.

"I know they can be a lot to take in," he said, "but they mean well. We've been through too much shit together not to give each other hell. Lucky and I served together side by side in Afghanistan."

Kayla nodded, breathing in the scents of tobacco and bourbon that clung to his cut. "I can tell. That kind of bond doesn't come easily." Her gaze drifted over the room, lingering on scars and tattoos that hinted at stories she could only imagine. "I think it's good you have that. A family, I mean. Someone to watch your six when things go sideways. My family is more concerned with reputations and numbers in a bank account. They've never been much on support or love. I mean, my mom could only give me what she'd experienced, an off-putting indifference. She hired the most experienced of nannies, though. My dad—I'm closer to him than anyone else in the family—but even then, it's not like we are best friends. Neither of them were much on praise or cuddling growing up. But they didn't really tell us no either. I had a houseful of pets. I was closer to my dogs than the humans. Thus, the reason for my career."

His arm tightened around her. "And now you have me- and I come with my own baggage and a lot of brothers. More brothers than I can count sometimes." He looked around the room and then pressed a kiss to her hair, his breath warm against her scalp. "You're one of us now, whether you realize it or not, and I plan on it being for life."

A lump formed in Kayla's throat at the vow, emotion welling inside her chest. She turned into him, meeting his gaze as a wry smile curved her lips. "I don't have to start wearing

leather, do I? Black isn't really my color." The teasing wasn't lost on Maddock. His eyes glinted with amusement and something more. "Whatever you want, Sunshine. Everyone here knows you are mine; you don't need to wear a cut to be identified as such after I do this-"

He claimed her mouth in a searing kiss, igniting a blaze of burning lava inside her veins. Kayla sank into his embrace, the world fading around them as she gave herself over to his touch. She'd never been much for public displays of affection but, here, even though there were dozens of eyes on them, it felt intimate.

When at last they parted, chests heaving, she peered up at him through dazed eyes. "I think I can live with that."

Chuckling, Maddock pulled her close once more. "Good, because there's plenty more where that came from. And a cut too, if you play your cards right. Even if you don't want to wear it," he teased back. "Black looks good on everyone."

Kayla laughed, warmth flooding her as she gazed out at the sea of faces.

Her stomach growling again set Maddock in gear. "I'm going to go see what Pitty has available and make you a plate."

"They'll ruin you," Trinity slid into the empty spot Maddock left on the couch and handed Kayla a beer. Taking a hesitant drink, Kayla was surprised at how good it was.

"It's a shandy from a local brewery. It's like half lemonade, half beer," she explained.

"It's good. What do you mean they'll ruin you?" Kayla asked.

"They'll ruin you for any other man, ever. Like, make sure, completely sure, this is the life and the man you want. Because, after Maddock, you'll be ruined."

"That sounds...intense."

"He's intense. If you haven't figured that out yet."

“I know,” Kayla quickly answered. “Even on our most lighthearted dates, he had a brooding intensity to him. It’s like...” She tried to find a way to explain it.

“He’s always on? Always watching? Ready for anything?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Trinity laughed loudly. “Most of these men are Dominants, Masters, or Daddies. All of them are combat hardened veterans. They are the alpha males of society, the sheepdogs. They protect their women like mama bears protect their cubs.”

Before Kayla could respond, two other women approached. “Are you going to keep her all to yourself?” the younger of the two asked.

“Maybe. What if I do?” Trinity’s challenge was tilted with lightheartedness and the two women laughed. “Kayla, this is Cherry and Pinky.”

Kayla bit back a laugh at the outrageous names. “Unfortunately, my name really is Cherry.” The younger woman with the bright red hair smiled. “My pops had a real sense of humor. He saw the red hair and...”

“And your mom allowed it?” Kayla asked. She’d definitely not been exposed to such huge personalities as a child. Thinking back, she realized how boring her youth had been.

“I was an emergency c-section. My mom was taken to have her appendix removed right after I was born. Story goes by the time my mom returned to the room, it was done and over. I think she liked it.”

“Mine is a nickname,” the woman standing next to her said. “My favorite color is pink.” She shrugged unapologetically. She wore a hot pink cut covered in Barbie and girly patches. Her jet-black hair was tipped with hot pink ends. “Do you like it?” Pinkie must have noticed Kayla staring at her hair and shook her head from side to side.

Kayla nodded. “I’ve never had the courage to color mine anything other than natural tones.”

“Hang out with us and you will. I was forty the first time I colored my hair,” Pinky said.

Kayla mingled with the three women while waiting for Maddock to return. She was drawn to the understanding in their eyes and the knowing smiles they exchanged. Conversations flowed easily, bonded by a shared experience of loving men who carried the shadows of war.

“It’s not always easy, is it?” A petite blonde named Jessa sidled up next to her, holding out another glass of shandy. “Being with someone who’s seen the things they have. The nightmares, the walls they put up. But it’s worth it, finding the man beneath the armor.”

Kayla, wondering what was taking Maddock so long, had found out one man Lucky, Maddock and a few others in the club had served with committed suicide the night before. The men were talking quietly about him and sharing memories. The food could wait.

After explaining it in hushed tones, the conversation had turned to Trinity, pointing out which men had served together in the military, the branches they were in and how long they’d been in the club.

Kayla accepted the drink from Jessa with a grateful nod. “You’re right. I don’t know what exactly Maddock has gone through, but I know he’s spent time in counseling battling his demons, and I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, he is worth fighting for. He’s helping me confront my own demons, giving me the courage to heal.”

“Then you’re lucky to have found each other.” Jessa glanced over at a rugged brunette, affection softening her gaze. “Just remember you’re not alone. We’re all here for you, anytime you need us. Maddock made you family.”

“Thank you.” Kayla blinked back the sting of tears, her chest tightening with emotion. “That means a lot.”

Close friendships weren’t something she developed easily. Women were hard to deal with. She had Emma and, once upon

a time, had Jane. But now, she felt like she'd been welcomed into an entire sorority, no questions asked.

A comforting hand squeezed her arm before Jessa moved back to the bar to pour another drink. Maddock returned with a heaping plate of food.

"I thought we could share," he explained. "I put all of my favorites on here."

"Try the brisket first." Trinity nodded to the dark slices of thick meat on the plate. "You'll thank me later." She stood and headed over to where Lucky sat in an oversized leather chair and sat on the arm. He pulled her into his lap and snagged a big arm around her waist.

"He's a Daddy." Maddock explained to her.

"A daddy? How many kids does he have?"

"He's that kind of daddy, yes. But he's also a Daddy. A BDSM Daddy and Trinity is, well, they are in talks about her becoming his little. There are some growing pains there."

Kayla's face flushed, and she stuffed a piece of brisket into her mouth. The tender, smokey meat fell apart on her tongue and she moaned in pleasure. It was incredibly good.

"Now, knock that off. You'll give Pitty a big head and that's the last thing he needs." Maddock said. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Embarrass me? You didn't. I'm shocked he—I mean, have you looked at Lucky?"

"I try not to," Maddock teased. "He gave me permission to tell you in case you overheard Trinity call him Daddy. I told him you are kink friendly and don't judge."

"Nah. Never. I believe all adults should be able to love who they want and do what they want as long as they aren't hurting or forcing anyone else to do it, too."

"I agree." Maddock sat down next to her and handed her a round ball of cornbread. "These are the best hushpuppies in the state."

Laughter rang out as Lucky regaled the group with a story from their days in the sandbox, ribald humor and camaraderie lightening the somber undertones. Kayla found herself smiling, the shadows of her past held at bay for now within the warmth and welcome of her newfound family. Here, she could simply be - scars and all - and that was enough. Everyone in the clubhouse carried their own scars, just like her. There were no perfect people here.

“You doing okay?” Maddock asked, placing the now empty plate on the table.

Kayla leaned into him, smiling up at the man who’d volunteered to walk through the darkness by her side. “Better than okay.”

Maddock’s eyes softened, a wealth of emotion flickering through their depths. “Yeah?” he asked roughly, his grip tightening around her hand.

Kayla nodded, a peace settling over her that had been absent for far too long. “You were right to bring me here. I needed this. Needed to see I’m not alone.”

“You’ll never be alone again.” Maddock brushed a kiss over her temple, his breath warm against her skin. “Not as long as I’m around. And now you’ve got a whole club of people on your side. We take care of our own.”

“I’m starting to see that.” A contented sigh escaped Kayla as his arm came around her shoulders, holding her close.

For the first time, the future seemed bright with possibility rather than shadowed by the ghosts of her past. Perhaps this was what healing felt like - a slow unfurling of hope and joy, a reawakening of the heart she’d thought gone forever.

If so, she owed this new beginning to the man at her side and the unlikely family who’d taken her in as one of their own tonight. Kayla smiled, laughter bubbling up inside her as Lucky launched into another outrageous tale.

“He’s like the little boy who caught a minnow but tells you it was a shark,” Maddock explained.

“I wanted to welcome you home, Kayla,” Jessa said, coming back over. “We’re headed out, have to relieve the sitter, but I wanted to say goodbye before we left. Here is my number if you need anything.”

*Home.*

She’d found it in the unlikeliest of places, surrounded by the unlikeliest of people. But maybe that’s where home was meant to be found - in the spaces between, in the cracks and imperfections, with those as scarred and broken as herself.

Maddock pressed a kiss to her hair, his warmth and solid strength a balm against her soul.

Home.

Was it here in Maddock’s arms surrounded by this ragtag combination of people? Did Jane predict she’d find her home here in the small-town Grand Ridge, Colorado? Was that why she was so insistent that Kayla take over the clinic?

Kayla took a deep breath, soaking in the sounds and scents of laughter and friendship surrounding her. This was what she’d been missing for so long—a place to belong, people who understood. Imperfectly perfect people.

“I understand. I understand why you joined The Spartan Watchmen and why you call them all brothers. You are a family.”

