

## Chapter 5

### Cody's

What am I doing? I've never been so hopeless around a beautiful woman before. And Tess is a looker. Even with her hair a mess, no makeup, and her clothes ruffled, she's incredibly beautiful. I can't believe I asked her to stay with me. I guess we're quite the pair; running away from the troubles of our daily life. Actually, she's not really running with her leg so cut up. I still feel guilty about that. I can't believe she got hurt because of my carelessness.

My phone buzzes so I pull it out of my pocket. Jared Hudson flashes so I answer the call. "Hey."

"Daddy?"

"Hi, Sunshine. How is your day?"

"It's good. Grandpa took me fishing at the river. I caught a fish. It was slimy and yucky so I didn't want to touch it. Grandma is going to cook it for dinner tonight." Willow is so animated, I can't help but smile. I'm so bummed that she's not here, but I'm glad she's having fun.

"That's awesome, shortcake. You'll have to teach me how to fish."

"Okay. Grandpa says I'm a natural. What did you do?"

I glance toward the bathroom door then decide to go outside. "Well, I chopped some wood, I searched for old bear traps, and I just finished eating a sandwich for lunch."

"What's a bear trap?"

"It's a device that hunters use, but they can hurt people or animals so I got rid of them."

"That's good. Grandma is telling me to wash up for lunch. I gotta go. Bye, Daddy."

"I love you, Sunshine."

"Love you too." The phone clicks off. I guess I don't have to talk to Jared. I try to put on a happy face for my baby, but I know she sees how down I am, all the time. Two more weeks, I have to remind myself. I pick her up in just two weeks.

I thought I would use this time to escape my issues, but nothing has changed. The peace and quiet I've had over the last two weeks here at the cabin have done nothing to ease my mind, except for one thing; I've decided to get back into the dating game. Willow needs a mom. She's my world and I do everything I can for her, but I know there are things she's missing out on. Audrey would've been the perfect mother, but she was taken from us. I had to apply for a dependency discharge so I could take care of my daughter. I can't say I miss the life of a Soldier, but if I could still have Audrey, I would.

That's what my problem is. I'm always thinking of my beautiful Audrey. She used to call me her soulmate. Honestly, I don't doubt it. It was seriously love at first sight with her. She was my everything. I only got to have her for 3 short years, but they were the best 3 years of my life. I've had Willow longer than I was with Audrey. I rub my hands down my face and try to let the peace of the woods calm my mind. It hasn't worked, nothing has worked.

Well, I wasn't thinking of Audrey when I was getting Tess out of that damned trap. That is until she asked about my ring. Holy shit she's beautiful. I almost lost it when I saw her in her black bra. Wow. It was only a glance, but what I saw was a strong firm body. One that's not so

delicate. Audrey was delicate. I had to be gentle with her. I wouldn't have to be gentle with Tess unless I wanted to be.

Listen to me thinking about Tess. And what's wrong with that? She's single. I'm single. We're both adults. She seems intelligent and interesting. Fuck those elders for trying to force her to marry. I bet she would never allow it. She's the kind of woman that does what she wants. She's the one in charge. It would be fun to see someone try to make her do anything. Although she does let me take care of her.

I step back inside just in time to hear the shower cut off. I sit in the armchair and bounce my knee in anticipation of seeing her again. After a few moments, the door opens and she calls my name. "Cody? I'm decent." No way. There is nothing decent about Tess. Since the first time she bit my shoulder I've wanted her to do it again, but while naked and riding my lap. Wow, there I go again. I clear my throat as she stands against the sink in my t-shirt that reaches mid-thigh. Her smooth legs are a coppery tan and her hair is flowing wet and wild down her back. The idea of her biting me again floods my thoughts. "The pants are way too big." She says and I am alright with her wearing only my shirts. No. You barely know her. Stop it, Cody. "I don't have any shorts, but I can get you a pair of my boxer briefs." She nods with a slight smile. I step in and grab her pile of clothes from the floor. "I'll go throw these in the wash." "Thank you, Cody." It's weird how much I like hearing her say my name.

"It's no problem." I rush to the washing machine then grab a pair of clean underwear. She's sitting on the counter when I return, trying to get the duct tape off her leg. "Here." I slip my underwear over her legs then she pulls them the rest of the way up. I always carry a knife in my pocket. I pull it out and cut the tape at both ends then pry the tape from her leg. It's almost shocking that she hasn't bled through the bandages, not even a drop. A little blood is expected, but she seems to be healing very well. "Your bandages are still dry. I'll change them before bed."

