



# Stone's Promise (Knockout Knights #3)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Emily:

I've dealt with enough heartbreak to last a lifetime, especially after my ex rejected me and our son. Now, my life is about keeping things simple, which includes steering clear of men with messy lives. But when Cody Stone, the gruff MMA fighter, steps into my world and offers to be my fake boyfriend to deal with bad publicity, I'm thrown off balance. The one rule I made for myself—don't fall for the grumpy fighter—is starting to look impossible to keep.

Cody:

I don't do distractions. With the Intercontinental Battle Royale coming up, my focus is on winning, not relationships. But when Emily Daniels needs help keeping her jerk of an ex away, I step in. Fake relationships should be easy, right? Wrong. Emily's got a fire in her that I didn't see coming. The last thing I need is to fall for someone right before the biggest fight of my career—but man, if Emily doesn't make me want to break all my rules.

Stones Promise is a fast-paced, passionate instalove romance that's part of the Knockout Knights series. Dive into the world of MMA fighters and the strong women who love them.

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EMILY

SUNRIDGE CITY HALL

Sunridge, Illinois

I walked through the office suite of city hall, wishing I could go home for the day. Instead of the spring sun warming my skin, the fluorescent buzz of the lights overhead cast a glare in my face. My phone buzzed in my pocket, a relentless reminder of work still left to be done. Family Day was coming up in a few weeks. The event wasn't going to organize itself, and I was responsible for making sure things went off without a hitch.

I switched between text conversations with vendors, confirming the bounce house for the preschool kids and local bands for the soundstage downtown. Each confirmation was a small victory. Then I made sure to call the sitter. There was a good chance I could be working late again tonight, and needed to be sure she could watch my six-year-old son Oliver. My mother had her boutique to run, and I sure couldn't rely on Trey Larson, Oliver's dad, to step up to the plate. I heard he was back in town, but he'd been pretty much absent from our lives for the past three years.

"Em, did you order extra ice for the drinks stand?" Linda, the office manager, called out to me from her desk. Her voice was tinged with the usual pre-event stress.

"Already on it," I replied, ticking it off my app checklist. Mama always said multitasking was my superpower, though right now, it felt more like a survival skill.

"Great job." Linda stood up from her seat to stretch. "I don't know how you do it, girl, being a single mom and working as the city coordinator."

I wanted to let out a giant sigh, although I knew she was just giving me a compliment. "If I'm honest, I don't know, either." I kept my tone light and tossed in some bland office humor. "It's got to be all the coffee we keep stocked in the break room."

"You're such a modest little powerhouse." She chuckled. "Well, I don't want to keep you from your next appointment. You got this." She waved me off.

I felt like I was doing a decent job juggling my career and mom life. Even so, I had other unspoken womanly needs. Just for a while, I wanted to lose the corporate suits for some comfy sweats. I had my whole little fantasy planned out: I would eat the gooiest slice of deep-dish pizza from Little Nando's, spend the night with a decent guy who knew what to do with his mouth besides say ridiculous things to me, and then sleep for a week straight while the other adults figured out their lives.

But that's what I got paid to do: figure things out for everyone. And that included my next task.

I left city hall to head to Warrior's Den, the biggest mixed martial arts facility in town. It put Sunridge on the map a couple years ago when it first opened, attracting professional athletes and those who dreamed of making it big in the sport. With Family Day approaching, I thought it would be fun to get a couple fighters to come out and put on a show. All family-friendly, course. No black eyes or TKOS.

Oliver was going to be so excited to see some of his favorite MMA fighters in person. As I drove down Main Street in my SUV, I couldn't help but feel a swell of pride at all my hard work. Despite the whispers around town that lingered after Trey and I ended things, I was determined to show I was more than just a broken engagement

with a guy from Sunridge's richest family. I was Emily Daniels, dedicated mom, and architect of community joy. Come this Family Day, everyone would see just that.

Maybe I'd get more paid vacation when all was said and done, too.

Just as I'd rounded the corner past Sullivan's Diner, my phone beeped. I pulled over to check the message. The screen lit up with Mayor Jenkins' name and a text from his assistant: The mayor saw Cody Stone at last Saturday's fight. He wants him at Family Day.

A lump formed in my throat. Cody Stone. His name alone made me think of a scowling face, a grumpy grizzly, even an empty cliffside. I had met him once last year during a visit to Warriors Den with my friend Ava, back when she was working on an exclusive for a sports journal.

Cody had stood there while we chatted with him and Ryder McKenzie, the heavyweight champ at the time. Ava had her eyes all on Ryder, but I remember Cody being a six-foot wall of muscle and restraint. He barely acknowledged anyone with more than a grunt or quick nod. I struggled to include him in the conversation. He turned his intense grey-blue eyes from me like I was wasting his time.

Today, I was about to step into his world again. I hoped he wouldn't be as closed off as he seemed that day a year ago.

I arrived at the facility. Pushing open the door to the Warriors Den, I felt the shift in energy. The calm sunny day gave way to an atmosphere of sweat and resolve within the gym. My entrance drew little attention among the grunts and thuds from the surrounding training sessions.

"Hi, I'm Emily from city hall." I flashed my ID to the receptionist at the front desk. "I called earlier to see which athletes wanted to be part of a charity event."

The receptionist pointed to the main floor. "A lot of guys are training today. You might catch a couple before they finish up."

I thanked the man and took a breath to prepare myself before heading out on the gym floor. At first, I thought my job wasn't going to be difficult. Then Mayor Jenkins made a specific request, and I had no choice but to search for him.

Scanning the area, I sought out the man I'd come to find.

Cody was just finishing up with a heavy punching bag, his face and arms glistening with the sheen of hard work as he wiped the sweat from his brow with a white towel. Our eyes met. The recognition in his was immediate, but it was accompanied by a shrewd look and a frown that creased his forehead.

My heart skipped a beat, unsettling the confidence I'd built on the drive over. I straightened my spine, mentally bracing myself. There I was, all five foot two inches of me, out of place among giants whose bodies were being forged for combat.

"You got this," I whispered, hyping myself with the reminder of my personal successes and the love for my son that powered every decision I made. I could do this. I was smart, competent, and I'd faced tougher challenges than meeting the harsh gaze of an athlete.

With each determined step toward Cody, the clench of anxiety in my stomach unwound slightly. This was for my career, for Family Day, for the community that was the heartbeat of my life. And if that meant standing toe-to-toe with Cody Stone, then so be it. I was ready.

"Hey, Cody. I'm Emily Daniels. I'm not sure if you remember me." I extended a hand that hovered in the air for an awkward moment before he took it.

His grip was firm. When he released my hand, I felt the phantom pressure of his calluses imprinting on my palm. “I remember you. Ryder’s wife’s friend.”

“You have a good memory.” I couldn’t remember some people I met yesterday, let alone a whole year. I looked past Cody’s arm and saw for the first time a massive black and tan German Shepherd lying near the training area. Unlike the constant movement around him, the dog stayed perfectly still, watching everything with sharp, intelligent eyes. He didn’t look like a typical pet. He looked like he belonged here, just as much as the fighters did.

The dog saw me shake Cody’s hand. It lifted its head, ears twitching. Its gaze locked onto me. I hesitated, glancing toward Cody, who proceeded to wrap his hands in sports tape like I wasn’t even there.

“That’s Max,” he answered my unspoken question, still not looking up. “He’s with me.”

I blinked. “You bring your dog to the gym? He’s so well-behaved.”

Cody finally met my eyes, his expression indecipherable. “He goes where I go.”

And that was it. No further elaboration. Just a firm statement that made it clear he wasn’t open to talking about the impressive canine companion.

I exhaled, pushing aside the prickle of irritation. I already knew he was the no-nonsense, say-as-little-as-possible type. The stress of getting Family Day together made my patience run a little thinner than usual. As I watched Cody run a steady hand over Max’s head, the frown muscles in his face relaxed.

“You probably are wondering why I’m here.” I smiled at Cody, but he didn’t return it. The dog gave me an encouraging grin instead. “City Hall’s got me organizing a

charity event for the town called Family Day. We'd like to feature some of our local fighters, you included."

"Me?" Cody's sandy blond eyebrows knitted together as if I were speaking a foreign language. "Charity event?" His voice was a skeptical rumble.

"Exactly." I maintained my friendly, professional tone. "It's to raise money for the community center. They're planning to open a new kids wing. It's something positive for the town, you know?"

"MMA fighters aren't babysitters." He draped his towel on his shoulder. "We train to compete, not smile for donations."

Oooh-kay. Wasn't expecting that level of bluntness. I gathered myself, not letting him see my annoyance at his rude yet athletically toned behind. "You're role models to these kids. They look up to you." My voice remained even, though I could feel the tension coiling between us like a loaded spring. "Your participation would mean a lot."

"Seems like a waste of training time," he countered. "I have to get ready for the Intercontinental Battle Royale coming up next month. He crossed his arms, muscles flexing beneath the thin fabric of his tank.

I had to admit, I didn't follow these MMA leagues closely like many people in town, so I had little idea about this royale he mentioned. But I wasn't about to give up just because he was trying to get out of Family Day.

"Look, I get your strong work ethic," I insisted, trying to find common ground. "Training is your priority. It's only one day, and it could change lives."

"Or one day that could set me back."

My, my. Cody was a wall that refused to crumble under the weight of my words.

I forced myself to put on my sweetest smile, the one I reserved for stingy grantmakers and pushy politicians. "This is about giving back, something Warriors Den is known for."

"Emily." He leaned down as he spoke my name. The gesture was almost intimate, the way he stood close, and I felt the heat from his body washing over the exposed skin of my face and arms. "I'm not the poster boy for your fundraiser." His words sliced through the sliver of space between us.

My frustration simmered just below my pleasant expression. If it wasn't for him being the mayor's pick, I would've let him get back to his sweaty gym mat. I broadened my smile as I took a big breath. "Clearly, you're no poster boy." His raised brows let me know I hit a little too heavy with the sarcasm. I scrambled to patch things up. "You're a part of Sunridge, too. I'm asking you to help your community, to be part of something that matters."

"Everything I do in that cage matters," he fired back, his eyes appearing more cold steel grey than blue.

I squared my shoulders, bracing myself against the wave of frustration washing over me. "Look, Cody," I began, my voice steady despite the rapid drumming of my heart. "This event is not just about putting on a show or raising money. It's personal for me."

He uncrossed his arms, though a silent challenge remained etched across his face. "You?"

"Yes, because I love my son." The words tumbled out softer than I intended, but they carried the weight of my world. "My little boy is six. He looks up to fighters like



you.”

Cody’s hard expression softened around the edges. For a second, I thought he truly heard me. “You let your kid watch MMA?”

My hope deflated like an overstretched balloon.

“I’m joking.” A quick smile lit across his mouth before his stoic expression returned. At least now, his eyes held a glint of humor. I found myself looking into them while I tried to hold my laugh back.

“You got me.” I turned my face away, wanting to still hold my ground as a solid professional. When I returned my gaze to Cody, he gave me his full attention. His arms were at his sides now, relaxed. I eased my tense stance, too. “This charity event is showing kids like Oliver that strength is more than just muscle.”

There was a shift then, a subtle loosening of the hard lines around his eyes.

“I want Oliver and other kids like him to see that even their idols can step out of the ring and into real life to make a difference.”

Cody looked away then, finding a distant point on the gym floor. “Fine,” he finally said. “But I’m not making any promises.”

I nodded, accepting the small victory for what it was. My phone vibrated in my pocket. I reached for it and saw I had a missed call. My stomach dropped the second I saw Trey’s name on my screen. A cold prickle ran down my spine. Months of silence, and now this? What could he possibly want? My jaw locked as my thumb hovered over the screen.

“Something wrong?”

I focused on Cody, but the sharp, unreadable look in his eyes told me he'd already noticed something was off.

"Nope," I answered too quickly, already stepping back. I locked my phone and shoved it into my pocket, as if it could erase the uneasy weight pressing down on my chest. "Just need to make a call. Later."

Cody's eyes narrowed. He wasn't the type to let things go, apparently, but I wasn't about to stand here and explain why the father of my child—who'd acted like Oliver was a ghost for months—suddenly decided to pop back into my life.

"I'll send you more details on Family Day once I get it all finalized." I turned to leave, heading for the exit, anywhere but under Cody's piercing scrutiny. His voice followed me.

"Emily."

Just my name, but it made my stomach flip. I paused for half a second before pushing forward, pretending I didn't hear him. Right now, I needed air. I needed space to figure out how the heck I was going to deal with Trey.

The sunshine did little to warm my clammy skin once I got outside. I climbed into my SUV and gave the key a hard turn in the ignition. Then I let out a big huff. I succeeded in getting Cody to participate in Family Day, just what the mayor wanted. A huge weight was lifted from my shoulders. However, I felt another, the weight of Cody's stare, still lingering on me from the gym windows.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:53 am*

CODY

Warrior's Den Training Facility

Emily disappeared out the door, her shoulders stiff. I watched her go, frowning as I ran back over our conversation. She'd been all confidence and determination. Something on her phone had thrown her off.

Not my problem. That's what I told myself, but my thoughts kept going back to her.