Maddock’s eyes softened; dark depths filled with a tenderness that made her heart ache. “You deserve this, too, Kayla. People who care about you for who you are. I’m just glad I could show you that. We’re a package deal, all of us. It’s like taking you home to meet my parents.”

Kayla reached forward, brushing a soft kiss over his lips. “You’ve given me so much. A reason to move forward. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

“You already have. The moment you told me you wanted to be exclusive and mine.” Maddock cradled her face in his hands, longing etched into every line of his expression. “Just promise me you’ll keep fighting for that life we’re building together. That’s all the repayment I’ll ever need. Fight for us.

When things get tough, and I know they will, when we don't get along... when my anger or impatience rears its ugly head, fight for us. I promise I'll do the same when you need me to."

She covered his hands with her own, meeting his gaze with a smile. "I promise. This—this is worth fighting for."

Maddock's answering grin lit his eyes with joy. "That's my girl."

He claimed her lips then, a sweet and tender kiss that sealed the silent vows spoken between them.

They left the clubhouse hand in hand, walking out into the cool night air. A few stars peeked through the clouds overhead, pale pinpricks of light in the velvet sky.

Maddock tucked Kayla against his side as they headed for his bike. The familiar rumble of the engine a comfort in itself. She breathed deep of the night air, crisp and clean, scented with pine and possibility.

A smile curved her lips as Maddock's arm tightened around her shoulders, the warmth of his body chasing away the chill.

"You did good tonight," Maddock said, walking her up the steps of her house a few minutes later, pride and affection mingling in his tone. "The guys love you... and so did the girls. It's much harder to get the women's approval, and you knocked the ball out of the park. You're one of us now, you know that, right?"

"One of you," she echoed softly. Spartan Watchmen. Brothers in arms, bound by service and sacrifice and an unbreakable code of honor.

"I know what it means to you, to have a place you belong." His hand slid down to twine with hers, calloused palms and long, strong fingers interlacing. "You'll always have that here. With me. With them. Go inside, lock the door behind you and text me before you go to bed."



# CHAPTER 11



## KAYLA

A month after taking her to meet the Spartan Watchmen, Maddock asked Kayla to go with him on a weekend away.

*To a remote cabin.*

*In the woods.*

Kayla initially balked at the idea. But Maddock made a few good points. He thought it might replace the bad experiences with good ones.

Kayla had been attending a support group for people with PTSD. One of them had been in a horrific car accident and spoke about how it took months for her to get behind the wheel of a car again but was so happy she had.

Living in her own cabin home in the woods, she'd never equated it with Zach's abuse. Then again, she thought she'd done great at putting it all behind her - that was until she'd ran into him at the reunion.

Paisley called it re-traumatization during their session earlier in the week. Kayla was tired of being a victim, she wanted to take the reins and prove she was a survivor. She was safe with Maddock and the last month had been perfect. They'd spent almost every day together, whether it was having dinner or grabbing a drink at The Clubhouse.

When she'd spoken with Paisley about what Maddock suggested, Paisley had gently encouraged Kayla to try it. *Let*

*him know if you can't go any further. You can always turn around and come back.*

The cabin was right outside of Valhalla's gate, one shared by the residents. Maddock signed it out a few months back, he'd explained. Every winter, he went up for a long weekend and unwound. There was a phone in the cabin for emergencies, but otherwise, he turned off the electronics, signed out of social media and reset. He'd invited Kayla, no pressure, to bring the dogs and go with. He'd understand if it was too much for her.

She wanted to.

She'd been working on grounding techniques and dealing with trauma triggers. Specifically, she'd been trying to separate reality from memories. It was hard but something she worked on every day.

Now, as she rode to the cabin in Maddock's truck, with the three dogs in the backseat, her heart started racing. She could do this; she would do this. It helped that the seasons were different. White snow blanketed the forest around her, casting it in an almost magical glow.

The cabin emerged from the pine forest; its weathered logs moss-covered with age. It looked nothing like the overpriced hunting cabin that Zach's father owned. This was well loved and old. She centered herself with the techniques Paisley taught her, naming off things she could see, smell, touch and hear.

Kayla breathed in the crisp mountain air, as she stepped out of the truck, a smile spreading across her face. After the bustle of her veterinary practice, the quiet serenity soothed her soul.

Maddock grabbed their bags from the truck and nodded at the cabin. "Home sweet home for the weekend." His gaze lingered on her, warmth flickering in his intense eyes. "Doing okay?"

"I am. Oddly. The cabin doesn't resemble... let's just not talk about it, okay? I'll bring it up if I need to."

“I think we should come up with a safeword.”

“Safeword?” Kayla furrowed her brows and looked at Maddock. “Like a BDSM one?”

“Kinda. I wanted you to have a word to say if you were overwhelmed and needed me. Like a panic word. Kind of like what you would text a friend if you needed them to get you out of an awkward blind date.”

“Oh. Okay. What should it be?”

“I don’t know, Sunshine. If we were at The Citadel we would use red. What would you like it to be?”

Kayla spun around staring at the woods around her. A beautiful red cardinal landed on the tree branch overhead. “Cardinal,” she said.

“Cardinal it is.” Maddock whistled and the dogs ran back toward them. She’d been grateful when her golden retrievers met Gretel and the three dogs bonded immediately. Sometimes, it wasn’t that easy.

“It’s perfect,” she said, looking at everything around her. She slid an arm around his waist, leaning into his solid warmth. He pressed a kiss to her hair, the tender gesture squeezing her heart.

Inside, the crackling fireplace cast a golden glow over handmade furniture and rustic decor. Maddock stoked the fire as Kayla unpacked, a contented sigh escaping her lips.

“Get settled in. I’ll make us some dinner.” He headed to the kitchen, shrugging out of his leather cut as he went.

Kayla bit her lip, watching the play of muscles under his snug t-shirt. After a month of sleeping together almost nightly, her heart still skipped a beat at the sight of him. She smoothed the throw blanket on the sofa and curled up, listening to Maddock chopping something in the kitchen and humming softly.

The aroma of chili wafted through the cabin, her stomach rumbling in response. But it was the man behind the meal, and the way he took care of her, that nourished her soul.

Maddock set two bowls of chili on the coffee table and sat beside her, pulling her feet into his lap. “Dig in, Sunshine. I bet you are hungry.”

“Famished.” She took a spoonful of the hearty chili, the spicy and savory flavors bursting on her tongue. “Delicious!”

“My secret ingredient is love.” Maddock winked at her, warmth flooding her cheeks.

Kayla ducked her head to hide her smile. She leaned over and kissed him, slow and deep. “Thank you for this weekend. I wasn’t sure I could do it, but I’m already glad I did.”

Maddock cupped her cheek, his eyes soft with emotion. “Any place is perfect, as long as you’re with me.”

Her heart overflowed. The cabin, the quiet, the stunning scenery, all paled in comparison to the man beside her. She never thought she’d be able to find a man she wanted to grow old with. She definitely didn’t think he’d be a scarred former special forces operator who, as it turned out, had nightmares that rivaled her own. But life sometimes had a funny way of providing what you needed, even if you begged it not to.

After they were finished eating, Maddock suggested they go for a hike to explore the natural beauty of the area. They bundled up in warm jackets, hats, and gloves and slipped on their boots.

Maddock pulled Kayla close, wrapping his arms around her as she tugged on her gloves. “Ready for an adventure?”

“With you?” She nuzzled his neck, breathing in his woody scent. “Always.”

He kissed the top of her head and took her hand. Together they stepped outside into a winter wonderland of snow-draped pine trees and majestic peaks towering under a pale blue sky. The dogs ran out ahead, constantly circling back to their owners, frolicking in the snow.

The cold air seeped into her lungs, crisp and fresh, as a profound stillness settled over the landscape. Not a bird chirped nor a leaf rustled. The world seemed frozen in time

except for Kayla, Maddock and the three dogs. Was she in a fairytale story? Snow White rescued by the handsome prince?

Kayla squeezed Maddock's hand. "It's so quiet. So perfect."

"Like heaven on earth. Some people love the summer, but I prefer the winter. You can only remove so many clothes, but you can layer as many as you want. The fresh snow is like a new coat of white paint, removing the blemishes and giving God a clean canvas to paint on." Maddock gazed out at the mountains, a wistful smile curving his lips.

Maddock covered her hand with his, pressing a kiss to her palm. "I'm thankful I get to share this with you. After we'd first met, I'd come out here and made a list of things I needed to accomplish before I could ask you out. Getting my drinking and anger under control were important. I needed to be a healthy man in order to be a good partner. I've carried the list around with me in my wallet ever since that day. I promise you, Kayla, I might not be a perfect man but I will do everything to be the man you need."

Kayla blinked back tears at his vow. "You are my knight in shining armor. I don't think anyone has given me such an expensive gift. Changing, bettering yourself, becoming the best and healthiest version you can be..."

"Your heart is my armor." Maddock tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and nodded to the trail. "Let's explore."

They continued down the trail, snow crunching under their boots. Maddock pointed out landmarks along the way, weaving stories of his time in the military and adventures with his brothers both on Valhalla and the Spartan Watchmen. Each tale revealed another layer of the man she had come to love—his courage, loyalty, humor, and deep wells of compassion.

Kayla listened, enraptured, piecing together the mosaic of his past. She'd heard rumors of situations that occurred here in recent years. Something with a Mexican drug cartel, a story about a rogue government CIA officer and recently, a tale involving a United States Senator. Maddock told her about

those situations, clarifying fact from fiction, and gave her more details about his past.

A past that had shaped him into the protector and healer she now knew him to be. Her admiration grew with each word until her heart overflowed.

How had she gotten so lucky to find a man like him? A man who saw beyond her scars to the soul inside. Who stood as a bulwark against her fears and the demons of memory that continued to haunt her.?