Her cheeks turn a slight shade of pink. It's cute when she does that, actually, it's hot. I can tell she's thinking dirty thoughts. Probably the idea of going to bed. Oh, come on, Cody. Just because you think like that doesn't mean she does. Sitting on the counter, just looking at me, I'm thrown by this woman. She's not afraid to look me in the eye, like most people. I get that I'm pretty intimidating. At 6 foot 6 and 260 to 270 pounds of mostly muscle, I'm bigger than most guys. I step closer to her and she reaches around my shoulders so I can pick her up. I like the feel of her in my arms. Probably too much. She's a perfect fit. I set her down on the sofa and pull a pillow under her leg. Great, now what? "How long were you a soldier?" She asks so I sit on the armchair to keep space between us.

"6 years. I enlisted on my 18th birthday. Can I get you anything?"

"A drink would be nice."

I jump to my feet and stride to the kitchen. My uncle renovated it just before he retired so I haven't had to do anything to it. I actually like the white cupboards and the gray granite countertops. The island is a slate gray, but it has the same counter top as the rest of the kitchen. I did change the faucet though. It was brass and didn't match anything. Opening the fridge I ask, "What do you like? I have water, milk, juice, beer."

"Water is fine." She watches me over the back of the couch.

I feel her eyes on my back and I wonder if she likes my bulk or if she's turned off by my size. Pulling two bottles from the fridge, I open the freezer to pull meat out for dinner. "Are you a meat eater?" Bad choice of words, Cody. "Most definitely." Her answer goes right to my groin and I have to breathe to get the thought to clear. I wash my hands then bring the water to her.

"So what do you do?" I take my seat away from her.

"My dad and I own ski resorts. I pretty much run them. That is when I'm not training. I help my dad with the tribe as well." Her finger traces the opening of the bottle and my lewd thoughts return. How does she turn me on with such mundane actions? Audrey was the only one that could do that. "Cody. I need to be blunt with you." I clear my throat and she continues to speak. "I love my dad and my life is there, but I don't want to go back yet. I want to get to know you, and I want time away. I've been there pretty much my entire life. I need a break"

Well, that is blunt. "Won't your tribe come looking for you? Your dad doesn't know where you are."

She shakes her head. "I told you, my dad is the chief. No one would go against his order. He knows I'm fine."

I nod to her leg. "But you're not."

Her smile lights up her face. "Of course I am. You made sure of that." A small amount of pride fills me knowing that she trusts me to take care of her.

"I'll give you that. And I understand staying away to avoid the problem with the elders, but there's nothing special about me. There's really not much more to know that I haven't already told you."

Her sharp brow ticks up. "I highly doubt that. You said you feel protective of me. I like that, a lot. Sure, you wear your heart on your sleeve and you're reserved, but I know there's more to you. I just want to know more." I'm intrigued. "Why? You probably have men falling at your feet on a regular basis."

She laughs. She actually laughs. "Yeah right. Men want to be the chief. They want the power, not me. I'm just a bonus for them." That really pisses me the fuck off. My jaw clenches tight. I have to force myself to relax.

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"Then they're fucking idiots."

"Exactly." I guess I see her point. I'm a novelty. She is used to guys wanting her, but for the wrong reasons. "When do you fight?"

Her words wake me from my stupor. "Oh. Um, next Saturday."

"Would it be alright for me to come? I really would like to see you in action."

That would be a first for me. I usually don't have anyone in my corner. My buddies from the military will watch once in a while, but they all place bets. In other words, it's for their own benefit. "Yeah, if you want. It's in Vegas, though. My schedule is pretty tight. I leave here Wednesday, Thursday is promotions, Friday is weigh-in and ring time, then Saturday is the fight. After my match, I have to drive to Spokane to pick up Willow."

"I bet she's absolutely adorable. What does she think about you fighting?"

"She is adorable. She doesn't quite understand. She sees me banged up, but she just kisses my boo-boos better. I should actually be training right now."

"Would you like someone to spar with?" Her eyes light up in excitement.

I shake my head. "I already told you I'm not fighting you. Besides, you're still injured."

She laughs again and I really enjoy it. "I didn't mean me. My dad. He's about your size, maybe a little smaller, but he's really good. He trains all the men in my tribe. Granted it's not fighting in a ring, but you never know..." She trails off. I haven't had a trainer in a while. The last guy

that trained me was an asshole and liked to treat me like his personal punching bag until I hit back and he couldn't take it. "Maybe that would be a good idea. Plus you can let him know where you are. That would make me feel much better." I hand her my phone. "I'm going to take care of your clothes then finish chopping the wood. That will give you some privacy. Just yell for me if anyone calls." With that, I leave Tess alone so she can make her call.