It should've been easy to brush off her earnest spiel about community and family. But her words clung to me like the sweat on my skin. Something warm and fuzzy pressed against the side of my palm.

"Max." I glanced down at my service dog. His head perked up at the sound of my voice. He could tell I was off track, thinking about the petite woman with the big smile. I gave him a scratch behind the ears.

I exhaled sharply, shaking my head as I turned back toward the punching bag. What was I thinking, agreeing to this charity thing? I wasn't the kind of guy people looked up to. I fought, I trained, and I kept my circle small. It was Liam, Ryder, a few others at Warrior's Den. That was it.

Then Emily had mentioned the kids. And her son Oliver.

That got to me.

I didn't know why, not at first. But as I stood there, fists clenched, the reason settled in my chest like a weight I couldn't shake. I knew what it was like to be a kid without someone to look up to. A kid searching for strength in all the wrong places. My old man had been around, sure, but never there. Not in the ways that mattered.

And now there was some six-year-old out there, looking up to fighters like me. Expecting something good from guys who stepped into the cage.

I exhaled again, longer this time, and cracked my knuckles before throwing another punch. Maybe I was taking this too seriously. I didn't do role model. I didn't do community events.

"Damn, Cody," Ryder called out as he and Liam strolled over, fresh from their sparring. "Did I just see you have a full-blown conversation? You know, with words?"

"More words than we've heard all week," Liam added, grinning.

I rolled my eyes, reaching for my towel. "Funny."

Ryder cracked a smile. "What was Emily doing trying to bleed words out of you?"

I wiped the sweat off my face. "She's organizing some charity thing. Family Day."

Liam let out a low whistle. "And you said yes?"

I scowled. "Yeah. So?"

"So," Ryder said, crossing his arms, "we finally found the secret to making you talk. Small-town women with big ideas."

Liam snorted, and I threw my towel in the bin behind him. He dodged it easily. “Not a big deal,” I said, hoping if I said it enough, I’d believe it.

But my mind drifted back to Emily, to the look on her face after she checked her phone. Whatever it was, it left her rattled.

And for some reason, I didn’t like that.

EMILY

I DRUMMED MY FINGERS against my desk, glancing at the email I’d sent Cody two days ago. No response. Not that I expected anything else from Mr. Blunt-and-Brooding, but still. A simple Got it wouldn’t have killed him.

Sighing, I tapped the folder on my desk, the one containing the rest of the details he needed for Family Day. His schedule, his security badge, and a rundown of what he was expected to do. I wasn’t about to leave this up to chance, so hand-delivering it was my best option.

Which meant another visit to Warrior’s Den.

I pushed away from my desk, grabbed my purse, and tucked the folder under my arm. The drive across town didn’t take long, and when I stepped into the gym, the familiar sights and sounds hit me instantly. Athletes moved across the floor, some drilling techniques, others pounding away at bags, the steady rhythm of training filling the space.

And then I spotted Cody.

He was near the cage, wrapping his hands, focus locked on the task like the rest of the world didn’t exist. His dog Max sat beside him, ears alert but body relaxed.

I approached, the folder tucked under my arm as I stopped a few feet from Cody and Max. Cody didn't look up right away, still focused on wrapping his hands with precision, but Max's sharp eyes landed on me immediately. The big German Shepherd let out a quiet chuff, his tail giving a single thump against the mat.

"He's saying hi," Cody muttered, finally glancing up at me.

"Oh, well... hi, Max." I hesitated, but when I held out my hand, Max leaned forward and sniffed before nudging my palm with his nose. I smiled, fingers grazing the thick fur behind his ears.

Cody's hands stilled. "Huh."

I raised an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"He doesn't usually let people touch him right away."

"Guess I'm just special," I teased, scratching behind the dog's ears a little more before straightening. "Speaking of special, I have something for you." I held out the folder. "Your security clearance, event details, and schedule for Family Day. I emailed most of it, but since you never confirmed..."

His eyes flicked to the folder but didn't move to take it. "I got the email."

"And you didn't think to reply?" I asked, tilting my head.

Cody just shrugged. Typical.

I exhaled through my nose, deciding to let it go. "This has everything else you'll need. You're doing some Q&A, nothing crazy. Then a quick meet-and-greet. It shouldn't take too much of your time."

He took the folder then, flipping it open as he skimmed the contents. “Meet-and-greet, huh?”

“Yes, you have to interact with people.” I crossed my arms. “Try not to look like you’d rather be anywhere else.”

His lips twitched. “No promises.”

Despite myself, my eyes stayed on him, on the strong line of his jaw, the way his muscles tensed and flexed even in small movements. It was silly, really, being attracted to someone who barely spoke, whose resting face looked one bad moment away from a brawl. Although, something about the way he carried himself, the way he seemed so solid and immovable, pulled me in.

I shook off the thought. This wasn’t the time to be noticing how broad his shoulders were or how his gray-blue eyes caught the light just right.

“I’ll be there to make sure everything runs smoothly,” I said, stepping back. “So just—”

The gym doors swung open, making me turn my head. The last person I wanted to see strolled through the gym doors.

Trey Larson.

Every muscle in my body tensed as my ex strolled inside, looking around like he owned the place. He was dressed in black designer workout gear, the tight kind fitness buffs wore. I was sure he picked up on the trend not from actual gym goers, but from watching a bunch of videos online. His too-white sneakers gleamed under the lights. He flashed an unnaturally lunar smile at a young female receptionist at the front desk.

“Hey, Vanessa, busy this afternoon?” He swiped an imaginary strand of dark hair from his forehead to meet the rest of his gelled back coif.

“Yes.” The receptionist kept her eyes on the computer screen. “I just started my shift.”

“That’s a shame. I got a private invite to Highland Art Gallery this afternoon. I know you’re studying to be an artist.”

“I’m a kinesiology major.”

Trey blinked like a gnat just flew into his eye. “Right. Just making sure to keep you on your toes.”

He chuckled like he hadn’t just completely butchered her field of study, then let his gaze sweep across the gym. When his eyes landed on me, his insincere smile widened.

“Hmm,” he drawled, taking a slow step in my direction. “Didn’t expect to find you here, Emily. What are you doing at an MMA gym?”

My pulse ticked up, and I fought to keep my expression neutral. Beside me, Cody shifted slightly, his presence suddenly feeling a lot more solid. I thought I heard a low growl come from Max.

Just great. My stomach clenched. I knew Trey was back in town, but I hadn’t expected to see him here. And judging by the smug look on his face, he knew exactly what he was doing.

Cody’s eyes flicked from me to Trey. He said nothing.



"I'm working," I answered, shifting my purse strap higher on my shoulder.

Trey scoffed. "Around all these big, sweaty men?"

"Intimidated?" I shot back, keeping my face neutral.

"Please." He shook his head like I was amusing him. "I could buy this gym if I wanted to."

Of course, he thought money solved everything. I wasn't in the mood for his posturing, especially not with Cody watching us. I felt his gaze like a weight pressing between my shoulder blades. The last thing I needed was to let my ex get under my skin in front of him.

I took a step toward the door, but Trey blocked my path with an easy stance, hands tucked into his pockets like he had all the time in the world. "You never called me back."

"I forgot. I've been busy with work all week." It wasn't a lie.

"We need to talk about Oliver," he said, dropping the words casually, like he was commenting on the weather.

I froze. He never mentioned our son unless it was to remind me how complicated parenthood was for a man like him, a man who was too busy and important.

"You have my number," I said, forcing myself to keep my voice even. "We can talk about it later."

Trey's upper lip curled as he gave me a mocking stare. "What, too busy to talk now?" His eyes flicked over my shoulder, sweeping over the gym floor in a way that made

my skin crawl. "Come on, Emily. Be honest. You're not here for work. You're here for the view."

My stomach twisted. He wanted to get under my skin, rile me up, make me feel small in a place where I was already out of my element. And worse, he was doing it in front of Cody.

Before I could fire back, warmth suddenly pressed against my side. A strong arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me in close.

"She's not looking," Cody's voice was low and rough, sending a ripple of surprise through me. "She already found it."

Trey's smirk faltered. My breath caught. I felt Cody's fingers flex where they rested against my hip. It wasn't a tight grip, but it was steady. Certain.

I blinked up at him, my heart hammering against my ribs. What in all of the green earth was he doing?

Trey let out a sharp laugh, but there was something tight in his expression. "I see how it is." He gave a slow nod. "Guess I misread the situation."

Cody didn't let go. His grip remained, like he was daring Trey to say something else.

I had two choices: freak out or go with it.

I smiled, tilting my head just enough to play along. "Looks like you did."

"We still need to talk about Oliver." My ex's voice sliced through the air. "It's time I took a larger role in his life."

Surprise caught in my throat, sharp as a shard of glass. I steadied my voice, the practiced calmness not quite reaching my rapidly pulsating heart. "This is unexpected."

"I'm his father. He needs more than what you're providing."

I bristled but kept my response level. The last thing I wanted was for the whole gym to hear our business. "Oliver's happy and thriving. But if there's something specific you're proposing, I'm listening."

"We'll discuss it over dinner tonight." It was a command cloaked as an invitation.

"Tonight's an open mic fundraiser." I leaned into Cody, feeling his body heat light up one side of my body. "We have to be there so I can't do it."

"Tomorrow night, then." Trey spared a disdainful look at Cody. "Just the two of us to talk about our son."

"Fine," I replied, though nothing about this felt fine at all. I would show Trey the stable, caring environment I had built for our son, without his help, no matter the turmoil churning inside me.

Trey made a show of staring at his smartwatch. "If we're done, I'm late for my training session."

I slipped past him without a second glance. Once I got outside, I realized I had been holding my breath. I exhaled as I reached my car, my hands gripping my purse strap. I needed a second to breathe, to process, but before I could, the sound of footsteps followed me. I turned to see Cody approaching, Max right beside him.

"What just happened?" I asked, still caught off guard by his sudden act of playing the

protective boyfriend.

Cody hesitated, rubbing his earlobe. "I just wanted to shut him up. He's annoying. No offense."

"None taken," I admitted. "I would like that, too, though I have to deal with him now that he finally wants to see his son." I shook my head, more frustrated than anything. "Sorry. I'm not trying to dump all this drama onto you. I really only wanted to come here and give you the stuff for Family Day."

"You're good," Cody said, his voice even.

I appreciated that. No prying, no unnecessary comments. Just a simple reassurance.

I exhaled, shifting gears. "So what are you wearing to open mic tonight?"

Cody's eyes widened. "You want me to go? I thought you just said that to Trey."

"I did, but you don't have to be there," I admitted.

He crossed his arms, the movement making his biceps flex just enough to distract me. "I stepped in to make him think we're together. We're going to have to go with it."

I bit my lip. He was right. If Trey thought I was seeing someone, it might get him off my back long enough for me to focus on Family Day. And if word got out, well, I knew how to handle press. A little extra attention wouldn't hurt the event.

"You're right," I agreed. "This might result in a little sports gossip. Just warning you, in case a cool MMA fighter such as yourself doesn't want to be seen in photos with a basic city employee."

“You’re not basic. And trust me. You’d be doing me a favor if someone gets a picture of us.”

“That’s sweet of you.” How was this man making my skin tingle and the back of my head feel warm without touching me?

“Your smile is big enough for the both of us.”

I wasn’t quite sure if I should take that as a compliment, but the playful glint in Cody’s eyes made me want to grin. Like an idiot. “That’s nice to hear. Thank you.”

He glanced down at his sweaty t-shirt and joggers. "So, what am I supposed to wear on our date?"

The fact he said date made me feel oddly excited on the inside. "It's casual. You can wear jeans and a nice shirt. Showing your biceps won't hurt."

The left side of Cody’s mouth curved. "Is that for you or the people we’re trying to convince we’re dating?"

Heat crept up my neck. "I can put on a show if you will."

He let out a low chuckle, patting Max on the head. "You never answered my question. I think I have clothes that aren’t gym shorts. Unless you like the tight pump covers Trey was wearing."

I laughed. "You actually have the muscle for it, but I think a regular shirt will do. Now I have to get back to work and then figure out what I'm wearing tonight."

"What time do you need me to pick you up?"

He actually offered to pick me up like an old-fashioned gentleman. "Seven's fine. I have your number from the info you sent city hall. I'll text you my address."

Before I could open my car door, Cody added, "Remember what I said about Max. He goes where I go. He's my service dog."

Realization dawned on me. That explained why Max was always by his side. I glanced at the German Shepherd, who was looking up at me expectantly.

"Max will be more than welcome at tonight's open mic," I said, returning the dog's grin. "If he's got a few jokes, we'll listen."

Cody flashed a quick smile. Then, almost like he remembered himself, his expression turned neutral again. "Gotta go back in and finish my drills."

"Sorry Trey wants to make this his workout spot now."

He shrugged. "As long as he stays out of my way while I'm training, it doesn't matter to me."

I sighed, wishing I had that kind of indifference. "You're very cool-headed."

"That's the point. Lose your temper and your opponent gets a leg up."

With that, he turned and headed inside the training facility, Max trotting beside him.

I slid into my SUV, gripping the steering wheel. Cody's words stay with me.

And so did the fact that, tonight, I had a fake date with him.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:53 am*

CODY

I stepped into the gym, Max at my side, my mind still tangled in what I'd just agreed to. A fake relationship. With Emily.

