

Chapter 12

Cody

"So how do you know Holt? And why didn't you tell me your real name is James?" Tess asks as she presses the button for our floor.

I shrug my shoulder. "Only a few people actually know me as James, they're from my soldier days. We were stationed together in Quantico. There were two Johnsons in my battalion. They called us both by our first names to avoid confusion." I remember hearing that Holt was a hothead as a teen, but I never heard what they did to steady him, I guess now I know. "So Holt is a military buddy?"

Cody nods. "Yeah. He's saved my ass more times than I care to admit, but I've done the same for him. He was just discharged a few months ago. I'm actually surprised to find him here of all places. He was the one always to step in when a fight broke out. You were very well matched against him."

"I think I could be friends with him. He seems like a decent guy. Jocelyn, however." She lets the thought go, but I notice her fists clench.

I take her hands and unfurl them. "She's not that bad. She can get a little touchy, but she's done great work for me." The elevator opens and I lead Tess out, keeping her hand in mine.

"She's more than touchy. The sank bitch tried to scare me away from you. She was waiting for me in the locker room. She said a bunch of crap about how I'm planning and scheming to get to you." Tess rolls her eyes like it's no big deal, but I can feel the tension in her body. "Oh, warning. She plans on talking to you about me. I told her it only took a

day for you to see me. Just in case she tries to turn my words against me."

Now that we're back in our room, I pull Tess in front of me to rub her shoulders. "Don't worry about Jocelyn. She may have an ulterior motive, but I've never seen her as anything more than my promoter. She dresses provocatively for the sponsor's attention. It has no effect on me. You on the other hand." I slip her flannel off her shoulders and kiss them.

My mark is too small, for some reason, I really like that Tess has my hickey on her neck. I hum then pull her closer to wrap my arms around her tiny body. I nibble her sexy neck, then suck hard. She inhales a sharp breath and I can practically taste her getting turned on. My teeth salivate to sink into her skin. It's such an odd sensation, but I pull away. I kiss her mark again, satisfied that it's nice and dark. "You're so delectable, I'm dying to sink my teeth into you." Her fingers skim through my facial hair. "I'm not going to stop you."

Now I'm completely turned on. "What is it about you, Tessalee Denton? Why do I find myself liking things I've never cared for before? I hate hickeys, but seeing you marked up makes me relieved. Why did it take less than a day to know that you belong to me? And why am I so possessive of you?" Tess shudders as my lips skim her ear. I keep one hand holding her against me, the other caresses her coppery skin. "You're dangerous, I can feel it. You have this weird power over me. You could crush me with just a look, but you could also be my saving grace."

Tess's eyes are closed and she's breathing hard. I pull her hair free from its wet bun to let her long silky locks cascade down her back. I inhale her scent then kiss her behind her ear. "Cody." She says breathlessly. "You need to stop or I'm not going to be able to resist you." I don't want her to resist me. All I want is her. My Tess.

I'm about to say just that when my phone rings, bringing me out of my trance. Let's face it, that's what happens to me when I'm with Tess.

Jared Hudson flashes on the screen so I answer. "Hello?"

"Daddy?" Tess nods then takes a seat across the room to give me space to talk to my daughter.

"Hey, sunshine. How are you? Did you go fishing again?"

"No. Grandpa took me to a playdate with some kids. They were weird, but they were like me."

I chuckle knowing her aversion to meeting new people. It's one of the reasons I'm so nervous for her to meet Tess. "How so?" I hear Jared's muffled words in the background, telling Willow something.

"Okay." She answers him. "They were all nice. There were three girls and two boys. The boys liked to run around and the girls were all trying to be my friend. One girl gave me a friendship bracelet. Her name is Katie."

I smile that my baby is making friends. "That's great, short stack."

"When are you going to be here? I miss you, Daddy. I want to go home."

My heart is crushed being away from her for so long. "Soon. I have to be here just two more days, then I'm driving straight to you afterward."

She softly huffs. "Alright. I think I can wait that long. Will you make waffles when you get here?"

"I sure can. It's only a few more days, so enjoy your time with your grandparents, okay? I'll be there as fast as I can." My fight is scheduled for 4:15 on Saturday. Since I'm in the amateur group, I fight early. I plan to be on the road no later than 6:30, provided I don't need to go to the hospital.

"Okay, Daddy. Grandma says I'm going to go swimming with Katie after I finish my lunch. Love you. Bye." Click. I chuckle as I look at my phone before stashing it in my pants pocket. "Willow," I tell Tess.

Her smile spreads across her face as she walks back over to me. "Yeah, I figured. You only smile like that when you're talking to your daughter. I love that about you. I hope Willow likes me."

I reach out for her and pull her to me. "I do too. I'm not sure how she's going to react. She's not usually a people person." Tess giggles nervously. I take her hand. "Come on. Let's change then get some lunch before we meet with Jocelyn again." Tess grunts and I laugh.

Jocelyn smiles at me from across the room. We're in one of the convention rooms where sponsors, fighters, and fans with passes are all gathered. I pull Tess along with me and I notice Jocelyn's smile slightly tighten when she notices her. It's hard not to notice Tess in her form-fitting flower tank top and olive green shorts. Her brown leather sandals crisscross like a gladiator around her stunning legs, drawing my attention.