Her hand tightened around his arm, and Maddock glanced down with a smile, reading her thoughts as clearly as if she'd spoken them aloud.

“What is it, Sunshine?”

Kayla shook her head, at a loss for words in the face of so much emotion.

Maddock stopped, turning to face her. He cupped her cheeks, his eyes shining with understanding. “I know you said you didn't want to talk about it anymore, but I am incredibly grateful that instead of running, you opened up to me about what happened to you and gave us a chance. I hope you know, you'll never be alone again. I'm here to chase away the demons of your past, too.”

Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. But for the first time, they were tears of joy. Of hope. She stretched up on her toes and kissed him with all the love in her heart.

When at last they parted, Kayla smiled up at him. “I didn't know you when you were active duty but you are my hero. You've already slain them. We haven't been bothered by Zach since we installed the app and forwarded the calls. It's been a relief to live without fear of him calling and harassing me. I think Jay was right. When he couldn't control me anymore, he found someone else.”

Maddock kissed her forehead and wiped away her tears. “We will have many adventures now and in the future and I can't wait to go on them with you. I'm not a hero. I'm not always a good man, sometimes, I do things that straddle the

line. Some might consider them morally gray. But I'm yours and I will do whatever it takes to preserve the good thing we have going. Both of us have faced an unfair amount of trauma in our lives. It's time to enjoy this second chance life has given us to make something beautiful out of it."

Arm in arm, they continued down the trail, leaving the past behind them and embracing the future with open hearts. A future of love, laughter, and joy in their own little piece of heaven. Together.

They emerged from the trail into a wide, open clearing blanketed in pristine white snow. A frozen lake stretched out before them, encircled by majestic snow-capped peaks that rose like sentinels under the azure sky.

Kayla gasped, enchanted by the breathtaking beauty. "It really is like something out of a fairy tale." She voiced her earlier thoughts out loud.

"Or Valhalla," Maddock said softly. He squeezed her hand, his eyes distant for a moment. "When I first came up here, broken and alone, this place gave me hope. Reminds me of the light still left in the world."

His words pierced her heart. Kayla reached up to cradle his cheek, bringing his gaze back to hers. "You gave me hope too. You saved me just as much as this place saved you."

Maddock covered her hand with his, pressing a kiss to her palm. "You were my light in the darkness, Kayla. You, tThe Watchmen and Valhalla gave me a home. A purpose. A reason to live again." His voice broke on the last word, raw emotion etched into the lines of his face.

Kayla stretched up on her toes and kissed him, pouring her heart into the tender embrace. "We saved each other," she whispered against his lips. "And we'll continue to save each other, every single day, for the rest of our lives."

Maddock crushed her in his arms, his whole body trembling. When at last he pulled back, his eyes shone with tears. But behind the tears was a light Kayla had never seen.



“I love you,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “Today, tomorrow, and forever.”

Kayla smiled through her own tears, her heart overflowing. “I love you too.” He was the first man she spoke those words to and meant them.

They stood at the edge of the frozen lake and gazed out at the majestic vista. “Have I ever told you the story about Peter and Izzy getting trapped in these woods together? You know, they hated each other at first.”

“Peter and Izzy hated each other? But they are adorable together!”

“They did. We had to rescue them. So, what happened was...” They hiked through the woods, each taking turns telling stories, occasionally squeezing each other’s hands and exchanging soft smiles. The trail wound higher into the mountains, each turn revealing a new stunning vista.

Maddock stopped and whistled for the dogs. All three of them came bounding around the bend and knocked him over into a pile of snow. She laughed, helping him stand, brushing snow from his shoulders and straightening his hat.

“Hey.” He tipped her chin up and kissed her, slow and sweet. “Thank you for this. For being here with me, for taking a chance this weekend.”

Emotion welled in Kayla’s chest. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

As the sun dipped lower, they found an outcropping overlooking a valley filled with pine trees. Maddock spread a blanket over the ground and wrapped his arms around Kayla, sharing his body heat.

The sky ignited, pinks and oranges bleeding into purples as the sun descended behind the mountains. Kayla sighed, melting into Maddock’s embrace. The fiery colors were reflected in his eyes as he gazed down at her, radiating a peace she’d once thought impossible to find.

Here, cradled in Maddock’s arms with the majesty of nature on display, Kayla felt whole. As if the broken pieces of

her soul had finally been pieced back together.

The sun dipped below the horizon, shadows lengthening over the valley. But in Maddock's embrace, Kayla had found nothing but light.

They made their way down the trail in comfortable silence, hands clasped together. A full moon rose over the mountains, bathing the forest in silver light.

When the cabin came into view, Kayla sighed. She didn't want this perfect day to end. As if reading her thoughts, Maddock squeezed her hand. "This is only the beginning, Sunshine. We have the rest of our lives to make memories here."

Kayla smiled up at him, her heart overflowing. "I love you." A month of being official, several months of dating, and years of being friends. She knew. Beyond a shadow of a doubt. She loved him... and he'd said it first.

"And I love you." Maddock stopped, turning to face her. She rose up on her toes, sealing her lips over his. The kiss was slow and deep, filled with tenderness. When they parted, Kayla rested her forehead against his. "I'd like to try out the bed now..."

A low growl rumbled in Maddock's chest. He scooped her into his arms and carried her the rest of the way to the cabin, kicking the door open.

The fire had died down to embers, casting a warm glow over the rustic interior. Maddock laid her on the bed, his hands roaming over her body as he stripped away their clothes between searing kisses.

Kayla moaned softly as Maddock trailed his lips down her neck, leaving a path of heated kisses in his wake. She arched her back, pressing her body closer to his as she felt his erection against her thigh.

Maddock's hands roamed over her skin, sending shivers of pleasure coursing through her body. Her nipples were hard and sensitive, and she gasped as he took one between his lips, licking and sucking until she writhed underneath him

desperately wanting more. His tongue continued to circle her nipple, sending jolts of pleasure straight to her core. When his teeth gently grazed over the tip of her left nipple, she threw her head back, moaning in ecstasy.

As Maddock's hands traveled further down her body, her breath became shallower and her heart beat faster. She couldn't believe how much she wanted him, how much she was willing to let go of just to feel his touch.

He parted her legs and trailed his fingers up her inner thighs, teasing her mercilessly. She moaned and arched her back, pressing herself closer to him.

"Please," she begged, "Please don't stop."

Maddock chuckled darkly and leaned down and captured her lips in a deep kiss. His tongue darted into her mouth as his hand slipped between her legs and found the sweet spot that made her shudder with pleasure.

Kayla cried out as he circled his fingers around her clit, sending waves of ecstasy through her. Her hips bucked uncontrollably as he continued to play with the sensitive bud, her moans and gasps growing louder and more desperate.

Her body was on fire as Maddock lowered his head, his tongue replacing his fingers. He licked and suckled as if he couldn't get enough of her taste. Her pleasure built until it was almost unbearable.

She needed him inside her, and she urged him on by grinding her hips against his mouth. Maddock groaned and crawled back up her body, and shifting his weight, positioned himself between her legs. He entered her slowly, filling her completely. Looking into her eyes, he pulled out and thrust again, brushing against her g-spot with the head of his cock.

Kayla shuddered as he picked up speed, the friction building with each thrust. She wrapped her legs around his hips and dug her nails into his shoulder blades as he rode her hard.

Their bodies were slick with sweat, their moans growing louder with every passing moment. Kayla felt herself climbing

towards orgasm, the pleasure coiling tighter and tighter inside her core. She cried out as Maddock hit just the right spot, sending her over the edge into a mind-blowing climax. Maddock followed soon after, collapsing on top of her in exhaustion. She felt the aftershocks of pleasure coursing through her and soaked in every last sensation.

They lay there for a long moment, tangled together in a blissful haze. Eventually, Maddock rolled off of her and pulled her into his arms.

“God,” Kayla whispered finally. “That was amazing.”

“That was just the appetizer. Give me a minute and I will show you what amazing really looks like.” Kayla gave herself over to him fully, heart, body, and soul. And the way he mastered her body, bringing her repeated orgasms, she knew she’d been claimed by him, too.

After another ridiculously amazing fucking, she couldn’t call what he’d done to her making love, Kayla nestled into Maddock’s embrace, draping her arm over his chest, and tangling her legs with his. His heart thudded steadily under her palm, the strong and comforting rhythm lulling her toward sleep.

She listened to the crackle of logs in the fireplace and the whisper of wind in the pines outside. A deep peace settled over her, unlike anything she’d known before. Here, cocooned in Maddock’s arms amid the quiet beauty of the mountains, she’d overcome the memories of the past and built new ones.

Maddock pressed a kiss to the top of her head, his hand gliding up and down her bare back. “Almost afraid to close my eyes,” he murmured. “Might wake up and find this was all a dream.”

She was terrified of closing her eyes, too. But not because she might wake up and find this was all a dream, but because the nightmares might resurface. She shook her head, refusing to allow herself to go there, refusing to allow the dark to seep into the joy. Instead, she smiled, tilting her chin up to meet his gaze. “If it is, don’t wake me.”

One corner of his mouth quirked. “Not a chance, Sunshine. I’m keepin’ you right here where you belong.”

“Promise?”

“On my life.” His eyes darkened, raw emotion flickering in their depths. “I’d walk through hell again to find my way back to you. Sometimes, I wonder if you aren’t my reward for keeping going. There were some dark days and pitch-black nights where I contemplated no longer fighting. When I look at you... I’m so damned glad I never went down that path. It’s like God created you for me and he waited until I could be the man you deserved to bring you into view.”

Kayla’s breath caught at the intensity of his words. She’d never doubted his love or the strength of his commitment. But in moments like this, when he bared his soul so openly, she was reminded of the gift she’d been given. Of the man who held her heart.