What the hell had I been thinking?

This wasn't like me. I didn't get involved in things that didn't concern me, especially not with people I barely knew. I kept to myself. It was safer, but something about Emily pulled me in like a rip current. That Trey guy rubbed me the wrong way from the second he opened his privileged mouth, and when he'd looked at her like she was just another one of his fancy toys, something in me snapped. Before I even realized what I was doing, I had my hand on her waist, standing between her and him like I had every right to be there.

Now, I had to follow through.

I clenched my jaw and exhaled through my nose. It wasn't real. It was all for show, a temporary thing to keep Trey off her back. That was the only reason I'd agreed to it. It wasn't because Emily made the gym feel a little brighter when she walked in or because I sort of liked being around her these past couple days.

I shook my head, pushing the thought away.

Max bumped my leg with his nose, like he could sense I wasn't feeling at ease. I reached down, running a hand over his fur.

Ryder had been the one to give me Max, back when I was struggling just to function outside the ring. After everything I'd been through serving overseas, I'd thought I could handle life all on my own. I was wrong. The nightmares, waking up in a cold sweat with anxiety making my hands shake. I'd kept it all bottled up, convinced I could fight my way through it. Max had helped in ways I hadn't even realized I needed. He was the reason I could step into a crowded gym or live event without feeling like the walls were closing in.

Emily had taken it in stride when I told her Max had to be with me. She didn't question or make a weird comment like some people did. That had thrown me more than anything.

But it didn't mean she actually liked it. Or me.

I wasn't the smooth, charismatic type like some of the other Fury Combat league fighters. I barely talked when I didn't have to. So why would someone like Emily—upbeat, social, pretty—want anything to do with a guy like me?

I was still chewing on the thought when I caught movement near my favorite punching bag.

Trey.

He was standing beside it, watching me with a smirk that made my fists itch.

Great.

He stood with his arms crossed like he belonged here. Like he was one of us. My hands instinctively started to curl into fists, but I forced them to relax.

Max let out a low chuff, sensing my mood.



“You lost?” I asked, my voice flat.

Trey studied me with the kind of arrogant expression that made me itch to knock it clean off his face. “Just wanted to get a closer look at the guy Emily’s parading around.”

I stared him down. “And?”

“Still trying to figure out what she sees in you.” He moved his head up and down, making a show of sizing me up.

I’d been around guys like Trey before, men who thought they could walk into any room and take up space they hadn’t earned. He didn’t intimidate me. He just annoyed the hell out of me.

I turned toward the locker room, ready to be done with this waste of time, but his voice followed me.

“Watch yourself around Emily. She’s got enough on her plate without you complicating things.”

I stilled.

Something dark and instinctive surged inside me, a protective fire that took me by surprise. It had nothing to do with the fact that Trey was her ex or how he’d suddenly decided he wanted to be a father, even though that pissed me off, too. It was about Emily herself, her determination, her bright spirit, the way she kept standing even when life threw shit at her.

I sure as hell didn’t like the way he talked about her, insulting her one second and then pretending to be her guardian the next. He needed to run his feet like he ran his

mouth and get the fuck away from me before I showed him exactly how we take punches here at Warriors Den.

I turned back to him, my voice low and controlled. “Emily’s stronger than you think. She doesn’t need you acting like you’re fighting her battles.”

Trey scoffed. “Is that why you’re with her now? Because of her little charity project?”

I met his gaze. He shifted his feet when I took a few seconds longer to answer. “I like Em.” I shortened her name, the way I heard her friend Ava say it, even though I was nowhere near friend status with Emily. Trey didn’t need to know that. “And I’m going to like helping her on Family Day.”

“Right.” His voice was soaked in sarcasm. “Just remember where you stand, Stone.”

He turned and strolled toward the exit like he had nothing to prove, but his words left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I watched as he slid into his black Lamborghini, revved the engine like some kind of power move, and sped off.

“Asshole,” I muttered under my breath.

Max nudged my leg, and I ran a hand over his head, grounding myself.

Trey was full of shit, but I could put him out of my mind for the time being. Emily stuck with me. Since seeing her again after a year, something shifted inside me that I wasn’t sure I was ready to name.

EMILY

I STOOD IN FRONT OF my closet, arms crossed, my lower lip caught between my teeth. For someone who spent her days making decisions at City Hall, I sure was struggling over what to wear tonight.

"Why do you look like you're about to negotiate a peace treaty instead of picking an outfit?"

I glanced over at my mother, who sat on the edge of my bed with an amused smile. She owned one of the trendiest boutiques in town, so naturally, she had opinions about fashion with a capital O.

"I just want to look nice."

She hummed knowingly, standing and heading straight for my closet. A moment later, she pulled out a fitted sweater and matching skirt set in a deep autumn orange shade. "This. Cute, put together, and it shows off those legs I gave you."

I rolled my eyes but took the outfit anyway. "Thanks, Mama."

As I dressed in front of the mirror, Mama gave me a pointed look. "So, when were you going to tell me you were dating one of those hunky wrestlers?"

I spritzed on a little bit of perfume and sighed. "MMA fighters, Mama."

She waved a dismissive hand. "I see you didn't correct me about them being hunky."

I hesitated, my mind flickering to Cody and his strong, quiet presence, the way he didn't hesitate to step in and help me get Trey off my back.

"I guess they're attractive, if you like the muscular, athletic type." I admitted, trying not to sound too interested. "It's not a big deal. Cody is just going to the open mic

with me tonight."

As soon as the words left my mouth, a knock sounded at the door. My stomach flipped.

"He's here early," I said, suddenly panicked.

Mama patted my shoulder. "Go ahead and answer it. I'm going to check to see if Oliver got into his pajamas."

I nodded, exhaling as I turned toward the front door. My heart pounded just a little harder than it should have for a fake date.

I shoved my feet into my low top Nikes, barely taking a moment to glance in the mirror before heading downstairs. My stomach fluttered with nerves, though I told myself it was just because of the event, not because Cody was waiting on the other side of the door.

When I opened it, my breath hitched for half a second.

He stood there in a button-up shirt and jeans, his normally scruffy jaw freshly shaved, and his hair neatly combed.

"You clean up good," I said, tilting my head as I took him in.

His eyes flicked over me in return, and for a brief moment, something warm sparked there. "You're pretty."

Before I could decide how to respond, Mama appeared at the top of the stairs, waving.

Cody waved back. "I see where you get your looks from."

"Ah, he knows what's up," Mama teased, winking at me.

I hid my smile before turning back to Cody. "My mother is in a playful mood tonight. Ready to go?"

"Sure." He stepped back to let me lock up, and we started toward his truck.

"Oliver's getting ready for bed," I told him as we walked. "I'll introduce you two later, or he'll want to talk about MMA all night."

"I wouldn't mind. I know MMA. This public charity stuff? No clue."

I glanced over at him as we reached his pickup. "It's just an appearance tonight. We don't have to say anything."

But as I climbed inside, smoothing my skirt over my legs, a twinge of doubt settled in. This was my first time stepping out with Cody in public. What had I just gotten myself into?

Cody drove us to the comedy club. When we went inside, it buzzed with energy. The low hum of conversation mixed with bursts of laughter from the stage. The place had a warm, intimate feel. Exposed brick walls, dim lighting, and round tables clustered near the spotlight. I was just about to relax when I spotted a familiar face moving toward us with a microphone in hand.

Herb Caldwell, a local news anchor, was grinning as if he'd just found gold.

"Cody Stone," Herb called out, waving for his cameraman to follow. "Mind if we get a quick shot?"

Before I could react, Max stepped in, placing himself between Cody and the camera. His posture was calm but firm, his head slightly lowered, tail still. Protective.

I moved quickly, stepping in front of Cody and putting on my most charming public relations smile. "Herb, hey," I said, my voice light and warm. "We're just here to enjoy the event tonight. No press, no interviews, okay?"

Herb, undeterred, shifted to angle his mic toward Cody. "Come on, just a quick photo."

"This isn't the time," I interrupted. "But Family Day will be perfect for that. Check the website tomorrow for an official announcement." Then, leaning ever so slightly toward the camera, I added with a wink, "And I'll be on your morning show to talk about it soon, right?"

Herb hesitated, realizing he'd just been outmaneuvered. He had to stick to the schedule, and he knew it.

"Right," he muttered, forcing a smile. "Enjoy your evening." He turned away, already scanning the room for his next target.

I exhaled, turning back to Cody. "Let's get our table."

He gave me a look, one I couldn't quite decipher, but followed me as I led him through the club. A hostess greeted us and, at my request, led us to a quieter corner near the stage where we had a good view but a little more privacy.

Once we were seated, Cody let out a breath. "Thanks. I don't like cameras in my face too much, even for work."

"I can't imagine all those cameras and lights." I watched as he ran a hand over his

shirt sleeve, already looking a little restless.

"It's only because I like to fight," he said, his voice quieter. "It got harder after I got back home from service."

Something in the way he said it made me want to know more, to understand the weight behind his words. Before I could ask, the next comedian took the stage, and the room filled with applause.

I glanced at Cody one more time, making a silent note to revisit this later. For now, we turned our attention to the stage as the night began.

About an hour passed. Time had gone surprisingly smoothly. Between the laughter from the stage, the casual conversation, and the steady presence of Cody beside me, I felt more at ease than I had in a while. Even Max had settled in, sprawled comfortably at Cody's feet. The waiter brought our drinks and appetizers without issue. He even delivered a bone-shaped biscuit on a little napkin for Max.

Cody looked surprised. "Nice touch," he muttered, giving the waiter an approving nod before handing Max the treat.

After the open mic portion of the evening was over, we headed back to my house. Now, as we pulled up to the driveway, the evening winding to an end, I felt a quiet satisfaction settle in. Cody had been more relaxed tonight, and I liked seeing that side of him.

"You thought of everything," he said as he walked me to the front door. His tone was light, but there was something appreciative underneath it.

"It's my job," I replied with a small smile, feeling warmth spread through me at the way he noticed. Behind us, Max stuck his head out of the truck window, ears perked

up, making me chuckle.

Cody stopped a step behind me. "It's your gift," he corrected. "I mean it. Thanks for making this a little easier for me. And for being nice to Max."

Something about the sincerity in his voice made my stomach flip. I hadn't expected gratitude. My fingers fumbled as I turned the key in the lock, suddenly feeling the need to look anywhere but at him.

"Of course," I said, focusing on the doorknob. "He's a busy boy, sticking by his human." I glanced over my shoulder and gave him a small smile. "Thank you for taking the time to do this."

Our eyes met in the quiet of the night, something unspoken passing between us. Before I could say anything else, the door creaked open, and a blur of movement shot toward us.

Oliver, clad in his favorite dinosaur-print pajamas, skidded to a halt in the doorway. His eyes went so wide I thought they might pop out of his head. "You're Cody Stone," he blurted.

I pressed a finger to my lips. "Inside voice, honey. It's late."

He barely heard me, too busy staring up at Cody like he'd just met his favorite superhero.

Cody chuckled, nodding at him. "Hey, kid."

I sighed, rubbing Oliver's shoulder. "This is my son, Oliver, who should be in bed."

"I'm on it," Mama called from the kitchen. "Just heating up some milk."



Oliver turned back to Cody, practically bouncing on his toes. “Mom, this is so cool! Are you ready for the Intercontinental?”

Cody leaned against the doorframe, his tone easy. “Training for it right now. Well... not right now. Your mom took me to a comedy club tonight.”

Oliver scrunched his nose like he couldn’t imagine why anyone would pick jokes over a perfectly good fight. “That’s cool, I guess. Can you show me how to do a roundhouse?”

“We have to let Mr. Cody get ready for his big fight,” I reminded him gently. “We’ll see him at Family Day.”

“It’s all right,” Cody said, glancing at me. “I can teach him a couple of moves. I mean, only if you’re okay with it.”

Oliver grabbed my arm, tugging. “Yeah, Mom. You said I could take karate soon. Cody can show me how he kicks.”

As if to prove his point, Oliver attempted his best kick, followed by a quick, wobbly punch.

Cody nodded approvingly. “That’s a right jab. You seem like a tough little guy. How about we try some kicks in the park this Sunday?”

Oliver gasped like he’d just won the lottery.

I blinked, caught off guard by the casual offer. “Uh... yeah. We can make it a little picnic.”

“Yesss!” Oliver jumped in place, pumping his fist.

“Oliver,” I said, trying to reel things back in, “get inside and drink your milk. Then go to bed.”

Mama waved him toward the kitchen. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s let the grown folks talk.”

With one last wide-eyed look at Cody, Oliver finally obeyed, leaving us alone on the porch.

I exhaled. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind.” Cody shrugged. “He seems like a good kid. Should be fun.”

“I want to respect your time while you train for your upcoming fight.”

“Sunday’s my easy day. I’ll hit the gym in the morning, then meet you guys for lunch at noon. Sound good?”

I wasn’t used to men who made decisions easily. It was kind of nice. “Sounds great. I’ll bring the food. Got a favorite snack?”

“As long as it’s high in protein.”

“Guess we’ll see what I come up with, then.”

Max let out a low huff from the truck, as if reminding Cody they had places to be.