I cut through the crowd to join Jocelyn. "There's Holt. I think I'll go bug him while you do whatever it is sank face wants you to do. You have fun." I slightly growl, not liking the idea of my Tess leaving me to be with another guy. When did I become so possessive? I'm not usually like this. "Holt?" I question her.

"Yeah. If you're going to be with her," she sneers. "I can be with Holt. That way I can avoid punching her face in and you know I'm with someone you can trust." Tess smiles sweetly at me.

She really does know how to get her way. I shake my head with an eye roll. "Alright. I'll find you later on."

She stands up on her toes to give me a kiss. "I'll come find you if you're taking too long." She says with a wink then disappears through the crowd.

Jocelyn appears at my side. "Everlast and ONX Sports are both looking to sign new sponsorships. I have meetings for you with their reps."

She moves to grab my hand, but I subtly drop it out of her reach. "Just lead the way, I'll follow you." She turns then sashays through the crowd in front of me.

I'm introduced to not only the reps from Everlast and ONX sports, but several other sportswear representatives. I know talk is great, but they'll be watching the fights before any contracts can be signed. At least they sound promising. I don't expect much, so far I've only signed a one-year deal with Impact Mouthguards. I got that contract at my last win... over a year ago. They haven't resigned and I don't blame them.

I only started losing after getting rid of my trainer. I thought I didn't need one, that I already knew how to fight, but after working with Tess and Micco, I know how wrong I was. We'll see how much I've learned within the short amount of time we've been working.

After introduction after introduction and schmoozing for longer than I care to, I have enough. I'm in need of my woman and a drink so head to the bar for a beer, Jocelyn still glued to my side. "Cody, I didn't want to say anything in front of the sponsors, but I think you need to get a reputable trainer. One that actually knows how to fight. There's more to an MMA than just throwing punches."

"I'm more than aware of what an MMA fight involves." I remind her. Sometimes I question why I do this, especially after my three losses. At first, it was all about the hurt and pain I was going through, but now...? The money isn't bad, but I'm still only an amateur. I could make better money as a firefighter or an EMT. Those jobs would keep me away from Willow and probably put me in just as much danger. Fights are only once a quarter. I could go all in and try to go pro, but why? My reason for fighting isn't what it was not even two weeks ago. Everything changed after meeting Tess. She makes me feel alive again. I would give up everything, except Willow, to make Tess happy.

Jocelyn's voice brings my thoughts to a halt. "I know you do, Cody, but does your new friend? You know when you told me you found a trainer a week before your Vegas appearance, I was originally concerned that she just wanted a free vacation. After meeting her, I think it's much worse. I'm worried she's only trying to get you to sleep with her. She said some things that I should warn you about." I cock my brow not at all surprised by the turn of conversation. "She said it took her less than a day to win you over."

"Jocelyn, I thank you for your concern, but Tess did win me over in less than a day. Listen, I'm a grown man. I think I can handle my own relationships. I appreciate your concern, but your job is to get me sponsors, not a girlfriend." I hand Jocelyn the drink she ordered then take my beer and look around the room.

"I'm just looking out for you. I care about you, Cody. It is my job to make sure you're not distracted. If you're not in the right frame of mind, it can affect your performance in the ring. I can introduce you to other trainers." She sips her wine with delicacy.

"You introduced me to two trainers already. One was your boyfriend at the time and had no experience whatsoever, in fact, I believe he was a kid's karate teacher. The other guy just had anger issues he needed to work through." I finally spot Holt at a table with Tess sitting across from him. They look like they're getting along pretty well.

I start heading in their direction, but Jocelyn grabs my arm and steps in front of me. I see Tess cock a brow at me before I look down at Jocelyn. "She said some things about your daughter too. You should know she plans to make Willow like her just to win your favor. She intends to take over Audrey's place. She wants to be her new mommy. What a horrible thing to do to your wife's memory."

I doubt Tess confided in Jocelyn so I'm pretty she's making shit up. It is what she does after all. Tess told me what they did speak about, but the

idea of Willow and Tess getting along makes me smile. "That's good to know. Thanks." I walk around Jocelyn to Tess and Holt's table. I take the seat beside Tess and kiss her cheek. "Hey Darlin', what are you two talking about?"

"You." Holt bursts out. I tilt my head in question. "Life in the military. I told her about the time we were playing flag football during R&R and you lost your footing." Holt begins cracking up and Tess is laughing along.

My ears warm up remembering the story. "Ah, come on it wasn't that funny."

"Eating mud sounds pretty funny," Tess says then kisses my red ear.

I rest my arm across the back of her seat. "At least I wasn't busted naked after a drunken weekend. On multiple occasions." I remind Holt. He shrugs his shoulder like it's no big deal.

I haven't seen Holt in years so it's nice to get reacquainted after all this time. Tess seems to get along with him, which makes me happy. Jocelyn eventually joins us and Holt is accommodating toward her. By the end of the night, I'm ready for it to be over. I just want to lay in bed next to Tess.