“If that’s the case, he did the same for me. He waited until he knew I would need your strength to keep me standing, to keep me moving... I’ve been the type to run away from my problems instead of face them head on. Jane, she knew I needed somewhere to put down roots. She picked out Grand Ridge for me, I didn’t choose it. But, I think, if it was God or fate or the universe... whatever or whoever it was, they waited until we needed each other. We flirted for years and never moved on this- on us- until the right time. And it’s a good thing. If we’d started dating back when we first met, before you’d done the work, we wouldn’t have ever made it.”

Maddock stared at her for a long moment. Then he claimed her mouth in a searing kiss that left her breathless. “I’ll tell you one thing, Sunshine. Forever’s not long enough to be with you,” he said roughly. “But it’s a start.”

# CHAPTER 12



## KAYLA

Kayla's skin prickled as she walked down Main Street toward Day & Night, a familiar uneasy feeling settling in her stomach.

Life was predictable.

Whenever things went too smoothly for Kayla, she started to prepare. History proved that good things didn't just happen to her. Good things were a foreshadowing of horrific things to come.

After the weekend with Maddock, they'd found themselves in a routine. Work, Watchmen and Valhalla business kept Maddock busy and her growing veterinary clinic made the days fly by. They tried to see each other as often as possible, carving out intentional time on nights and weekends. They didn't go more than a couple hours without a phone call or a text message.

Jay's friend's app really seemed to do the trick and kept Zach's calls at bay. Until last week when Zach decided he didn't have any more fucks to give and started texting her from a cell phone on their family plan.

The emails and calls had started again a week ago, a slow trickle that was building into a flood. She blocked him, but he simply changed his number and found a way back in.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she flinched. There it was on the screen. *One new message.*

*You thought you could escape without paying the price for your actions. I'm right outside Grand Ridge now. We have some unfinished business to take care of.*

Kayla's breath caught in her throat and she glanced over her shoulder. The street was empty, but she could feel his eyes on her.

The phone buzzed again.

*You can't hide from me, Kayla. I'll find you. When I do, you will be punished.*

She quickened her pace, fingers curling around the phone. His manipulation and threats were escalating again, that familiar pattern of control that had dominated her life for far too long.

Kayla ducked into Day & Night, the coffee shop by day, wine bar by night and waved at Trinity, glad to see her behind the espresso bar.

"Hey Kayla! Why do you look like you've seen a ghost?" Trinity asked, wiping her hands on her apron. "I just cleaned the machine. Want your usual?"

Kayla forced a smile and walked over to the bar, grateful to not be alone. The shop was quiet, in between the morning rush and the night time wine bar opening. She could smell the delicious aroma of appetizers baking in the oven. The makings of a charcuterie board were spread out on the bar behind Trinity.

Two college aged students were gathered in the back corner, talking in hushed whispers, books spread across a table, laptops propped open. Kayla remembered those days.

"Seriously," Trinity slid a steamy cup of caramel colored coffee toward her. "What's wrong?"

Before she could answer, Maddock stepped into the shop, the familiar jangle of the bell above the door alerting the women to his presence. He made his way over to them. "Everything okay?"



She started at the sound of his voice. “I just asked her the same thing,” Trinity said. She turned her back to them and started to fill the espresso machine again. “Americano?”

Maddock nodded. “Sure. I’ll never turn down coffee.” He wrapped an arm around Kayla’s waist. “You seemed... distracted at lunch today.” He waited for her to meet his eyes. “And you took off in a hurry just now down the street. I’d turned onto Main and saw you. What’s going on?”

Kayla took a deep, steadying breath and reached across him for her coffee. Her fingers brushed his, sending a spark of warmth up his arm. “Zachary’s texting and calling again.”

Maddock straightened, jaw tightening. “He contacted you.” It wasn’t a question.

She nodded. “His messages are getting more threatening.”

“Let me see.”

She unlocked her home screen and handed Maddock her phone. He swore under his breath and handed it back to her. Reaching into his jean’s pocket, he palmed his phone and brought it to the counter.

“Jay, the bastard texted her again. He’s escalating with his threats. Track him.” After speaking the text into the phone, he set it on the counter and turned to Kayla.

“I won’t let him hurt you.” Maddock gentled his tone, though his hands curled into fists at his sides. “We put measures in place for a reason, remember? Spartan Watchmen are keeping an eye out and Valhalla is on alert. If he comes into town, we will know and we will get to him before he gets to you.”

“I know, it’s just...” Kayla wrapped her arms around herself, gaze darting to the shop windows. “What if it’s not enough? What if he—”

“Hey.” Maddock ducked his head to catch her eye, waiting until she looked at him. When she didn’t, he ordered her to. She’d noticed the increase in his bossiness lately and found herself needing his dominance more and more. “Look at me, Sunshine. You’re not alone in this. I’m here for you, and so is

Jay, Hudson, Nick and all the Watchmen. We won't let him get to you."

She searched his face, seeming to find the reassurance she needed. Some of the tension eased from her posture and she managed a small smile. "Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'll never have to find out." He squeezed her shoulder gently, pulse quickening at her soft intake of breath. "Finish your coffee and I'll walk you back to work. Why don't you plan on spending the night at my place tonight? I know a couple of brothers were watching the town limits for something business related. I'll call them and let them know to keep an eye out for Zach. He won't enter Grand Ridge without us knowing. But, still, I'd feel better having you behind the gates of Valhalla."

"Yeah. I think I'd like that too."



The rest of the afternoon passed quickly, with back-to-back clients at the clinic. After finishing up the last appointment, a sick parakeet, Kayla's phone buzzed in her pocket. She sighed with relief when she saw it was Maddock calling.

"Hey Sunshine, I'm on Valhalla with Jay."

"Did he find him?"

The silence on the other end was deafening. Finally, Maddock cleared his throat. "Yeah. He got a location. Apparently the bastard's been staying in one of the pricy ski resorts right outside of town for days."

"And we're just finding out?" Kayla swallowed down bile.

"Jay just confirmed it. He wasn't convinced it was him at first, but one of our men put eyes on Lori Anne. She's pretty recognizable. Looks like he's convinced her it's a romantic getaway." Kayla could hear the disgust dripping from Maddock's tone. "Look, Sunshine, I'm going to meet you at

your house, just in case. We're going to gather a few things and head back to Valhalla."

"Okay," Kayla said shakily. "I'd feel better not being alone."

"We have people watching the room. We'll know if he moves. We're going to find out what he's about, and we are going to keep him the hell away from you," he reassured her. "Anything happens, we'll know about it."

Kayla released a slow breath. "I'm almost done here. Emma will walk with me to my truck when we lock up. I have a couple patients I'm waiting to be picked up and then I'll head out. I'll text you when I leave."

She ended the call with Maddock, her heart pounding. Zachary was here, in Grand Ridge. After all these years, he had tracked her down.

She paced the length of her office hugging her arms around herself. Zachary was like a poisonous snake, coiled and ready to strike.

The thought of him being so close made her stomach churn. All the progress she'd made, all the hard-won peace she'd found here, felt suddenly fragile. At any moment, Zachary could snatch it all away again.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text and she jumped. But it was only Jay.

Jay: We've got eyes on the situation. Zachary won't get near you.

She drew in a sharp breath, equal parts relieved and ashamed. She didn't want to be the damsel in distress, relying on others to save her. But the truth was, she couldn't face Zachary alone. Not after everything he'd put her through.

There was a soft knock at the door. Heart leaping to her throat, Kayla peered through the peephole to find Emma waiting outside her office door, concern etched into her delicate features.

Kayla opened the door, blinking back tears. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have locked the door—”

“Hush.” Emma pulled her into a fierce hug. “Maddock called the office after hanging up with me. You’ve always got me. And the guys will keep you safe. We won’t let Zachary hurt you again.”

Kayla clung to her friend, the fierce support of this community threatening to undo her. She had escaped Zachary once. She could do it again.

She wasn’t young, naïve, or alone this time. Her phone buzzed with a text from Jessa, checking on her. They were all on alert.

With Maddock and the Spartan Watchmen on her side, Zachary didn’t stand a chance.

Kayla’s phone buzzed again. This time, it was a local number. Heart pounding, she answered, hoping it was the golden doodle’s owner letting her know she was on her way to retrieve her spayed dog.

“Kayla, did you really think you could kick me and walk away without facing the consequences? I trained you better than that.” Zachary’s smooth, snake oil salesman voice slithered down the line.

She gripped the phone tighter, panic and rage warring within her. “Leave. Me. Alone.”

His chuckle echoed through her bones. “Not a chance. You’re mine, Kayla. You always will be.”

Emma scowled, clearly able to hear Zachary’s threats. She mouthed, Do you want me to call Maddock?

Kayla shook her head. She had to handle this herself. “I won’t let you control me anymore.”

“Is that so? A little birdy told me about the biker dude you are fucking. Do you think he will protect you when the whole world sees what a filthy little slut you really are? No one will want you then, especially not him.”

Her blood turned to ice. “What are you talking about?”

“The sex tapes, of course. Hours and hours of footage of you begging me to do so many depraved things to you.” He sighed, as if reminiscing. “So passionate. So raw. Once those go viral, your precious reputation will be ruined. Remember, Kayla. You begged me. How would anyone think you were a victim when you literally asked me for it?”

“Y-y-you made me! You made me or it would be worse. You threatened—” Rage and terror warred within her, bile rising in her throat. How often had he recorded them? All those times when he’d—

She choked back a sob. “You’re bluffing. You’d ruin your own reputation.” But even as she said the words, she knew they weren’t true. Zachary always had a plan, and he’d do anything to regain control over her. She was certain the tapes were edited exactly as he’d wanted them to be.

“Am I? You are going to be punished, Kayla. One way or another.”

Kayla slammed the phone down, trembling.

Emma rushed over, eyes blazing. “What did that bastard say?”

She couldn’t get the words out, shame and fear strangling her.

“Kayla, talk to me.” Emma grasped her shoulders. “What’s going on?”