I grinned. “I think Max is looking forward to it, too.”

Cody glanced over at his furry friend. “He just thinks there’ll be food.”

I laughed, stepping back toward the door. “If he likes peanut butter, he might be in luck.”

Cody turned toward his truck. “See you Sunday, Emily.”

I lingered in the doorway, watching as he climbed in. Max stuck his head out again, his big eyes tracking me as if making sure I was still there.

And I was.

Even after the truck disappeared down the street, I stood there, arms wrapped around myself.

“Well, well, well,” Mama’s voice came from behind me. “That looked a lot like a good date.”

I groaned, turning toward the kitchen. “It was nice .

“Mmhmm. I saw a certain someone getting all flustered when a certain hunky fighter invited himself to a picnic.”

I grabbed a cookie from the counter and took a dramatic bite. “Mama. Please.”

Her teasing softened as she leaned against the counter. “I know you work hard, but you should think about yourself, too. I’m glad you seemed like you enjoyed yourself tonight.”

I swallowed, not sure how to respond. I didn’t want to admit to her that this was just fake dating for the press. I wasn’t even sure I believed that anymore.

Instead, I forced a small smile. “I’m happy for Oliver.” I changed the subject quickly.

“He’ll probably never go to sleep now.”

As I moved to clear away the last of the cookie crumbs, I found my gaze drifting toward the window. The street was empty, Cody’s truck long gone.

I knew I’d be up for a while... thinking about him anyway.

## Page 4

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EMILY

The next evening, I was running late.

I hated running late. It made me feel flustered, like I was already losing control of a situation before I even stepped into it. When the situation involved Trey, it was even worse.

After dropping Oliver off at the sitter's, I drove across town, gripping the wheel a little too tightly. I hadn't seen Trey in months. He never called. And now, suddenly, he wanted to talk about Oliver? I should've been used to his unpredictability by now, but it never stopped being frustrating.

When I pulled up to the restaurant, my irritation doubled. It was one of his places, overpriced and pretentious. The kinds of spots Trey loved had menus that read like an art exhibit instead of actual food.

The hostess barely looked at me as she led me through the restaurant, her expression cool and vaguely judgmental, as if she could tell I'd rather be anywhere else.

Then I spotted Trey.

He was already seated at the table, casually flipping through the menu with one hand while his other hand rested near his half-finished martini. The crystal-clear liquid gleamed under the low lights, and his Rolex flashed as he turned his wrist to glance at the time.

When I slid into my seat, he didn't offer a greeting. He tossed out a question, sharp and clipped. "Where's Oliver?"

I reached for my water as the waiter filled my glass. "With the sitter."

Trey frowned. "You'd rather leave him with a babysitter than let him see his dad?"

I took a slow sip, willing myself to stay calm. "You said you wanted to talk about him. I'm not going to let him hear us work out visitation." As if you ever come around anyway.

He set the menu down. "It's time you let me spend more time with my son."

I exhaled, already exhausted. "I never stopped you. You're always on some big business trip halfway around the world. I didn't even know you were back in town until I heard people whispering about it in the hallway at work."

"I was going to call you," he said, dismissive. "I had to take care of some things."

My brows drew together. "What's more important than your son that you claim you want to see?"

His lips thinned. "Hey, I don't need that. We both know your little job at City Hall doesn't begin to provide him with the life I can."

My fingers tightened around my glass, my appetite vanishing. "I don't want to go back and forth with you. We did that years ago. If you want to be in Oliver's life, let me know so we can be good co-parents."

Before he could respond, a waiter arrived, setting down a plate of appetizers. Trey immediately helped himself, not even bothering to offer me any.

Between bites, he said, “I’m taking him to the Kentucky Derby in a couple of weeks. And don’t worry, we’ll be back in plenty of time for your Fun Day.”

“Family Day.”

The idea of Trey whisking Oliver away on an out-of-state trip didn’t sit well with me, but I had to be fair. “Just... please make it a father-son thing. No flashy parties, no women.”

“You got it. But you’re the one going around town with flashy athletes.” He leaned back, swirling the last of his martini. “I saw you and Stone’s picture all over that comedy club’s social media.” He angled his head. “It’s not a good look.”

I stiffened. “Cody is—”

Trey downed the rest of his drink, a drop slipping down his chin. “I don’t know what you and that guy got going on, but make sure my son isn’t part of it.”

I took a steady breath, forcing myself to stay civil. “I heard you out, Trey. Just like always, I put Oliver first. That hasn’t changed.” I pushed my empty plate aside, no longer in the mood to order dinner. “I need to get home. It’s been a long day.”

Trey barely looked up as his phone buzzed on the table. Without missing a beat, he picked it up, already distracted by whoever was on the other end. “Yeah?” he answered smoothly, as if I had already left.

I stood, sliding my chair back without another word.

As I walked out of the restaurant, the tension in my shoulders didn’t ease, but at least I was free of my ex. For now.

## CODY

I pushed through another round on the heavy bag, sweat rolling down my back, my knuckles stinging under the wraps. My focus this Sunday morning should've been locked in footwork and precision. But instead, my brain kept short-circuiting back to Emily.

Whenever she laughed at the comedy club a few nights ago, it lit up her whole face. She had that soft kind of beauty, the kind that made a man want to reach out just to see if it was real. Her hair looked just as touchable. I had no business thinking about it.

Or the way she'd made sure Max had a treat at the comedy club. The one little gesture stuck with me .

I threw a harder punch, forcing my head back into the fight. This thing between us was just for show. That's it.

"Looks like the internet has a lot to say about you and your date the other night."

I turned to see Liam smirking as he leaned against the ropes. I reached for my water bottle while listening to him.

"Some of your online female fans especially have plenty of things to say about it," he added.

"You know I never look at that stuff."

"Yeah, lucky you," Liam scoffed. "A couple million followers and all you ever post is fight pics. No captions, nothing."



I took a long drink. “Guess some people like me to keep it simple.”

Liam rolled his eyes and grabbed the pads. “Come on, let’s spar a few rounds.”

I shoved my hands back into my gloves. Fake or not, Emily was getting under my skin. I needed to fight it off. The Intercontinental Battle Royale was coming up right behind me and if I didn’t focus on winning, I’d lose everything.

Liam grinned as he dodged a jab from me. “Now that’s the Cody I know.”

I just hoped getting punched a few times would knock some sense back into me.

We practiced for a few more rounds before I had to wrap it up and meet Emily and her son at the park. The sting of the sparring session lingered in my muscles as I stepped out of the gym, showered and refreshed. The walk through the park was filled with the usual—joggers, dog walkers, a few people who recognized me. Some waved, some whispered. I nodded politely but didn’t slow down. Today wasn’t about them.

Today was about Emily.

As soon as I spotted her by the pond, my focus narrowed in. She stood with her back to me, her small body hugged by a matching leggings and jacket set. The outfit highlighted the curves I’d tried really hard not to notice before. Gold hoop earrings peeked out beneath her baseball cap, and when she turned toward Oliver, laughing at what he said, I felt something in my stomach.

Damn, I didn’t have time for flutters.

Before I could overthink it, Oliver spotted me. His baseball cap, already slipping forward, flew off his head as he bolted toward me.

“Let’s do some moves!” he yelled, already shadowboxing. His little fists pumped the air with determination.

Emily turned at his outburst, her eyes meeting mine. She smiled, easy and bright. The flutter in my gut turned into a full-blown somersault.

“Hey, champ,” I said, catching Oliver’s hat before the wind took it. I ruffled his hair, chestnut brown with tight curls just like his mom, before setting it back on his head.

“You ready?” He grinned up at me, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He also had Emily’s big smile and dark brown eyes.

Emily laughed, stepping closer. “You’ve created a monster. He’s been practicing in the mirror all morning.”

I took in the warmth in her eyes, the way the sunlight caught the sheen of her skin. I had a feeling this Sunday was going to be a little harder to keep things strictly business than I’d planned.

EMILY

AFTER CODY SPENT SOME time showing my son a few kicks and light footwork, we took a break to eat. Oliver, being Oliver, got distracted by the ducks near the pond and decided they were his new opponents. He flapped his arms, running in circles, pretending they were chasing him. Max’s tail flopped from side to side as he observed.

I laughed as I watched. “I swear, he has endless energy.”

Cody stretched his long legs out on the blanket. “Good trait to have.”

I turned to him, still smiling, only to find him already looking at me. My breath stalled. His gaze was different today, something deeper was there. He looked relaxed in a way I hadn't seen before. The sharp, guarded edges of him seemed softer here, sitting under the warm sun, watching Oliver play.

"You're good with him," I murmured, my voice quieter than I meant it to be.

Cody shrugged, refusing to take a compliment from me. "He's a cool kid." A pause. "You're a good mom."

My breath caught again. I got compliments all the time about my work, my organization and ability to handle chaos. This felt more personal.

I swallowed, looking away toward Oliver, who was still caught up in his game. "I try."

Cody's hand brushed against mine on the blanket, and a spark of warmth shot up my arm. When I turned back to him, the air between us tightened. The attraction had been there before, simmering under the surface. I believed I felt it from him at the comedy club. Today it was still there. It felt real, maybe more dangerous.

And then, he leaned in.

It wasn't rushed or forceful, just a steady, deliberate press of his lips against mine. Soft but sure.

My heart tripped over itself. For a moment, I forgot everything else. The park and the people around us faded because all I could focus on was Cody. His warmth, the scratch of stubble along his jaw, the way his lips moved against mine with an aching gentleness that worked to undo me.

I couldn't help myself. I began to kiss him back, reaching up to touch the side of his face with my fingertips.

“Mom! Cody! They're really chasing me now!”

We jerked apart just as Oliver came barreling toward us, two very determined ducks waddling after him.

Cody chuckled under his breath. “Guess we should save that for later.”

I could barely form words. My lips still tingled as my pulse hammered in my ears.

Oliver dove onto the blanket between us, breathless and laughing. I barely heard what he said next because all I could think about was how Cody just kissed me. I liked it. A lot. Only now, I had no idea where that left us.

DAYS LATER, THE PICNIC with Cody settled in my head, rent-free.

I kept replaying the way he had been so patient with Oliver, how he'd encouraged him without making him feel small. He had this grounding presence that made me feel safe in a way I hadn't experienced with a man before.

And then there was our kiss. Despite our fake date for the press, the kiss felt like the real thing.

That was a whole other problem.

I couldn't let myself get carried away. This was just for publicity. I originally thought it would make a good performance to drum up interest in Family Day and boost Cody's image leading into the Intercontinental Battle Royale. No more, no less.

I reminded myself of that fact as I wrapped up work for the day, making sure everything was set for the next step in our little arrangement. I confirmed with Oliver's babysitter that I'd be out this evening after Cody's press conference. More people were arriving in town for the fight, and the buzz was growing. Reporters, sports analysts, even a few celebrities were being spotted all over Main Street's restaurants and shops. Mama was having a blast selling unique pieces to the new customers, and my cousin Angelique got to show off her modeling skills for them. It was exactly the kind of attention that made this "relationship" perfect timing.

"Emily, you've outdone yourself." My coworker, Geraldene, stopped me in the break room. "The way you timed Family Day right before that MMA fight? Genius. Mayor Jenkins is thrilled with the turnout projections."

I smiled, accepting the praise even though I increasingly felt out of my element. Coordinating events for the city was one thing. Fake dating a famous athlete who had the power to draw in millions of fans and a ton of media? That was a different league.

Judging by the morning headlines, people were eating it up.

I saw my own face staring back at me from the homepage of the Sunridge Chronicle news website. A smaller photo of me and Cody from the comedy club was tucked in the corner, but the main picture was from the park. Cody and I sitting close, Oliver sandwiched between us, all three of us laughing.

Even the major news outlets were picking up the story. I should've been happy that this spur-of-the-moment idea Cody and I had was working, but he only intended it to just be a fake relationship to get Trey off my case. I was the one who took it to the next level, and now I wasn't sure if I got in over my head.

After work, I raced home to get ready for the press conference. Mama was there waiting for me. I told her earlier I didn't have anything appropriate to wear. She came

to my rescue. I ran my hands down the fabric of the sleek royal blue dress she picked out for me at the boutique. I studied the boatneck neckline and long sleeves. “Are you sure about this one? It’s very, I don’t know, tight looking.”

“Body con is trending. It’s perfect.” She lifted the dress from where it was splayed on the couch to hold it up to my frame. “Understated, but elegant. You’ll look beautiful.”

I took the dress upstairs to my bedroom mirror and glanced at my reflection. Cody and I were supposed to head to dinner after the press conference. The dress was more than I’d normally wear out, but this wasn’t just any outing. I had another night where I had to play my role.

I could do this. I had to do this. Once Family Day and Cody’s big fight was over, everything would return to normal. A nagging feeling stayed in my chest after I showered and lotioned my body.

Normal was good, right? Safe, predictable. But as I slipped into my dress and caught my reflection in the mirror, the thought of going back to the way things were felt... hollow.

I decided on an evening purse and ordered an Uber. I figured I might want a glass of wine tonight, and didn’t want to worry about parking in the heavy traffic that the press conference would attract to Warriors Den.

