### ****Kayla and the Rattlesnake****

Kayla stood barefoot in the Arizona dirt, the pale red dust clinging to her legs. Her eyes, steady and bright, as whe walked over and then stepped onto the large, coiled rattlesnake nearby. The snake didn’t strike, its body tense, its rattle silent. It was a miracle, or madness, or something holy.

Kyle came around the rock and saw her. "Kayla, what the hell are you doing?" Kyle’s voice cracked as he gripped the handle of his revolver, the weight of it a reassurance against the insanity unfolding before him.

She didn’t answer, didn’t flinch. Her feet adjusted slightly, just enough to let him know that this was deliberate, and not a fluke. She had chosen this moment, this dance with danger, as if daring the snake, daring him, daring the universe itself.

Kyle’s hand twitched, his knuckles whitening against the gun. His mind raced through every possible outcome, most of them ending in venom and blood. And yet, he couldn’t pull his eyes away. Kayla stood like something ancient, something untamed. A breeze stirred her hair, and the desert seemed to hold its breath with him.

"You’re insane," he whispered, his words half prayer, half accusation.

A small smile played on her lips. "Am I?" Her voice was calm, her gaze never leaving the snake. "It’s only fear, Kyle. You have to be still enough to let it pass. Fear doesn’t own us."

"Fear? That’s a damn rattlesnake under your feet, Kayla! It can’t be enjoying that."

The snake shifted, its muscles rippling beneath her soles, and Kyle’s breath caught. He raised the gun halfway, his pulse hammering in his throat.

"Put it down," she said softly, her voice like the desert wind, both gentle and unyielding. "It’s not going to bite me. It doesn’t want to. Just like I don’t want to run from it."

Kyle lowered the gun an inch, then two. He wanted to scream, to yank her away, to curse her name. But more than that, he wanted to memorize this moment—the way the sunlight framed her, the raw defiance in her eyes, the maddening bravery that had always both terrified and captivated him.

She lifted one foot and then the other and the snake slid out from under her, slow and deliberate, like it understood it was part of something larger. It slithered off into the scrub, its rattle brushing against the dirt but remaining silent.

Kayla stepped back, brushing her dusty feet against her jeans. "See?" she said, her tone light, as though she’d just proven something obvious.

Kyle holstered his gun with a shaking hand, his heart still racing. "You’re out of your damn mind."

She laughed, the sound ringing clear and bright in the quiet desert. "Maybe. But at least I’m not afraid."

Kyle stared at her, at the reckless courage that had both saved and nearly killed her more times than he could count. She was the wildest thing in the Arizona desert, and he loved her for it, even when it drove him crazy.

"Come on," she said, grabbing his hand. "Let’s get out of here before you faint."

He followed her, muttering something about stubborn girlfriends and rattlesnakes, but he couldn’t hide the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Because no matter how much she scared him, Kayla had a way of making the impossible seem like the only way to live.

Ben Santora – December 2024