The ringing phone shattered her composure. She lunged for it with a cry.

But it wasn’t Zachary. “Kayla, it’s Maddock. The app alerted us that he called again. Are you okay?”

His gruff voice was like a lifeline, and the dam broke. She told him everything in a tumble of words, sobs wracking her body.

“I won’t let him hurt you,” Maddock said, icy determination in his tone. “Go home and pack a bag. I confirmed with Jay, Zachary hasn’t left his resort room today. I’ll meet you at your place.”

“But what about the tapes? If they go public—”

“They won’t. We’ll handle Zachary.” His voice softened. “You don’t have to face this alone. I’m here for you, Sunshine, however you need me.”

She drew a shaky breath, clinging to his promise. Maybe, just this once, she could lean on someone else. Trust Maddock to help her and not exploit her vulnerability.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“That’s my good girl. I’ll be there soon.” He hung up, and she turned to Emma.

Emma’s eyes gleamed with purpose. “Well, you heard the man. Go home and pack up. I’ve got everything here.”

Kayla nodded, relief flooding her that she wouldn’t have to weather this storm alone. Maddock was on his way, and together they’d make Zachary pay for threatening her again. She wasn’t that broken girl anymore, willing to surrender control to keep the peace. This time she would fight back—and win.

# CHAPTER 13



## KAYLA

*K*ayla's truck bumped along the winding gravel road leading to her cabin. Her day had been long and exhausting, filled with demanding patients and complicated diagnoses, the last thing she needed was Zach's bullshit adding to it.

All she wanted to do now was to get home to the excited barks of her two golden retrievers, Goldie Locks and Honey Bear, who were always waiting by the door to greet her, pack up a few bags and head to Maddock's house.

As she pulled into her driveway and cut the engine, Kayla's exhaustion hit her hard. Motivated to throw whatever she could into the suitcase in her closet, grab the dogs and go, she hurried up the steps of her house. Bracing herself for the dogs greeting, she was surprised when she reached the front door and heard their muted barking coming from deep inside the house.

Kayla's heart quickened with a sense of unease. Once, when they were puppies, one of them accidentally shut her bedroom door behind them while they were playing. It had been years since that happened, but maybe they were roughhousing... her heart dropped to her stomach with anxiety. With a pounding heart and hair standing on end, she considered waiting for Maddock to arrive or if she should get back in the truck and at least call him.

*Scaredy Cat. Don't let him control you. Maddock and the guys are watching him.*



“Goldie? Honey?” she called out as she entered the cabin. Instead of the eager padding of paws, she heard growling and barking coming louder from her bedroom, echoing with a deep, menacing tone that she’d never heard from her dogs before.

Taking a deep breath, she carefully pushed the front door open and stepped inside. Fear gripped her as she cautiously moved down the hallway. The menacing growling emanated from her bedroom. The door was slightly ajar, and the sounds of her dogs grew louder and more aggressive as she got closer. What could have gotten into them? Dread coiled in her stomach as she approached the source of the commotion.

As Kayla pushed the door open gently, her blood ran cold. Goldie and Honey were on the bed, teeth bared and hackles raised, barking and growling at a stranger who stood in the room.

The shock of the situation hit Kayla like a sledgehammer. Her mind raced to process what was happening. The woman turned to look at Kayla, a handgun raised at her chest. It wasn’t a stranger.

*Lori Anne.*

Why was she here, pointing a gun at her, with a look of madness in her eyes?

“Stay right there, Kayla. Don’t take another step,” the woman demanded, her voice quivering with anger. She’d never seen Lori Anne look like this. The normally well put together blonde stood before her with disheveled hair and tear-stained cheeks, and she trembled as she spoke. “You... you ruined everything.”

Kayla froze, her heart jackhammering. “Lori Anne, what are you doing here?” she asked, her voice trembling. Kayla, remembering the techniques she’d learned in therapy, breathed out slowly, steadying her heartbeat.

“I know what you did,” Lori Anne hissed, her eyes filled with fury. “You screwed my husband, and now you’re going to pay.”

“I-I didn’t know you were married when Zach and I... It was a decade ago. I would never have gone out with him if I’d known he was married.” *And I wish every day I had never spent a second of my life with the bastard...*

Lori Anne’s voice quivered, her gun hand trembling. “I couldn’t take it when I found out about you. Zach... He’s never been faithful. All those affairs, all the lies...and then finding out who... Someone I knew! That was the last straw. Why you? What makes you so great? The bookworm? The geeky little Kayla? What the fuck do you have to offer a man like Zach?”

Kayla’s mind raced, trying to find a way to de-escalate the situation. She took a cautious step forward, her hands raised in a calming gesture. “Lori Anne, I’m so sorry for everything you’ve been through, but this isn’t the way to handle it. Let’s put the gun down, okay? We can talk about this.”

Lori Anne looked nervously from Kayla to the dogs. Kayla looked over and saw that they were leashed to the bedpost. Her girls would have gone straight to her, tails wagging when she’d arrived. They weren’t attack dogs. Now, they sensed the danger toward their owner and their instinct to protect her was causing them to strain against the restraints. A low growl from the back of Goldy’s throat spurred Lori Anne to action.

“Move! Now!” She pointed the gun toward the hallway and Kayla went. Lori Anne slammed the bedroom door shut and marched Kayla into the living room, the gun pressed into her side.

“Sit down!” she ordered, motioning the gun in the direction of the couch. Obeying Lori Anne, Kayla sat, glancing around for any escape or weapon.

Lori Anne’s eyes were filled with anguish as she continued to speak, waving the gun wildly around in the air. “I just wanted him to love me, to choose me over all those other women. But he never did. And when I found out about you, I... I couldn’t handle it. The rest were strangers. I could close my eyes and pretend they didn’t exist. I didn’t know what they

looked like or where he found them. But he had to go and fuck *you?*”

Kayla’s heart went out to the woman, understanding she must be in pain from Zach’s betrayal. How much did she know? Did she know her husband was a sadistic, abusive asshole? Did he abuse Lori Anne the way he’d done to her? At the reunion he said Lori Anne wasn’t into BDSM which is why he looked elsewhere... that didn’t mean he hadn’t abused his wife, too.

“I never wanted any of this. I didn’t even know about you until the reunion. Let’s find a way to make things right, but you have to put the gun down.”

Lori Anne seemed to waver, her grip on the gun loosening slightly.

“I don’t want Zach. I promise you. I’ve been telling him every day I don’t want him in my life. I want the calls to stop. Believe me when I tell you Lori Anne, I don’t want anything to do with him.”

Lori Anne’s high-pitched laugh sent a shiver up Kayla’s spine. “My husband is obsessed with you, but he’s not the one calling. He’s not stupid. He’s spoken of getting even with you, but he’d make sure it couldn’t be traced back to him. No, he’s in Mexico, fucking underaged girls and deciding which one he wants to bring back to be his sex slave. He’s gotten around the law by buying international girls and smuggling them back into the country to use and discard. I’m not supposed to know about them but I found the hard drive.”

There was too much to unpack in her statement. Kayla’s head spun with confusion. “If it wasn’t Zach calling me...”

Lori Anne confessed, her voice trembling with desperation, “I used an AI app to clone’s Zach voice when I called and threatened you. It was me all along, Kayla. I wanted you to be scared, to be punished for what you’ve done.”

Kayla’s heart sank as the truth hit her. The threatening calls had come from Lori Anne herself, not Zach. It was a twisted attempt to punish her, driven by jealousy and despair. Lori

Anne clearly loved her husband. How could anyone love a monster like Zach?

“Lori Anne, it’s not too late to make things right,” Kayla urged, her voice gentle but firm. “Put the gun down, and we can talk about this. We can find a way to get you the help you need.”

“Help? I don’t need help. I need my husband to love me. To want *me!* Why aren’t I good enough?” Tears streamed down Lori Anne’s face as she looked at Kayla. Her grip on the gun tightened, and she waved it wildly in the air as she spoke, her emotions spiraling out of control. “You don’t understand. I’ve done everything for him. I tried so hard to be everything he wanted. Be the perfect wife. Do you know how much work I’ve had done?” She ran her free hand down her body in a parody of a caress. “Tummy tuck. Boob job. Lipo. All for him. And still it wasn’t enough. He’s never satisfied. And I’m not into the kinky stuff you’re into. I can’t keep looking the other way. I’ve looked the other way our entire marriage. I’ve wasted my youth, my looks, my body on him...”

Kayla’s heart ached for the woman even as she feared for her life. No wonder Lori Anne had gone off the deep end. How much heartbreak and betrayal could one person take?

“I would never have done anything with him if I’d known about you, I swear, Lori Anne.” Kayla looked Lori Anne in the eye. “Zach kept me chained in a dog kennel. He raped and beat me until I escaped him.”

Lori Anne’s face contorted with disbelief and rage. “You’re lying! I’ve seen the videos. Rape? Kidnapping? You are a liar. You begged him to whip you until you bled. What kind of woman does that? I know what you’re into, you twisted bitch! I should just kill you now before you ruin any more lives with your lies!”

Kayla’s heart raced as Lori Anne’s aggression escalated. The situation was spiraling out of control, and she knew she had to tread carefully. “The videos you’ve seen are edited. Zach forced me to beg. He got off on it.

“The truth is hard to accept when the lie is more comforting. I understand why you wouldn’t want to accept that your husband is a violent, sadistic monster,” Kayla said softly. “But you deserve the truth, Lori Anne. And you deserve so much better than Zach.”

Before Kayla could respond, the front door slammed open, and Maddock burst into the room, his eyes locked on Lori Anne and the gun in her hand. “Lori Anne, put the gun down.”

Lori Anne’s head snapped toward Maddock, and she turned the gun toward him, trembling and desperate. “Stay back! I’ll use it!”