Cool evening air settled around me as I stepped outside when my ride arrived. On the drive to Cody’s training facility, I looked out at the neon lights and street traffic of the town. Car horns and the patter of light rain on the windows filled the silence.

The car turned down the street where Warriors Den was located. My fingers tightened around my clutch bag. The closer I got to the press conference, the more the weight of the night settled on me. Another event. Another set of eyes watching.

By the time I arrived at the facility and was ushered into the press room, it was already alive with flashing cameras and murmured questions. I sat down in the front and smoothed my hands over the dress, watching as Cody sat at the long table with the other fighters. He wore a black dress shirt, the fabric stretching just enough to hint at the strength beneath. His big hands were enough to send my thoughts in an entirely inappropriate direction. Paired with dark slacks and his usual quiet confidence, he looked sharp and controlled.

As if he could sense me watching, his eyes lifted, cutting through the chaos of the room until they locked onto mine. It was only a flicker of recognition. He gave me a small nod and a quirk of a smile before he refocused on the reporters.

He sat at the long table with the other fighters while they answered questions. Some of the guys leaned into the moment, cracking jokes and playing to the crowd. Cody, though, didn't waste words as he answered each question.

"Stone, what do you think about your opponent's statement that he's going to knock you out in the second round?" a reporter asked.

Cody barely reacted. "He's welcome to try."

"That's all you have to say?"

"What more is there?"

A few chuckles rippled through the crowd, but Cody remained serious. He wasn't there to perform, at least not in the way the others were. I admired that about him.

Max sat by his side, panting happily, completely at ease in the noisy room. The dog was practically an extension of Cody, strong and watchful.

The conference wrapped up, and as Cody made his way toward me, my pulse picked up. He didn't hesitate, sliding an arm around my waist and drawing me close. His lips brushed my cheek, warm and firm.

"Let's get out of here." His voice tickled as he murmured into my ear.

I barely had time to process his touch before a voice cut through the room, louder than the murmuring reporters.

"I have a question." Trey popped his head up from the back of the crowd.

My stomach dropped. A few reporters turned, some already raising their phones to capture whatever spectacle was about to unfold.

My ex adjusted the cuff of his tailored blazer, his Rolex catching the overhead lights. His smile was all polished confidence as he ignored the reporters waiting their turn. Instead, he directed his attention straight to Cody's opponent, Marcus Ray.

"How exactly do you plan to knock out Stone? I can't see him lasting too long in the ring with you."

A hush fell over the crowd. I shot Trey a sharp look, my irritation burning under my skin. He was embarrassing himself, and to an extent, me. Cody, however, remained calm. His expression didn't change, though a tightness set into his jaw.

Marcus leaned forward, playing into the moment with a wink and a smirk. "It won't take long. He's tough, sure, but I've got power. He won't last past round two."

Cody exhaled through his nose, turning his attention to Trey. "You seem pretty invested in my fight."



Trey put on his slick businessman grin. “I just like to bet on the winning horse.”

Cody hooded his eyes, looking more bored than angry. “Better rethink your wager.”

The tension stretched between them, thick and heavy. Then, with a dismissive glance, Cody turned back to the reporters. “Any more real questions?”

Laughter broke out, and Trey’s smirk faltered just a fraction.

I wanted to shrink into the floor, but I refused to let Trey see how much he irritated me. He tried to play it cool after Cody neutralized his attempt at verbal sparring. He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, smiled and sauntered off like he hadn’t just made a complete ass of himself.

The press conference wrapped up quickly after that. The major news outlets were already running with the story. Reporters snapped photos, capturing the moment. I told myself that’s what this was for.

Cody’s hand rested on my lower back, guiding me through the crowd. The tension from the press conference still crackled around me. Trey’s smug voice looped in my head. I was usually the one who managed the media, who kept her cool under pressure. Yet right now? I was frazzled.

“Keep walking.” Cody kept his voice low.

My legs moved on autopilot. Max kept pace on my other side, his fur brushing against my calf like he was standing guard. The questions from the media started as soon as we stepped outside. I squeezed my eyes shut as lights flashed in my face.

“Cody, how do you feel about Trey Larson’s comments?”

“Emily, is this relationship serious?”

“Cody, you’ve stayed quiet on social media about this. Why?”

Cody didn’t break stride. His grip on me tightened, protective. “Not tonight, folks.”

We made it to his truck, and he opened the passenger door for me. I climbed in, my pulse still racing. Max hopped into the back seat, and as soon as Cody shut his door and started the engine, I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

Silence stretched between us for a beat.

Then I snapped.

“Trey is such an ass.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:53 am*

EMILY

My usually controlled anger and frustration at my ex spilled out in front of Cody, and I couldn't put it back in to hide. "My ex-fiancé is such an ass," I blurted, repeating myself. "His dad owns half the commercial real estate, his uncle is a state senator, and his mother sits on every major board for every event that makes Sunridge look good."

Cody didn't say a word. He pulled out of the parking lot and drove, just letting me talk.

I shook my head, staring out the windshield. "I met him when I interned at his office when I was twenty. And I was just so... young and dumb."

"Never call yourself that again." Cody's response was sharp. I tore my gaze from the window to see the fierceness in his eyes. He focused on the road again. "I'm still listening." His voice softened. "But no way I was going to let that slide."

I blinked, caught off guard by the firmness in his voice. He wasn't just saying it to be nice. He meant it. The way he looked at me, even for the brief second, made my chest tighten. When did I ever reveal my feelings about my past to someone outside my family, especially my not-so-sunny opinions about Trey? When was the last time I had even considered being gentle with myself?

Swallowing past the sudden lump in my throat, I looked out on the road ahead. "Right. Well, like I was saying. We dated, and then I got pregnant. He was not thrilled. I wasn't out to baby trap him, and I never asked for anything."

“Were you still working in his office?”

“No. I left because he said the optics wouldn’t be good. Young family heir, his pregnant intern. He proposed, but said he didn’t want a shotgun wedding. The family lawyers needed to figure out his trust fund first.”

Cody gave a slight shake of his head. I went on. “I knew he didn’t really want to marry me, but I thought at least he would show up for me when it counted.” I scoffed, crossing my arms. “He told me he’d be there throughout the pregnancy, but he had his assistant update him on my OB appointments instead. Then, when I had to have an emergency C-section, she was the one who showed up at the hospital with flowers. I gave her his ring to return to him.”

I clenched my jaw, my fingers tightening against my arms. “He got even more distant after Oliver was born. And now— now—he suddenly wants to be more involved just because his office is a sponsor for Family Day.”

Cody’s hands flexed on the steering wheel, though he stayed quiet.

“He doesn’t care,” I continued. “He doesn’t see Oliver as a real child with real needs or emotions. He just wants the town to ooh and ah over a fancy trip he’ll take him on.” I let out a humorless laugh. “Did I mention they’re headed to the Kentucky Derby next week?”

I pressed my palms to my face. “Oh, gosh, Cody, I’m sorry. I just dumped all my baby mama drama on you.”

The truck slowed as he pulled up in front of the restaurant. Before I could scramble out and put distance between myself and my own humiliation, his hand reached out, firm but kind.

“Stop,” he said, his voice quiet but unwavering. I looked at him, and my breath caught at both the fierceness and compassion in his eyes. “You’re a damn good mother, Em, and a hell of a hard worker. This little town wouldn’t be half of what it is without you. Don’t you dare let that Spandex-wearing, jelly-haired fuckshit make you think less of yourself. You got that?”

I just stared at him, stunned. Even Max seemed unusually attentive, his dark eyes locked on me from the back seat.

Cody cleared his throat, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “Excuse all the cussing. I meant everything else.”

A slow smile tugged at my lips. “Trey is a jelly-haired fuckshit.”

Cody huffed out a laugh, and I grinned.

“Thanks for the pep talk,” I said. “Sorry I needed it.”

He reached over and took my hand, his calloused fingers warm against mine. The simple touch sent a spark up my spine. “Stop apologizing,” he murmured. “You’ve got to be one of the strongest people I know, but you still deserve someone in your corner.”

I shook my head, demurring. “Come on. You’ve got guys around you who could probably bench press this truck.”

“You know I’m not talking about that kind of strength.” He squeezed my hand gently. “I’m talking about your mind and spirit. You think on your feet. You go after what you want, or you create it for yourself. Not many can do what you do.”

I swallowed hard, his words settling deep in a place I usually kept locked away.

“That’s really thoughtful of you,” I admitted, my voice quieter now. “And sweet.” I let out a small, breathy laugh. “I don’t think anyone’s ever put it like that before.”

His grip on my hand didn’t waver, grounding me in the moment. I glanced down at our intertwined fingers, something warm and unfamiliar curling in my chest.

“But,” I continued, “it gets exhausting sometimes. Being the strong one. The one who always smiles, always figures it out and keeps everything running smoothly.” I looked back up at him, my throat tight. “I don’t mind doing it. I love my life. I love Oliver. Yet sometimes I just...” I trailed off, unsure how to say what I really meant.

Cody didn’t press. He just held my hand, his thumb brushing slow circles over my skin. “You’re tired of swinging and want someone to tag team with you.”

“Yes.” My voice rose in exclamation. “That’s exactly it.”

“I get it.”

“You really do.” My smile became shy as I gave it to him. “I wish I didn’t have to be the one to make things happen all the time.”

He made a frown as he thought. “Sounds like a lot of pressure. Who says you should do that?”

“Just the whole town.” I settled back in my seat, drumming the fingers of my other hand on my knee as I gave a more realistic admission. “I did some of this to myself. It was my way of proving I could handle business and didn’t need anyone, including my ex.”

“The people who got used to you carrying all the weight for them can adapt if you switch it up. You gotta decide if you want to.”

I soaked in what he said. “It’s amazing how easily your boxing analogies relate to my life.”

He gave me an earnest look. “I’d like to think your life and mine aren’t so different,” he admitted, almost like he was just realizing it himself. “We’re both fighters.”

Something about the way he said it made my breath stall. I studied him, the hard lines of his face, the quiet ferocity in his eyes. He wasn’t just throwing words around to humor me. He meant them.

Maybe it was why the air between us suddenly felt heavier.

Cody’s jaw tensed like he was debating whether to say more, but instead, he let out a quiet breath and turned toward me just enough that our shoulders brushed. He let go of my hand. His fingers flexed, like he wasn’t sure what to do with them. Before I could second-guess anything, he leaned in.

The kiss wasn’t planned. It wasn’t for the cameras. It was raw and real, and God help me, I melted into it. His lips were firm but unhurried, testing, almost like he was waiting for me to pull away. I didn’t. I couldn’t.

He pulled back. “Sorry,” he muttered, his voice heavy with an emotion I didn’t see in him before. “Just talking to you is a turn-on.”

I swallowed hard, my lips still tingling. “No,” I whispered. “Don’t apologize.”

A low noise from the back seat made us both glance at Max. The dog was staring at us, tongue lolling out in what could only be described as a doggy grin.

I chuckled, even though my body was still buzzing. “We should go inside. Max doesn’t want our reservation getting canceled.”

“He’s just hoping for another biscuit,” Cody said, glancing at the restaurant’s name. “Topped with parmesan.”

With one last breath to steady myself, I opened the door. As we walked inside and were led to our cozy table in the corner, my mind was nowhere near the food. I wanted to know everything about Cody that I could.

I ordered penne with chicken. Cody got spaghetti. I wrestled with the patience of a three-year-old as I waited for our server to set the breadsticks on the table and leave before I spoke.

"I took up the floor telling you my life earlier. What about you? What’s your origin story?"

His half-smile sent a signal straight to my clit. “I never heard it put like that before.”

I squeezed my thighs together under the table to relieve some of the pressure building. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t feel comfortable sharing.”

“It isn’t like that. Hardly anyone takes that kind of interest in my life outside of MMA. My dad worked a lot,” Cody said, taking one of the breadsticks. “Even when he was home, he wasn’t there, you know? He’d sit in his chair, drink a beer, and act like the rest of us were background noise. My mom wasn’t cold. She just wasn’t the kind of mom who checked in or worried too much about what I was up to.”

I rested my chin on my hand, listening. “So you had to figure things out on your own.”

He nodded. “Pretty much.” Our food arrived. He swirled his fork through his pasta. “My uncle was different. He saw me. He noticed when I got in fights at school, noticed when I started skipping class. Instead of giving me some half-assed lecture,



he took me to a gym and told me to hit a bag instead of people.” A small smirk played at his lips. “It was the first time I felt like someone actually gave a damn about what I was doing with myself.”

I could picture it. Cody, younger but still with that same sharp focus, pouring himself into something that finally made sense to him.

He rolled his shoulders like he was shaking off a memory. “When I graduated, I had no plan. My uncle was in the military, and he told me straight up if I didn’t get some direction, I was going to end up either in jail or throwing punches in the street for money. He got me to enlist.”

I studied him, trying to picture him in a military uniform. It made sense. The discipline, the quiet strength. “Did you like it?”

“Yeah. It made me feel like I was part of something bigger. But it was hard, the real combat, not the stuff I do now. The things I saw while deployed couldn’t be shown on TV.”

I nodded, giving him space to continue if he wanted, but not pressing. He carried those memories with him, even if he didn’t speak them aloud. “I can’t imagine what that was like,” I said softly, meaning every word. “I know it shaped you.”

His eyes flicked to mine, searching, maybe for judgment, maybe for understanding.

I offered only the latter. “Is that why you have Max?”

His gaze dropped on the canine at his feet, who raised his head when I mentioned his name. Cody gave him an affectionate scratch behind the ears before nodding. “Yeah. My friend Ryder trains service dogs at his facility. Max was the runt of the litter when they found him on the side of the road. I guess Max and I needed each other.”

The space near my heart felt like it was humming. It wasn't just sympathy I felt for Cody. I had admiration for him. He endured things I couldn't fathom and turned his survival into something more. A protector, a fighter, and, in ways he might not even see himself, a healer.

He resumed telling me about his time in the service. "When my time was up, I didn't re-enlist. I felt like I needed something else." He glanced down, rubbing his fingers over the condensation on his glass. "Fighting filled that space."

The feeling over my heart began to spread through my entire body, making me feel warm and alert at the same time. "I'm glad you told me."

His gaze flicked back to mine, steady and unguarded. "I don't talk about this stuff much."

"I'm glad you felt comfortable sharing it with me." I felt the sensation of a force pass between us, something deeper than the casual act we'd been playing. "Thank you for sharing tonight with me." I wanted to share more than this night with him, but I didn't say it out loud.

By the time we stepped outside, the night air was crisp. I barely felt it. The drive back to my house was quiet, but not in an uncomfortable way. It was a silence thick with everything unspoken between us, with the weight of what tonight had become. The city lights blurred past, the hum of the engine steady, but all I could focus on was the man beside me.

Cody's hand rested on the gear shift, close enough that I could feel the warmth of him. My fingers itched to reach out and close the distance. Instead, I held myself back. This was already dangerous territory.

When he pulled into my driveway and cut the engine, he didn't move right away.

Neither did I.

I turned to him, finding his gaze already on me. The look of desire and heat darkening his eyes to a storm grey sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine. “Cody,” I started, unsure of what I even meant to say.

“You don’t have to say anything.” His voice was lower now, rougher. “I just wanted tonight to be real.”

It had been. More real than I was ready to admit. My heart pounded. “Me too.”

His expression seemed to hold a mix of relief and a deeper emotion I had trouble naming. All I knew was how I wanted to see that look in his eyes whenever he gazed at me again and again. Then, slowly, like he was giving me time to stop him, he reached out and ran his thumb along the side of my cheek. His touch lingered against my skin, warm and sure.

“Emily.” My name was barely more than a whisper, but it curled around me, drawing me in.

I tilted my chin. It was all the invitation he needed. He leaned in, closing the last bit of space between us. Our kiss wasn’t rushed. It wasn’t just for the sake of it. It was slow, deliberate, like he wanted to make sure I felt every second of it.

It was soft at first, testing, but then deepened, his hand cupping my face like he wanted to savor the moment. My body responded before my brain could catch up, leaning into him, breathing him in.

When we finally pulled apart, I searched for words to speak.

“I’ll see you soon,” he spoke first.

I barely managed a nod. "Have a good night." I got out of the car. His truck didn't pull out of the driveway until I turned my key and went inside the house.

I wanted to ask Cody to stay. Everything in my emotions and body wanted him to be near me again. Even if I actually had the courage to ask, I couldn't do it because I wasn't at my house alone tonight.

"How was your date?" Mama asked when I saw her and Oliver in the living room, watching a game show.

I dropped my purse on the armchair. "It was nice. Dinner was good. You and I will have to go back to that restaurant since I know you love cheesy breadsticks."

"Me, too," Oliver chimed. "Can we go with Cody?"

"We'll see, Ollie." I wrapped my arms around him in a goodnight hug. "You know what time it is."

He groaned. "Five more minutes?"

"Maybe Friday. Tonight's a school night."

Oliver threw me the most wounded pout he could muster before grabbing his blanket off the couch. "G'night, Grammy. You too, mom."

I watched him go up the stairs, the cuffs of his pajamas flooding his ankles. He was getting so big. Had he gone through another growth spurt and I somehow missed it?

Mama got up and put on her coat. "I'm surprised that young man didn't want to skip right to dessert with how nice your dress fits."

“Mama,” I half-scolded. “Innocent ears are still in range.” I turned off the TV. “I don’t remember you being this cheeky when I wanted to date boys in high school.”

“That was when you were in high school. Your father, God rest his soul, and I did not want our daughter distracted. But now.” Mama’s warm brown eyes twinkled with mischief. “A little distraction never hurt anyone.”

I found myself unable to hide my giggle. “Cody is highly focused on his upcoming fight, so I doubt anything could distract him.”

“That’s not what I gathered when I saw him look at you during the press conference on TV.” Mama innocently reached for her keys. “I’ll text you when I get home. Goodnight, honey.”

My mother’s teasing left laughter in my spirit and more than a little curiosity about Cody. It was obvious we were attracted to each other. I should’ve been glad it was obvious to others. Was everyone picking up on my growing feelings for him, too? More importantly, was he?

My sex drive was singing high notes tonight when I was around him. As much as my body wanted what it wanted, I knew I needed him for more than just a night. And the thought alone scared me.

After tucking Oliver into bed, I settled into my own, scrolling through social media out of habit. The pictures from earlier were already circulating of me and Cody at the press conference. His arm around me. His lips on my cheek. The comments were filled with people speculating about us, calling us the hottest couple in the city.

My phone rang, and my friend Ava’s name popped up on the screen.

“Look at you,” she teased the second I answered. “You and Cody Stone, huh? You

have been holding out on me.”

I laughed, playing along. “It’s complicated.”

“I bet,” she said suggestively. “You guys look good together, though. And you look happy.”

Happy. I bit my lip, unsure how to respond. Because the truth was, this thing with Cody was supposed to be pretend. Then I thought about the way he kissed me at the park and the way he kissed me tonight. We talked about some pretty deep things that we didn’t share with other people.

If that wasn’t real, I didn’t know what was.

“We’re having fun. But tell me how you and Ryder have been. Are you getting ready to cover his fight at the Intercontinental, too?”

Ava and I chatted for twenty minutes before we both got drowsy. We set a date for a girl’s night in a few weeks before we hung up.

A deep warmth spread through me as I turned off my phone and sank against my pillows. My body still buzzed from the way Cody touched me, from the intimate, sexual way I wanted him to. It had been so long since I’d felt this kind of pull toward a man. This turned out to be the first time I actually experienced the jolt of something electric and real.

My fingers grazed my lips as if I could still feel the press of his. I wanted him in a way that had nothing to do with public appearances or my job expectations. The realization terrified me. I had no idea what to do about it.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:53 am*

CODY

I stepped outside the next morning after my dinner date with Emily. The spring air washed cool over me as I opened the door to my truck, my pre-workout drink in one hand and my gym bag slung over my shoulder. Max padded along beside me, his nails clicking against the pavement. The world was still asleep at five AM. I usually liked this quiet time of day to get in the right headspace to train.

I should've been thinking about my upcoming fight. Instead, my thoughts circled to Em and the way she felt in my arms as she kissed me back. Her lips had been soft, warm. She tasted a little sweet, and her scent, that soft floral hint that always clung to her, reminded me of sunshine after a long, brutal storm.

Fuck.

The boys at the gym would have my ass if they knew how pressed I was over her. But I didn't care. Not one damn bit.

I took a long drink and letting the bitterness of the pre-workout snap me back to reality. This thing between us was supposed to be for show. We were putting on a damn good one, if the headlines were anything to go by. But those kisses didn't feel like an act.

I glanced down at Max. "I really hope she talks to me after this whole Family Day thing is over."

Max wagged his tail like he had an opinion on the matter. Maybe he did. The dog was

smarter than most people I knew.

Shoving my gym bag into the truck, I let out a breath and leaned against the open door. The truth was, I liked Emily. Not just the way she looked in that dress last night, or how soft her lips were. I liked the way she listened and how she made it easy to talk. I could count on a few fingers how many people I shared stories about my life to, the dog included. Even Ryder and Liam didn't know all the details about my relationship with my uncle. Only Emily did.

I sighed before releasing a quiet laugh. If anyone else knew just how tangled up I was over her, they'd call me a simp. Maybe they'd be right.

I wasn't a smooth talker or the type to run game on women. My life and how I handled people was pretty simple. I was a fighter, a coach, a man who stuck to what he knew.

But I wanted Emily, a woman completely out of my league. How the hell was I supposed to make that happen?

The second I pulled into the lot, I spotted it. A black Lamborghini parked right in my spot. Sunlight gleamed off its polished hood like it belonged in a showroom. I knew exactly whose car it was. I gritted my teeth when the owner opened the door.

Trey got out and leaned against the car, arms folded across his long-sleeve Spandex shirt. He wore tight leggings to match. What social media influencer was missing their gym fits today? "No wonder he's got that big vein popping out of his neck. Nowhere else for his pulse to go."

Max let out a snort from the passenger seat.

"Easy, boy," I muttered, giving him a scratch behind the ears. I let Trey hear me as I



got out of my truck. "It's just one of Fury Combat's fans."

I didn't miss the way his eyes narrowed at me. This guy hated being seen as just another face in the crowd.

"Actually," he said, pushing off the Lambo, "I'm here for our training."

"Our training?" It was my turn to squint at him.

Trey looked so happy he got a reaction from me I thought he would jump up and down. "I just dropped a couple Gs to get some pointers on my uppercut."

Max and I exchanged glances. An uppercut? This guy?

I shook my head at Trey. "I'm busy training for the fight. You'll have to find someone else to teach you how to make a fist."

Boy, he did not like me saying that. His jaw tightened. He tried to play it off, like he hadn't just been brushed aside. "My family's office is now a corporate sponsor for the Battle Royale. Your league says you'll be happy to train with me."

And there it was. The real reason he was here. He wasn't looking for training. He wanted to piss on my territory.

I exhaled, reigning in my temper. This was the part of business politics I hated. The lawyers and accountants over at Fury Combat's corporate office cared about the bottom line. They had no idea why I wanted to put this guy through a wall.

But I wasn't about to let his games mess up my day.

I nodded toward the gym entrance. "Meet you inside."

Trey followed me into the gym, running his mouth the entire way. “My personal trainer when I go to New York for business says my endurance is elite-level. I’m thinking about doing the Boston Marathon next year. Might even try for a triathlon.”

“Uh-huh,” I responded, already tuning him out.

I grabbed a pair of pads from the rack, catching the looks from my teammates. They all knew exactly what was going down. Liam, never one to miss an opportunity for pettiness, strolled over with a grin and tossed me a pair of sweaty, old sparring gloves from the lost-and-found bin.

“Don’t know how long those have been in there,” he said, loud enough for a few others to hear, “but your student might need them.” A few of the guys snickered.

I grinned back. “Thanks for looking out.”

I turned back to Trey, who was eyeing Max like the dog had personally insulted him.

“Does that dog have all his shots?” he asked, nose wrinkled.

I didn’t even bother with a response. Instead, I tossed him the nasty old gloves. “Rule number one: focus on your opponent.” I hit the pads, motioning him forward. “Show me what you got.”

Trey stepped up and started throwing uppercuts, if they could be called that. Weak little taps, barely enough to make a sound, but he made all the faces like he was putting real power behind them.

Around us, more snickering broke out. I kept my own humor locked down.

“Not bad,” I said, because I was feeling generous. “Now this is how you actually

throw an uppercut.”

I demonstrated, keeping my form sharp. He tried again. Still garbage.

“Practice on your own,” I said.

“No.” Trey shook out his arms like he was preparing for something big. “You spar with me.”

“You’re not ready.”

The blunt response didn’t sit well with him. His face tightened. Then, without warning, he rushed me, throwing sloppy punches like a drunk at last call.

I didn’t move at first, just let him tire himself out swinging at air. Then, when the moment was right, I dodged smoothly and countered with a quick left jab, stopping just short of his chin.

The prick flinched.

“You gotta learn to bob and weave,” I said evenly, lowering my hand. “It keeps you from catching one of these to the face.”

He straightened, ironing his expression back into a grown thirtysomething year-old guy. Still a prick. “Since you’ve been dodging me, this is a good time to tell you something.”

I stretched my shoulders. “I knew this really wasn’t about training you.”

He crossed his arms. “Be careful around Emily. I don’t know what you think you’re doing with her, but I don’t buy it.”

I met his gaze without flinching. “It’s not for you to understand.”

Trey scoffed. “She’d never get with a rough sort of guy like you if there wasn’t something else attached to it. You may not be as rich as me, but as a professional athlete, I’m sure you’ve got a couple pennies she’d like to rub together.”

That was it. I tossed the gear bag onto the floor with a loud thud. The whole gym went silent.

“Lesson over,” I said, my voice calm but firm.

Trey showed off his fake ass veneers to me in a twisted grin. “Oh, that got you to lose your cool.”

He talked shit about Emily. I wanted to punch him in the mouth to fund his dentist a vacation to the Maldives. If it weren’t for the respect I had for the woman he was too stupid to keep in his life, I would’ve said fuck it to optics and let him have it. Instead I took a step toward him, leveling him with a stare. “Another fighting rule. Don’t taunt people above your class, especially Emily.”