Kayla’s heart felt like it was going to burst from her chest as the standoff intensified. But just as things seemed to be careening toward disaster, the back kitchen door swung open, and Lucky and Nick entered, guns drawn.

“Did you know she fucked my husband? Is this the kind of woman you want? A home-wrecking whore?”

“I’m sorry,” Kayla said softly. Nothing was going to get through to Lori Anne while she was like this. Maybe an apology would help.

“Sorry, don’t cut it!” Lori Anne shrieked. The gun went off with an ear-splitting crack.

Kayla screamed; certain she’d been shot. But there was no pain, no blood. Just the acrid stench of gunpowder and a hole in the wall behind her.

Lori Anne gasped, seeming to come back to herself. She blinked at the smoking pistol in her hand as if wondering how it got there. The sound of splintering wood and the increased barking filled the small cabin as the dogs broke free from their restraints and pawed at the bedroom door.

Maddock rushed Lori Anne, tackling her to the ground. Kayla watched as he struggled to restrain the woman. Nick approached and quickly kicked the hand gun out of Lori Anne’s reach. Lucky bent down and grabbed it, tucking it into his waistband.

Nick knelt down, putting a big knee into the woman's back and took over for Maddock. Maddock rushed to Kayla and wrapped her up in his arms, holding her close as she trembled.

"How did you know I was in trouble?" she whispered, clutching at his shirt.

"In person surveillance never showed Zach at the ski resort," he said, stroking her hair. "Jay tracked his location to Mexico. When we realized he couldn't have been making the calls, we put it all together." His embrace tightened. "I'm just glad we made it in time."

Nick spoke calmly to Lori Anne, trying to keep the situation under control. "We are going to get you some help, Lori Anne." Lori Anne muttered incoherently, her eyes darting around the room.

"What have I done? Oh God, I could have killed you." Lori Anne wailed into the room, sobs wracking her body. Nick released his pressure on her back but continued to restrain the woman.

Lucky called Dax, and an ambulance was dispatched for Lori Anne, who clearly needed immediate medical attention for her mental health.

Kayla stood and walked over to the other woman and knelt beside her, pulse racing. "It's over now. No one got hurt." She hesitated, then rested a hand on Lori Anne's back. "I really am sorry for what happened with Zach. If I'd known the truth..." She trailed off with a sigh. "Not that it excuses anything. What he did to you, to both of us, was wrong."

As they waited for Dax to arrive, Kayla remained calm and collected, relying on her support system and the knowledge that she was no longer alone in this battle. She looked at Maddock and asked, "What happens next?"

Dax arrived shortly after, and as Lori Anne was carted away on a stretcher by EMT's, he explained the plan. "We'll serve a warrant tomorrow when Zachary returns to Denver."

"I want to be there," she said, her voice steady. "When you arrest him. I want to see him in handcuffs for what he's done."

Dax studied her for a long moment before giving a sharp nod. “I understand and I will see what I can do. You deserve closure, and to see justice served for the hell you’ve endured.” His gaze shifted to Maddock, who stood at her side like a sentinel. “Zachary Cunningham is a dangerous predator, and he won’t go down without a fight. I can promise you I will see personally that Zach faces justice for what he’s done. You don’t have to live in fear anymore.”

The front door closed as the ambulance pulled away with Lori Anne in it, red and blue lights fading into the dusk. A faint bark echoed through the house, followed by the patter of paws. Kayla turned to see the dogs heading straight for her, Maddock having released them.

Goldy and Honey bounded over, showering her with slobbery kisses. Kayla wrapped them in her embrace, closing her eyes as the familiar warmth of their fur soothed away the fear coursing through her body.

She turned back to Maddock, meeting his worried gaze. “You were right about one thing,” she said softly. “Some battles can’t be fought alone.”

A smile lit his eyes. “I’m right about a lot of things, Sunshine. You’ll never have to face any battles alone again.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead, lips lingering. “Not as long as I’m here.” Kayla closed her eyes, safe at last in the shelter of his arms.

“There’s something else you should know,” Maddock said after a moment. His voice was quiet, laced with anger on her behalf. “Jay found an encrypted partition on Lori Anne’s laptop. Unedited videos of Zach...” He paused, jaw clenching. “Torturing women. Including footage of the days he held you captive.”

Kayla’s breath caught in her throat, a cold fist of dread forming in her stomach. So there had been cameras in his father’s hunting cabin. Her nightmare had been recorded, preserved like some sick trophy to be relived again and again.

She closed her eyes as a tremor ran through her. But the dark did not swallow her this time. Maddock was there, his

strength keeping her afloat. She leaned into his embrace, drawing comfort from his warmth and solid presence.

“It sounds like we have the proof we need to finally stop him,” she said. At least something good would come out of the videos.

“I know you aren’t in any danger tonight, but do you want to come home with me anyway?” Maddock asked.

Looking around her living room, Kayla nodded. “Yeah. I think your bed might be easier to sleep in than mine tonight.”

“Can I get your spare key?” Lucky asked. “Nick and I will fix this,” he nodded toward the bullet hole in the wall, “before you come back.”

Kayla nodded, smiling gratefully at the man. “I’m not sure where my keys are.” In the craziness of the situation, she’d misplaced them.

“You left them in the front door,” Nick said, holding them in the air.

“Oh, guess I did.” She took the keys from his outstretched hand and deftly removed her house key and handed it to him.

“I don’t like the fact that Nick has a copy of your house key before I do,” Maddock grumbled, and everyone laughed.

“I’ll make you a copy and I won’t take yours back,” Kayla promised.

“I’ll give you the passcode to my house when we get there tonight. You have my heart, you might as well have my security codes, too. Go get your bag, Sunshine. I’m ready to take you home.”



# CHAPTER 14



## KAYLA

The next morning dawned gray and gloomy, a chill in the air that seeped into Kayla's bones. Maddock gripped the steering wheel as they bumped down the dirt road to the private airfield, Kayla clutching his hand tightly.

They pulled up alongside the police cars, dust swirling around them. Maddock cut the engine and turned to Kayla.

"You don't have to do this." His voice was soft, reassuring.

Kayla's knuckles whitened around his hand. "Yes, I do. Thank you for coming with me." Her gaze flicked up to meet his, determination burning behind the fear.

Maddock squeezed her hand and nodded. They climbed out of the truck into the roar of an approaching plane and approached Dax.

As she stood on the tarmac of the private airport, flanked by Maddock and Dax, her heart pounded so hard she thought it might burst from her chest. After all the sleepless nights and tormented days, the confrontation she had dreamed of for so long was finally at hand.

A sleek jet taxied across the runway and came to a stop, its engine winding down with a whine. The door opened with a hiss, unfolding like the jaws of some great beast to reveal a staircase.

Rage and panic warred in Kayla's chest. She shook as the emotions physically manifested.

“I’m right here.” Maddock’s deep, steady voice cut through the chaos in her mind. “You’re safe.”

The first figure to emerge was a tall, broad-shouldered man in an expensive suit, his features obscured by dark glasses. One of Zachary’s lackeys, no doubt.

But her gaze snapped to the second figure, and a tremor ran through her. Zachary Cunningham stepped into view, impeccably dressed as always, his handsome face twisted into that cruel, familiar smile. Maddock snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her tightly into him.

“I will not let him hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid,” she whispered, “I’m angry.”

Rage rose in Kayla’s chest as she watched Zachary, primal and molten. He looked out across the tarmac and, seeing the police vehicles, he turned to get back onto the plane.

She took a step forward before a firm hand closed around her arm, anchoring her in place.

“Steady,” Maddock murmured, his voice pitched for her ears alone. She dragged in a sharp breath and gave a jerky nod, clinging to his touch like a lifeline. “They will not let him escape.”

Sure enough, two police vehicles were in front of the plane, blocking it from taking off again. Within minutes, a female detective had Zach handcuffed.

“Zachary Cunningham, you’re under arrest for kidnapping, sexual assault, and aggravated assault. You have the right to remain silent...” As the detective recited his Miranda rights and clicked the cuffs into place, Kayla watched, breath trapped in her chest.

And then he was walking across the airstrip toward them. Kayla took a deep breath as they got closer. Her stomach clenched, nausea rolling over her. Swallowing down the bile, she refused to throw up, to show him any signs of weakness. She would not give Zach the satisfaction of seeing her break. Not this time.

The detectives halted a few feet away. Zach smirked at Kayla despite the cuffs binding his wrists. His gaze found hers across the short distance, cold and calculating. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t *my* Kayla.” He smiled evilly. “Did you miss me?”

Kayla bared her teeth in a fierce smile. “Like a hole in the head.”

Zach’s smile only widened. “Still so feisty. I always did enjoy breaking that spirit of yours.” His gaze slid to the men flanking her, and his lips curled in disdain. “Found yourself some new playmates, have you? No matter. You’ll come crawling back to your Master soon enough.”

Maddock stepped forward. This time it was Dax pulling him back. She saw Maddock’s fist clutch at his side and knew he was struggling to contain himself. Kayla had no doubt that her boyfriend would lay the man out if given the chance.

Zach’s cruel laugh sounded in her ears. Rage and disgust churned in her gut, but she kept her voice steady. “Big words for a man in handcuffs. I hope you get a taste of what it feels like to be caged and raped in prison, you sadistic bastard.”

“Is that so?” Zach’s eyes glinted with malice. “I’ll be out by lunch. They never have enough to keep me.”

“That’s enough.” Dax stepped forward between Kayla and Zach.

“They found the hard drive partition.” Kayla shrugged off Maddock’s hand and, summoning every ounce of courage, stepped forward, going eye to eye with the monster. “They have it all, including the videos of you holding me in the cabin. Colorado doesn’t have a statute of limitations on kidnapping or sexual assault.” Kayla stood tall, staring him down.

“You didn’t break me.” Her voice rang out, strong and clear across the tarmac. “And you never will. I will not drop the charges like your previous victims have. I will make sure you rot in prison for the rest of your pathetic life. Who is the master now?” She watched as the light in Zach’s eyes

flickered and died, as his smirk melted into a mask of rage and shock. Watched justice, at long last, come due. For the first time, he had nothing to say as the officers hauled him away.

The commotion behind her in the plane caught her attention. Turning, she watched in shock as they took two young girls from the plane. They had more than the hard drive of evidence. They'd caught him in the act of international child sex trafficking.

“Lawyer.” Kayla turned back to hear Zach’s aggressive demand.

“Your lawyer won’t be able to help you this time,” the detective told him, folding him into the backseat of the patrol car.

Kayla watched them drive off, a fierce surge of triumph easing the trembling in her limbs. She turned into Maddock’s embrace, wrapping her arms around his waist, and laying her head on his chest. His heart beat steadily under her ear, a comforting rhythm.

Maddock held Kayla close, his strong arms around her. “You were very brave, Sunshine girl,” he murmured against her hair. “I’m proud of you.”

Kayla took a deep, steadying breath, absorbing his warmth and strength. “I couldn’t have done it without you.” She tilted her head back to meet his gaze. “Thank you. For everything.”

His eyes softened. “I’d do anything for you.” He brushed his lips over hers in a gentle, tender kiss. “Let’s go home.”



With Maddock’s reassuring presence beside her, Kayla walked back to his truck on steady legs. She slid into the passenger seat with a sigh, the adrenaline fading to leave her limbs heavy.

Maddock started the engine, casting her a concerned glance. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay.” Kayla offered him a tired smile. “Just processing it all, I guess.”

“I’m here if you want to talk about it.” His hand found hers, squeezing gently.

Kayla looked out the window at the receding airfield, shadows flickering across her face. “Seeing him again was hard, but not as hard as I thought it would be,” she said slowly. “He doesn’t have the same power over me he used to. I could stand up to him, and now...” She shook her head. “Now he’s gone, and I’m free.”

Maddock brought her hand to his lips, brushing a kiss over her knuckles. “You’ve always been free, Kayla,” he said softly. “You just had to realize it for yourself.”

“I’m proud of you, too.” Kayla said.

“Of me? What for?”

“I know you wanted to punch him...”

Maddock laughed. “Punching him is the least of what I wanted to do. I’ve dreamt of cutting off his dick and shoving it down his throat more times than I can count. But my anger management classes have given me some valuable tools to help keep my temper in check. I can use my imagination to bring him to the justice he really deserves.”

Kayla couldn’t argue with him. She’d dreamt of a variety of different slow, painful death scenarios herself.

As they continued the drive back to Grand Ridge, Kayla summoned the courage to talk to Maddock about something weighing heavily on her mind.

“Babe?” she asked him.

“Yes, Sunshine?” He glanced at her as he switched lanes on the interstate. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.” She relaxed her face and lowered her shoulders. She’d been debating on how to actually talk to him about this for a while. “I’m just nervous.”

“Nervous? You never have to be nervous around me,” he reassured her.

“I know. I’m nervous about what you might think or say. I’ve been thinking about it a lot...”

“Sunshine—” There was a warning tone in his voice and she chuckled. He’d been dating her for weeks, without even knowing it.

“There’s something I’d like to try. I think it might help me heal.” Her cheeks heated, but she forced herself to go on. “If you’re willing.”

Maddock glanced at her, his gaze intense. “I’ll do anything to help you heal, you know that.”

Kayla took a breath. “I was thinking we could explore some kink. Start slow, but...” She shrugged, dropping her gaze. “I don’t know how I’ll react. I know sex with you is amazing. I’ve never once thought about Zach during it, or the rapes. I thought maybe, exploring kink—slowly—with you might be the same way. But I’m afraid to lead you on if I can’t do it. If we start and it’s the opposite, it’s traumatic instead of therapeutic and I can’t do it, but I’ve given you a taste and now you crave it...” She twirled a piece of hair around her finger. “If it’s too much to ask, I understand.”

Maddock was silent for a long moment. Then he brought their joined hands to his lips, brushing a kiss over her knuckles. “We’ll go at your pace. And stop whenever you need to.”

She leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered and settled back into her seat.

After several minutes of comfortable silence, she said softly, “When we get back tonight, would you be willing to... spank me?”

Maddock’s eyes flicked to hers in surprise, his grip tightening on the steering wheel. “Tonight?”

Kayla ducked her head, a blush staining her cheeks. “I just...I don’t want to wait. The anticipation is hard and I’m ready,” she said hesitantly. “If you’re comfortable with it. I

think...I think it could help me work through the last of my issues, if that makes sense. I want to give you the control to Dominant me, while I maintain the ultimate power by being able to limit exactly what's done... I don't know if I'm making sense."

Maddock was silent as he considered her words. Did she move too quickly? Would he reconsider? "You are making sense, Sunshine. One of the attractions to submission is the deep knowledge that you are ultimately the one in control. If it's something you feel you need," he said at last, "and it will help you heal, then I'm willing to try. But we'll go slowly. And you have to promise to use your safe word if it becomes too much, or if you want to stop at any time. I know the bastard took that away from you-

Kayla held her hand up. "No more talk of him and what he did to me. I am doing this for *myself*, regaining something I enjoyed he took away, *despite him*. It's how I put him behind me once and for all."

"Then yes, when we get home, I would love to pull you over my lap and spank your beautiful ass."

Relief and gratitude flooded Kayla. "Thank you," she whispered. "For understanding. For always being there for me."

"You never have to thank me for that." Maddock said. "You're my heart, Kayla. My everything. I will always be here to give you what you need. Even if sometimes you can't ask for it."

They walked up the path to Maddock's house together, their hands clasped and swinging between them. Kayla's heart beat faster with each step, a mixture of nerves and anticipation swirling in her stomach.

When they entered the house, Maddock turned to her, cupping her face in his hands. "Are you sure about this?" he asked, searching her eyes. "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for."



Kayla smiled, leaning into his touch. “I’m sure,” she said softly. “I trust you. And I’m ready to take this step.”

Maddock’s eyes darkened, and he pressed a searing kiss to her lips. “Then go wait for me in the bedroom while I let the dogs out,” he said in a low, rough tone that sent heat spiraling through Kayla’s body. “I’ll be there soon.”

Kayla went eagerly, stripping off her clothes as she walked into the bedroom and dropping them in the hamper in the corner. She knelt completely naked in the center of the room, positioning herself the way she’d once loved, and waited with trembling anticipation to give her submission to a man who’d earned it.

What would he think when he saw her? Would he reject this act of submission? Demand they slow down?

A few minutes later, Maddock entered the room, closing the door behind him. Kayla kept her gaze lowered, her heart pounding, as he walked slowly around her in a predatory circle.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” he finally rasped, stopping in front of her. “You are such a good girl,” his voice was heavy with emotion. He stroked a hand over her hair in a tender caress. “My beautiful Sunshine, are you ready for your spanking?”

Kayla shivered, arousal pooling between her legs. She lifted her eyes to meet his, full of trust and love. “Yes, I’m ready.”

She was ready, completely ready. She’d never been more ready for anything in her life. She trusted the man in front of her with her entire heart and now, she wanted to give him her submission.

Maddock’s hand tightened briefly in her hair before he reached a hand out for her. She took it and they walked over to his bed. He sat down and spread his thighs apart, settling Kayla to stand between them.

“Do you want to keep cardinal as your safe word?”

She nodded, and he shook his head at her. “Sunshine, you are going to have to use your words.”

“Yes, Sir.” *Sir*. The word slipped out, foreign to her tongue. It didn’t feel heavy anymore. The word was no longer a threat, a foreshadowing of horrific things to come. Now it felt safe. “Yes, Sir,” she repeated, likely the way it sent butterflies to dance in her gut.

“What is your safe word, Sunshine?”

“Cardinal, Sir.”

“Good girl.” The words she’d longed to hear caressed over her body like a warm hug.

“You will use it the second any negative feelings start, do you hear me? You are not to wait until you are overwhelmed, afraid or panicked. If anything feels wrong or off, I want you to stay it immediately. Do you understand, Sunshine?”

“Yes, Sir. I understand.”

“If we move forward and decide to add D/s to our relationship, the use of your safe word will be our first rule. Not using your safeword when you need will always result in discipline. Safety comes first, Sunshine. Mental and emotional safety is included. Will you use your safe word if you need it?”

“Yes, Maddock. I will use it, I promise.” She knew why he was pressing so hard for her to use it, but she hoped, with him, she would never need to.

“What kind of spanking do you want, Sunshine?” The look of vulnerability mixed with the heat in Maddock’s eyes took her breath away. He truly was moving slow for her, giving her all the control she needed.

“I-I don’t know. I need—” The words tumbled around in her head and Maddock sat silently, letting her work it out. “I need release.”

He nodded and pulled her across his thigh, settling the top of her body comfortably on the mattress. “I can do that,” he told her.

The first slap came a second later, hard and stinging, snapping across the flesh of her rear.

Kayla gasped, tears pricking her eyes as memories rose and faded in her mind. But when the next blow came, and the next, there was no fear or panic. A heat spread across her cheeks and with it there was only bliss.

She was free.

# EPILOGUE



## KAYLA

Kayla leaned into Maddock's chest, his heart thumping under her ear, as laughter erupted around them. His arms tightened around her waist, pulling her closer onto his lap.

Maddock offered her a bite of his food, and she accepted it with a playful grin. But as she wiggled on his lap, a sudden grimace crossed her face, causing her to shift uncomfortably.

Trinity, sitting nearby, noticed her discomfort and winked at her in understanding. She leaned closer to Kayla and asked in a conspiratorial tone, "What did you do to get yourself in trouble?"

Before Kayla could answer, Lucky chimed in, his voice filled with playful authority, "Mind your own business little girl, or you'll find yourself sitting on a heated behind, too." He yanked Trinity's braid in warning.