His grin vanished. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“If you did, you wouldn’t be here.”

Trey’s eyes ping ponged as he saw other athletes listening in. He lowered his voice and huffed. It sounded more like a hiss. “As soon as I figure out what prank you and Emily have going on, I’m going to let everyone know and embarrass you.”

I didn’t react. Just stood there, steady. He hated that more than anything. With a scowl, he turned and stomped off, shoving past a couple of the guys on his way out.

Max let out a soft woof beside me, his tail swishing like he was waiting for permission to chase him down.

“Nah,” I muttered, scratching behind his ear. “Not worth the effort.”

Liam stepped up, shaking his head. “Man, you’ve got patience I don’t.”

I clenched and unclenched my fists. “Didn’t feel like it.”

I bent down to pick up the bag, but I was still pissed. Not about Trey. About the fact that he didn’t give a damn about Emily. To him, she was just another way to make himself look good.

I wasn’t about to let it slide.

EMILY

I ROLLED OLIVER’S SUITCASE outside and stood in the driveway, pretending to listen as my son rambled on about thoroughbreds and jockeys. He bounced in place, tossing out facts about the fastest horses in history and debating which one would win at the Derby.

I tried to keep up, nodding at the right moments, but my mind was elsewhere.

Why did Trey have to do this now? The weekend before Family Day? He knew how much it meant to Oliver and to me. This was just like him, sweeping in at the last minute with grand gestures, making himself look like the cool parent. He always had to one-up me, like the life I gave our son wasn’t enough.

I clenched my hands in front of me, forcing myself to breathe through the frustration.

Then Oliver stopped talking and started pulsing back and forth like a little welterweight. “I can’t wait to get back home and go to Family Day,” he said, shifting gears. “Will they have Choco Extreme ice cream there, Mom? It’s our favorite.”

Before I could answer, he threw his arms in the air. “This is going to be the best week ever!”

The lump in my throat was instant. I smiled, blinking against the sting of tears. “I love you so much, Ollie.”

Oliver looked at me like I’d just started reciting Shakespeare. He scrunched up his face. “Ew, Mom, why are you getting mushy like that? I just asked about ice cream.” Then, as if realizing something terrible, he groaned. “You cannot do that in front of Cody.”

A laugh bubbled up despite everything. “Noted.”

The low hum of an engine signaled Trey’s arrival. I stood as his Lamborghini pulled into the driveway. He stepped out in a fitted Hermès zip-up sweatshirt and matching joggers, his usual designer uniform he wore to catch flights.

I caught my own reflection in his Ray-Bans. Irritation flashed in my eyes.

“The jet’s all fired up and waiting for us, Ollie,” he announced, his tone easy, as if he wasn’t completely disrupting my weekend. “You ready to see some racing?”

Oliver jumped up and hugged me tightly.

Trey sighed, clearly impatient. “Come on. We don’t have all day.”

I bristled, wrapping my arms around my son, unwilling to rush this moment. “Let him

hug me. He's going away all week."

Trey scoffed. "Knock off the Mother of the Year act. You know you're glad to have this time to plan for your little town party."

I opened my mouth to argue but stopped myself. He wanted to get under my skin. I hated that he still had the power to make me angry.

Instead, I kept my voice even. "I'm going to call every day at eight so I can tell him good night."

"Yeah. Sure."

The way his tone dragged made me look at him closer. He seemed tired, more exasperated than usual. His right hand flexed and unflexed at his side, and he rubbed his fingers over his knuckles.

"What's wrong with your hand?"

"Nothing. Just a little strain from working out."

It had to be something more to what he said, but I let it go. I smoothed Oliver's curls one last time. "Text me when your plane lands."

Oliver waved to me on his way to the car, his grin wide. "Bye, Mom! Love you!"

I waved back. "Love you too, baby."

Trey didn't say another word as he climbed into the driver's seat and pulled away.

As the car disappeared down the street, a single tear slipped down my cheek.

I swiped it away and squared my shoulders. No time for that.

With a deep breath, I turned back to the house, ready to bury myself in cleaning and distractions to get through the long, lonely weekend ahead.

I went inside, shutting the door behind me with more force than necessary. The silence hit me. No Oliver chattering about horses or MMA. No little feet running down the hall. Just me and an empty house.

I took a deep breath and marched to the kitchen, rolling up my sleeves. If I kept busy, I wouldn't think about Trey flying off with my son to some extravagant weekend I could never compete with.

I grabbed a sponge and started scrubbing the stove like it had a decade's worth of dried tomato sauce. The thing was already spotless, but I needed something to do. My hands needed to be moving and my thoughts needed to be occupied.

Still, my mind kept circling back to Oliver and Trey. I sighed, dropping the sponge into the sink. Before I could second-guess myself, I pulled out my phone and opened my messages.

Hey, you busy?

It took less than a minute for Cody to respond. Just got home from the gym. What's up?

I hesitated. What did I want to tell him? How my house felt too empty? That I hated how this weekend was playing out? Or I had a moment of weakness and felt small and insignificant compared to Trey's grand gestures?

I settled for something casual. Nothing. Distracting myself. The house is way too



quiet.

My phone chirped with his second text. Oliver take off okay?

Yeah. Trey picked him up to go in his supersonic private jet. They're probably halfway to Kentucky by now.

Sounds like a big trip.

I frowned at the screen, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. Yep. Big trip. Big memories. Big everything.

I hesitated again, then added, Meanwhile, I'm here scrubbing my stove like my life depends on it.

I stared at the screen, my stomach twisting as I waited for Cody's response. Then I set the phone down and tried to resume focus on cleaning. I straightened up the living room and wiped down surfaces. It was supposed to distract me, but I was still stuck in my head when my phone rang.

Cody's name lit up my screen. I hesitated but answered. "Hey."

"You seemed like you needed to talk more than text." His voice was warm and grounding.

I felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me. "I'm being messy again."

"No. It sounds like you miss Oliver, and it sounds like his dad got on your nerves. I've met Trey. I get it."

There was something lingering in his tone, like he wanted to say more. "It sounds like

something is on your mind, too. Don't hold back. You see how I just spilled everything like a wet cardboard cup."

Cody chuckled. "Nah, you're good. But peaking of messy, Trey showed up at the gym the other day. You should've seen the crappy uppercut he threw."

I raised an eyebrow, mildly intrigued. "What are you talking about?"

He went on, describing the moment. "I mean, it was pitiful. He was trying to impress people, I guess, but he looked like he was swatting at flies instead of throwing punches on the bag."

I couldn't help but laugh. "No wonder he acted like his hand was hurting. He wouldn't tell me what it was about when I asked. Geez, so arrogant. Thanks for cheering me up."

"Glad I could help. Your laugh sounds sexy over the phone, by the way."

I felt flutters in my stomach at his compliment, a little flirtation weaving between us. "I like a man with a dry sense of humor."

"You should do something nice for yourself. Cleaning all weekend doesn't sound fun."

"It isn't, but I don't feel like going out by myself," I admitted, my heart racing. Was I actually flirting with him?

There was a pause on his end before he spoke again. "We could go downtown."

I wrinkled my nose. "I'm tired of dressing up for the press. Don't laugh, but I'd really like to check out one of those old-school arcades."

“Sounds like fun.”

“I said don’t laugh.”

“I couldn’t help it. I remember my uncle used to take me. We’d play Space Invaders and those fighting games with all the kooky characters throwing fireballs.”

I chuckled, picturing him as a kid, absorbed in games. “Let’s see, you’re not a commander of a space fleet. I’m guessing the fighting games also had a hand in your career choice.”

“Are you calling me kooky?” he asked, his tone lighthearted.

“No way. I’m just really, really bad at flirting. Ugh.”

I heard keys rattling on the other end. “Why don’t you put the dustpan down and think about which fighter you want to choose to try to beat me?”

I smiled, genuine joy bubbling up in me. “Challenge accepted.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:53 am*

EMILY

After ending the call, I took a lightning-speed shower and threw on a cute gray jumpsuit, pairing it with a little jean jacket, new from Mama's boutique. The fitted material of the jumpsuit hugged my curves, and the low-cut neckline was definitely on the flirty side. Maybe this should've been left in the juniors' section.

I eyed myself in the mirror, debating for half a second before I saw Cody's truck pulling up outside. Time ran out for second-guessing my outfit. I grabbed my crew socks, scrunched them just right, and slipped on my high-top sneakers.

When I stepped outside, Cody's gaze swept over me, lingering just long enough to send a warm pulse through my stomach.

"You look so good." His voice had that low, appreciative rasp that sent heat curling through me.

"Thank you." I patted Max's head as I climbed into the truck, letting the compliment settle in my chest. "I was trying to do an early '90s look since we're going to an arcade."

"Nailed it."

Cody's eyes flicked downward for a brief second, catching on the neckline of my jumpsuit. I bit my lip, pretending not to notice, though I definitely noticed. That small glance sent a thrill through me, like a secret between us neither of us had said out loud yet.

As we pulled up to the arcade, I was hit with a wave of nostalgia. The place was buzzing with neon lights, the flashing glow of game screens illuminating the faces of kids and adults alike. The sounds of classic 8-bit music, beeping buttons, and the occasional victory cheer filled the air. Groups huddled around pinball machines, teenagers were furiously mashing buttons at a side-scrolling beat-'em-up, and somewhere in the back, the familiar chime of Pac-Man gobbling pellets played on repeat.

Cody leaned in slightly, his voice low near my ear. "Glad people are focused on their games and not on us as much."

I inhaled, catching the scent of his cologne mixed with the fresh, clean smell of his clothes. It was subtle, warm, comforting, and yet dangerous in the way it made me want to lean in just a little closer.

I turned toward the nearest fighting game, a vintage setup with big, colorful buttons and joysticks that had clearly seen years of intense battles. Tossing Cody a playful look, I hit the start button. "Ready to surrender to the new queen of the ring, champ?"

Cody cracked his knuckles, his mouth tilting into a slow grin. "You're cute when you talk big."

I scoffed, waiting for the machine to load. "We'll see who's talking big when I wipe the floor with you."

He chuckled, stepping up to the Player 2 platform beside me. "Just remember. No hard feelings when you lose."

I arched a brow. "Oh, you're going down."

The game screen flashed, and our little challenge began. As much as I wanted to

focus on the game, I couldn't ignore the way my heart raced, not from competition, but from the way Cody was watching me.

Bright colors danced across the screen. Our characters lunging at each other in a flurry of punches and kicks. I gripped the joystick, my competitive spirit ignited.

"Let's see what you've got, queen of the ring." Cody laughed.

With a determined flick of my wrist, I executed a series of combos, each hit echoing with a satisfying thud. My character was quick, darting around the screen while I shouted out victory taunts. "You're going to need more than that to beat me!"

He was no slouch. I felt the pressure as he began to rally, his character countering my moves. The arcade noises faded into a backdrop, and it felt like it was just the two of us, our laughter and banter, and the thrill of the game connecting us.

"Ha! Gotcha." I squealed as my character landed a critical hit.

He groaned, mock despair etched across his face. "Beginner's luck. I'm just letting you have this one."

"Keep telling yourself that." I grinned, caught up in the fun, even as a flutter of anticipation danced in my stomach.

After a few more rounds, I was done, my cheeks flushed. I glanced at Cody, who was grinning ear to ear, clearly enjoying himself. "Okay, okay, you're better than I expected," he admitted, leaning back against the machine.

After our rounds of fighting games, we made our way over to Space Invaders. Our score was a tie. Then we headed to the pinball machines, the bright lights flashing as we took turns racking up points. My competitive side surged once again, and I found

myself giggling and squealing as I pulled the flippers, each successful shot sending a rush of adrenaline through me.

“C’mon, Em, you’re killing me.” He shook his head in mock defeat as I scored another jackpot.

“I think you’re just being nice,” I teased.

He hooded his eyes, his expression light. “Me, nice? I’m just letting you have your moment of glory.”

As the game concluded and I racked up the highest score, I couldn’t help but boast. “What did I tell you? Queen of the ring! I mean, Queen of Pinball.”

He threw his hands in playful surrender. “You got me. Next time, I’ll actually try.”

We stepped away from the game, and I realized I was starting to feel a gnawing hunger in my stomach. “So, what are we doing for food?” I asked, stretching slightly as I glanced around the arcade.

Cody looked thoughtful. “There’s this Thai place I like. They’ve got great pad see ew and spring rolls.”

“Sounds good,” I replied, but then hesitated. “Would you mind if we do takeout instead? I just want to decompress away from people and their phones.”

He nodded, understanding written all over his face. “Yeah, I get that. Let’s head to my place.”

As we walked toward the exit, the fresh air hit me like a welcome wave, and I felt lighter, freer. This outing had been exactly what I needed.

Once in the truck, I glanced over at him, surprised by how comfortable this all felt. “Thanks for today. It’s been nice.”

He shot me a genuine smile, one that reached his eyes. “Anytime. I enjoyed it.”

We got our takeout and proceeded to his place. Cody’s house was exactly what I expected: neat, buttoned-up, but still lived-in. The living room was simple but comfortable, decorated in neutral tones with subtle touches that reflected his personality. A few framed fight posters lined one wall, while a sleek leather sectional took up most of the space, looking as inviting as it was well-worn.