"You are not any fun, Daddy!" Trinity pouted and stuck out her tongue.

"Stick out your tongue again and I'll make you use it," Lucky warned playfully.

Laughter erupted around them as Lucky's words were met with cheers and jeers from the club members.

As they sat together joking and telling stories, Kayla looked around the room at the now familiar faces. Pitty stood over by the table laden with food, a content smile on his face, Buffalo stood next to him, chowing down on a pulled

pork sandwich. Jessa stood behind the bar, pouring drinks. Across from Kayla and Maddock sat Nick and Veronica.

When Bomber strolled over and leaned down to say something to Lucky, the temperature in the room changed. Hushed tones replaced the rowdy laughter. Lucky left quickly and then, a minute later, strode back into view, expression grim. Maddock's smile faded as he took in his friend's demeanor.

"Meeting. Now." Lucky jerked his head toward the back room.

Maddock's shoulders tensed. He gave Kayla's arm a gentle squeeze before rising. "Duty calls."

She offered a reassuring smile. "Go. I'll be here."

With a nod, he and the rest of The Spartan Watchmen followed Lucky to the back. Kayla watched them go, her heart heavy with foreboding. Their troubles were hers now, too. She wondered what was going on; if the One Percenters were causing issues again. She knew the men were more than capable of handling trouble, but she couldn't help but fear for Maddock's safety whenever trouble arose.

In his absence, Kayla turned to talk with Jessa, Veronica, and Trinity. She gave them an update on Zach's sentencing, revealing that he had received two life sentences without the possibility of parole at a maximum-security prison. It was a fitting end to the chapter of her life marked by pain and fear. She'd never have to see or hear from him again.

"Whatever happened to his wife?" Jessa inquired.

"She was evaluated at the hospital after she left my house. I told Dax I didn't want to press charges. Instead, she was committed to a psychiatric hospital. Her parents took care of her kids. After she was discharged, she reached out to me and we had a long talk. She apologized for everything and I learned he'd married her for her wealth, no other reason, but she married him thinking she loved him. She and the children are receiving outpatient treatment. It'll be a long road for them but I think they'll be okay."

Veronica nodded. “You can’t control anyone else’s behavior. But you can control your own reactions. She reacted horrifically to finding out about her husband’s transgressions. Although, I think she might have known all along and was pushed off the ledge finding out it was someone she knew. It sounds like she’s taken personal responsibility and is learning and growing. I truly hope she can heal and find peace.”

“Zach gaslit her their entire marriage. It’s not easy living with an abusive narcissist. I’m glad she and the kids have a chance to live a new life without his influence,” Kayla explained.

The women nodded in agreement. They’d all felt bad for Lori Anne, even after she’d broken into Kayla’s house. Many of the women in the room had their own stories of abusive exes and could somewhat relate to what the woman had gone through.

The conversation shifted to talk about an upcoming event at The Citadel and Jessa’s search for love. As she’d gotten to know her, Jessa opened up about her own past. Her longtime boyfriend died in a motorcycle accident a few years before. The Watchmen continued to include her in everything after his death, watching out for her. Now, she was ready to start dating again and it felt like she had twenty big brothers getting in the way at every turn.

“I’m sorry I was gone so long,” Maddock said, sitting down. He pulled Kayla back into his arms, embracing her tightly. “Club business took longer than expected.”

Maddock dipped his head and captured her mouth in a searing kiss. Kayla melted against him, heart overflowing with love for this man who had stormed into her life and made a home in her heart.

When the kiss ended, he kept her close, her back to his chest. The chaos continued around them. Laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the smell of smoked meat filled the air.

She breathed in the scent of leather and spice, a now familiar comfort. In the dim light of the clubhouse, the scars

on his knuckles and the tattoos on his arms seemed to shift and move.

His lips brushed her hair. “Everything okay, Sunshine?”

The low rumble of his voice soothed her. She smiled up at him, tracing a finger along his jaw. “Couldn’t be better.”

And it was the truth.

Here, cocooned in Maddock’s arms, the rest of the world faded away. Her man and The Spartan Watchmen were the only family she needed.

Maddock’s eyes darkened, arousal flickering in their depths. Heat pooled low in her belly as his hands slid under her shirt, callused fingers splaying over her lower back.

She arched into his touch with a quiet moan. Their dynamic might be complicated, but this—this bone-deep connection—felt as familiar as coming home.

“Ready to get out of here?” His lips brushed the shell of her ear, stubble rasping against her skin.

“Yes.” She breathed the word, barely more than a whisper.

Maddock stood, lifting her easily. Laughter and catcalls followed them out of the clubhouse and into the cool night. Kayla smiled, holding him tighter.

Maddock set her on her feet outside, tilting her chin up for a searing kiss. When he pulled away, chest heaving, she swayed into him. He wrapped an arm around her waist, steering her toward his pickup, his bike was at home, taken apart in the garage. He’d been working on notifications all week.

“Easy there, Sunshine. I’ve got you.”

The familiar endearment sent a rush of warmth through her.

Once they were in the truck, she grimaced as her sore backside made contact with the seat. Maddock’s eyes flicked to her, a smug grin tugging at his lips. Heat flooded her cheeks. She ducked her head to hide her smile. She loved



every second of discomfort. She'd purposely poked the bear before they left for the weekly meeting.

His chuckle rumbled deep in his chest. "C'mere."

She slid across the bench seat into the cradle of his arms. He pressed a kiss to her hair. "That's my good girl."

The praise settled over her, as warm and comforting as a blanket on a cold night.

Here, she could let go of her doubts and insecurities. Here, she was safe. Here, she was his.

The headlights cut through the darkness as Maddock turned onto the long dirt drive leading to her place.

"Do you have to head into town early tomorrow?"

She shook her head, threading their fingers together. "I took the day off."

"Good." His lips curled into a slow, dangerous smile. "You'll need it to recover once I'm done with you."

A delicious shiver ran down her spine. She shifted in her seat, heat blooming between her thighs.

After parking the truck, Maddock came around and opened her door. She stepped out on shaky legs, leaning into his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her, one hand tangling in her hair. "Inside with you. Now."

The ragged command sent a rush of arousal through her. She hurried up the porch steps, pulse thundering in her veins. She was more than happy to do his bidding.

At the door, she fumbled with the lock. Maddock's hands closed over hers, stealing them. Taking the keys, he unlocked the door and then bent to greet the dogs.

Inside, Maddock kicked the door shut behind them and pinned Kayla against the wall. His fingers tightened in her hair, tilting her head to the side. He nuzzled her neck, the rasp of his stubble sending tingles down her spine.

“I’m going to make you scream my name tonight, Sunshine. Remind you who you belong to.”

She shuddered, heat pooling between her thighs. Like she could forget for one minute. “Promises, promises.”

He nipped her earlobe. “Careful. Don’t go gettin’ bratty on me now.”

“Yes, Sir.” She breathed the words, pulse racing.

“Good girl.” He rewarded her with a slow, sensual kiss that left her dizzy and aching for more.

When he finally released her, she swayed on her feet. Maddock steadied her with a hand on her hip.

“Go wait for me in the bedroom. Naked and kneeling. I’ll be there soon.”

She hurried to obey, stripping off her clothes as she went. At the bedroom door, she paused to glance over her shoulder.

Maddock stalked after her, eyes gleaming with hunger and purpose. Her inner muscles clenched in anticipation. She dropped to her knees and licked her lips, teasing him.

He paused in the doorway, raking his gaze over her bare skin. “I changed my mind. I want you on the bed. Face down, ass up.”

Heat flooded her cheeks, but she assumed the position without protest. The mattress dipped under his weight as he joined her.

“So fuckin’ gorgeous.” He caressed her backside, raising goosebumps. “All mine to play with.” His hand came down in a sharp smack. She jerked, biting back a cry.

A delicious pain spread across her skin.

“Count.” His voice was rough with arousal.

“One,” she whispered.

Another smack, this one harder. “Louder, Sunshine.”

“Two!”

He alternated between smacks and soft caresses, slowly building an exquisite burn. By the time he reached ten, her body thrummed with need, desire overruling any discomfort.

“Please,” she begged. “Maddock, please...”

He answered by sliding his hand between her thighs, finding her slick and wanting. She arched into his touch with a broken moan... and he fulfilled his promise making her scream his name out several times.



The next day, Kayla smiled as she leaned against Maddock's side. His arm was draped over her shoulders, fingers idly tracing circles on her arm. They were sitting on the back porch of her house, coffee mugs in hand, gazing out at the woods awakening.

“I could get used to this,” Maddock said.

Kayla tipped her head back to meet his gaze. “What, watching the sunrise over the mountains?”

“Waking up with you in my arms.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “These last few months have been perfect. I want to build a life together. Grow old side by side.”

Her heart swelled. “You really see that for us?”

His face was earnest, eyes soft as he searched hers. “I don't care if we make it on Valhalla or if this becomes my home. You pick and we will make it ours, together. I don't want us to spend another night apart.”

Joy and disbelief warred within her. To think she had once believed love would always end in pain.

“I already consider you my home,” she said. “The building we share doesn't matter.”

The smile that lit his face was brighter than the rising sun over the Rocky Mountains.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RJ Gray is a USA TODAY, Amazon & International Bestselling author of Explosively Hot Romance. She specializes in writing dominant military men and the feisty women they fall in love with.

Writing military romance comes second nature to RJ. A military veteran herself, she married her very own hero, an active-duty EOD technician. In the last almost two decades of marriage, they've lived in Illinois, DC, Missouri, Alabama, Florida, Washington State, Colorado, Virginia, and Hawaii. In 2022, the couple moved to the great state of South Carolina with their two young sons, two rescue dogs, and two adopted kittens.

When not writing, RJ's hobbies include whipping up delicious meals, capturing life's beauty with her camera and attending her children's multiple sporting events.

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