I took in the details as I walked further inside, my gaze drifting toward the fireplace mantel. The framed photos caught my attention first. They were snapshots of Cody’s past, frozen in time. One showed him in uniform, standing tall and proud, his sharp features serious but confident. Another was of him with his team, arms draped over each other’s shoulders, their grins easy despite the rugged setting. My fingers hovered near the frames, tracing the edge of the glass.

Cody stepped up beside me and handed me a cherry soda, one of those pseudo-healthy ones that promised the world in a tiny aluminum can. “You ordered this back at that Italian place. Figured I’d try it myself.”

I accepted it from him. “Did you like it?”

“Too sweet, but I’m glad I still had it in the fridge.” His voice grew quieter as he saw the picture I looked at. “That was my first deployment.” His hand brushed against the small of my back, resting there as he pointed to another picture. The simple contact sent a ripple of awareness through me.

“And this one?” I asked, pointing to a photo of a much younger Cody. He stood beside a broad-shouldered man I assumed was his uncle, along with another guy in



boxing gear.

“My uncle and his best friend, one of the first boxers he ever trained. I was just a kid, but I was obsessed with it. Spent every weekend in the gym, watching and learning.”

I smiled, appreciating these glimpses into his past. He wasn't the type to volunteer information easily, so the fact that he was sharing this with me made my stomach flutter.

It growled, too. Loud enough for anyone within ten feet to hear. Max's ears perked at the sound from where he rested on the floor beside the sectional. “Oops.” I gave a sheepish grin. “Guess my stomach is talking louder than I am.”

Cody gave my back a gentle pat before stepping away. “I'll grab some silverware so we can eat. No way am I embarrassing myself trying to eat with chopsticks.”

I chuckled as he disappeared into the kitchen. Smiling, I moved toward the couch and sank onto the leather, stretching out. The softness against my back was instantly relaxing, a contrast to the stiff chairs I was used to sitting in at work. Before I could get too comfortable, Max hopped up beside me, resting his head on my thigh like we'd been best friends forever.

I stroked his head, scratching behind his ears. “Cody's a good guy,” I confided. “And you're a good doggie, aren't you?”

As if he understood me, Max made a pleased little noise.

Cody returned just in time to hear it. “Don't spoil him. He already thinks he's a person.”

At that, Max let out a dramatic sigh and hopped off the couch, heading down the hall

toward his food and water, leaving Cody and me alone.

We ate in comfortable silence for a few moments, the only sound the occasional clink of a fork or the rustle of takeout containers.

“This is good,” I finally said, biting into a spring roll. “Especially the spring rolls.”

Cody nodded, chewing his food with satisfaction. “The pad see ew is perfect.”

I twirled my chopsticks in my fingers, glancing at him. “I promise I wasn’t trying to get you to invite me to your place.” My voice felt small, a little uncertain. “But I’m glad you did. I mean, it’s nice we don’t have cameras in our faces now.”

Cody laughed, the deep, warm sound easing some of my nervousness. “I know what you meant. I like spending time with you. I like it more when I don’t have to share you with the media.”

The words sent a flutter through me. Undeniable warmth settled low in my stomach, and it had nothing to do with the spiciness of the meal. I met his gaze, and for the first time all night, I found myself a little breathless.

I set my chopsticks down. “I want to be honest...”

“I should tell you...” he said at the exact same time.

We both paused, then laughed.

“Ladies first.” He gestured toward me, his eyes steady, waiting.

I took a sip of my cherry soda to buy myself a second. My fingers tightened around the can as I finally forced the words out. “I know this is a whole fake relationship we

created to fool my ex and to generate publicity for Family Day... but I kind of like it.” My voice wavered. “Maybe a little too much.”

Cody tilted his head, studying me. “What do you mean?”

I bit my lip, then met his gaze. “I like it when you kiss me. I wish it was for real.”

“They are real.”

“Yeah, but the whole thing.” My face heated, and I instinctively lifted my hand to partially cover it. “Sorry.”

Cody reached out, gently uncovering my face with his fingers, his touch warm against my skin. “Why are you apologizing to me?”

Tears pricked at the edges of my eyes, and I tried to blink them away, but one slipped free. I hurried to wipe it, but Cody beat me to it, his thumb brushing the tear away before it could fall.

My throat tightened, but I pushed through. “It’s when you do little things like that to comfort me. Or when you encourage me, and you sound rough, but you’re actually kind and gentle. I like you, Cody.” My voice dropped to barely above a whisper. “You turn me on. For real.”

There were a few beats of quiet, his gaze unwavering, before he finally spoke. “I like you too, Em. For real.”

A surprised laugh bubbled out of me, half relieved, half overwhelmed. “How are you this sweet?”

Cody’s lips arranged in a small smile. “Most people wouldn’t use that word to

describe me.”

“They don’t know the other sides of you. You actually listen.”

“I like listening to you.”

I blinked up at him, warmth blooming deep in my chest. “You’ve been through a lot, but you didn’t let it make you an asshole.”

Cody pretended to measure the weight of my words. “Oh, I’m sure Liam and Ryder would tell you different when I’m coaching them.”

I laughed, playfully touching his knee. “Stop. You get what I mean. I like a man who’s careful with his actions and words.”

His expression turned more serious. His hand slid over mine, holding it gently. “I love being around you. I can show you better than I can tell you.”

EMILY

I swallowed hard, the heat in his gaze making it impossible to look away. He cupped my face, his thumb brushing away the last trace of wetness on my cheek. His eyes darkened with intent. “Come here.”

I leaned into him, knowing what I wanted. His mouth was on mine. Firm. Certain. The kind that didn’t just steal my breath but gave me something in return. His hand slid to my waist, pulling me in until there was no space left between us.

His lips brushed mine in a whisper of a kiss. It started gentle, as if he were memorizing the shape of my mouth. Then it shifted. A spark ignited, and the restraint holding us back snapped.

His mouth slanted over mine with a raw urgency, his grip tightening as if he needed to feel me against him. My fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt, desperate to anchor myself as heat flooded my veins. He continued to kiss me. Every stroke of his lips, every tilt of his head, sent a pulse of pleasure through me, dissolving every last bit of hesitation.

We broke apart for only a second, our breaths mingling in the space between us. His forehead pressed against mine. “I want you, Em,” he started, his voice rough like gravel, yet there was a softness to it that I hadn’t heard before. His fingers tightened around mine, and I could feel the tremor in his touch.

The words sent a shudder through me, my body already answering before my mind could catch up. My hands skimmed over the hard lines of his chest, feeling the steady

rise and fall of his breathing, the tension coiled beneath his skin.

“I want you too, Cody. I think I'm falling for you. Not in the way that fades, but the kind that sticks.”

There, I had said it. My feelings for him were out there, wide open and vulnerable and trembling like leaves in the breeze. I waited, time stretching out between us as he absorbed my words

Then, in a movement that felt like both surrender and claim, he reached for my hand. His fingers entwined with mine, strong and assuring. There was strength in his grasp, the same strength that had drawn me to him from the beginning, honest and true. Cody exhaled sharply, his grip on my hand tightening as if he needed to steady himself. His thumb brushed over my knuckles, the simple touch sending a ripple of heat through me. Then, without a word, he pulled me up from the couch, his eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that sent my pulse skittering.

He guided me through the dimly lit hallway. Anticipation curled low in my stomach for what was about to happen. His hand never left mine, and with each step, my body heated with a need that had been simmering beneath the surface.

When we reached the bedroom, he turned to me, his free hand lifting to trace the line of my jaw. “You sure?” His voice was strained, like he was holding himself back.

Instead of answering with words, I pressed my body against his, feeling the way his muscles tensed under my touch. I tilted my head up, brushing my lips against his in a kiss that held all my answers.

That was all it took.

Cody groaned, the sound vibrating through me as he wrapped an arm around my

waist and pulled me against him completely. His mouth claimed mine, the kiss deepening, growing hotter, more desperate. His hands slid over my back and hips.

“I want to memorize every curve, every inch of you.”

I barely registered the moment he lifted me off the ground, my legs wrapping around his waist as he carried me to the bed. All I knew was the way he held me like he never wanted to let go.

My back came in contact with the soft mattress. I lifted the hem of his shirt, exposing the taut muscles of his abdomen. My fingers trailed along his skin, tracing the contours of his scars, both seen and unseen, honoring his battles and the strength it took to fight them.

His hands were equally gentle on me, peeling away my jacket and exposing the strap of my jumpsuit. He tugged on one of the straps, lifting it from my bare shoulder.

Every piece of clothing that fell to the floor was another barrier we tore down, another step closer to the raw truth of us. As I looked up at him from the bed, my heart surged with a mixture of vulnerability and the courage to want to explore him—us —more.

Cody pulled me close, and our bodies fit together with an ease that felt like it was meant to always be this way. The taste of him was enough to make me forget every heartache that had come before. His kiss was a question and an answer all at once, and my body responded with a hunger born of lonely nights and silent prayers for something real.

As he trailed kisses down my neck and across my collarbone, his fingers skimming my hard nipples, I gasped. Seeing my reaction, he took one in his mouth, rolling it between his tongue while his fingers continued their journey down past my stomach

and beneath the waistband of my thong. His thumb and index finger stroked my labia and clit while his tongue made swirls around my nipples.

“Look how wet you are.” He withdrew his hand, his fingertips glistening with all the desire I kept hidden from him until this moment. He put one to his mouth. Fire flew up my cheeks and more liquid heat came from my center as I watched his tongue flick out and lick his finger. Leaning down, he brought his mouth to mine. I moaned as I tasted myself on his tongue. He shifted his head lower, kissing me along my neck and collarbone. Then his tongue left a hot trail between my breasts, scaling down my stomach and past my hips until he reached my sex.

Cody told me he wanted me. Suddenly, his words I can show you better than I can tell you took on a whole new meaning.

He tugged my underwear off. I spread my legs wide and arched my back, each stroke of his tongue sending rip currents of pleasure through me. He grabbed me by the thighs and dipped his head again, gently biting, licking, and sucking on my sensitive parts.

I felt fire wherever his tongue and fingers roamed. With every passing moment, the intensity grew. His tongue was a whip against my swollen clit.

“Cody.” I pushed my fingers through his thick hair, watching his head motion between my thighs. The sensation was overwhelming. I dug my heels into the mattress. As he sank two fingers inside me, I cried out in climax, the sound muffled against the pillow.

He pulled back just enough to look at me, his breath ragged. I noticed the way his eyes, a stormy shade I'd come to know intimately, scanned my face. His fingers traced the contours of my cheekbone.



"Em." This time, his voice was barely above a whisper, as if he didn't want to break the spell that had taken hold of us.

He shifted closer to me and began unzipping the fly of his jeans. The tough fabric was stretched with his erection. I put my hands over his and felt his movements as the zipper slid down, releasing his cock. Its impressive size filled my hands as I wrapped my fingers around the base. I sat up and leaned forward, taking the tip between my lips and sucking the clear preejaculate collecting at the tip.

He groaned. His cock grew bigger in my mouth, the veins on the underside pulsing with his need. He pressed me back down on the bed. His hands skimmed over my body again. The anticipation was almost unbearable.

"I need you now, Cody."

He reached for a condom in a drawer on the nightstand. I watched, getting turned on more as he tore the foil and stretched the latex over his long shaft. He leaned down, the head of his cock brushing against my entrance.

I could feel the wetness between my legs, a testament to how much I wanted him. I raised my hips as he pushed inside me.

He moved slowly at first, savoring the connection between our bodies. I relished every thrust, each one taking me further into a passionate haze. Our moans and gasps filled the small room, punctuated by the sounds of skin slapping against skin and mattress creaking under our weight.

Cody's hands held me close, his fingers digging into my hips. He looked into my eyes, his expression a mix of lust and love. He growled as he picked up the pace. The bed creaked under our combined weight. With every stroke, I felt myself getting closer to the edge again.

He slowed down and pulled out, his cock still hard. He guided it back to my entrance and thrust in again, hitting that spot inside me that made me see stars. I cried out.

He began to pound into me harder. I moaned and pushed back against him, meeting his rhythm with my hips. I could feel the tension building inside me, his cock hitting my g-spot with every thrust.

I called out his name, my orgasm hitting me hard and fast. I felt the walls of my vagina clamp down around his cock as he continued to thrust into me. It was overwhelming.

A deep groan rumbled in his chest, and I felt him get rigid all over as he came. His movements slowed, and then stilled.

Finally, his body went limp on top of mine. I felt the warmth of his chest against mine, our hearts still racing from what we had just shared.

I lay there, my heartbeat slowing yet still echoing in my chest. He disposed of the condom and got back in the bed. He reached out for me. His arms were my sanctuary, strong and secure, wrapped around me with gentleness. The room was silent except for our synchronized breathing.

As sleep began to tug at the edges of my consciousness, I let myself believe in the possibility of us. Whatever tomorrow might bring.

I WOKE UP TO LIGHT filtering through the bedroom blinds and the soft scent of Cody's cologne lingering on the sheets. I stretched, feeling more rested than I had in weeks. Maybe months. The kind of sleep that came from having nothing weighing on me. No overthinking. No doubts.

Then I blinked, glancing at the empty space beside me.

Cody was gone.

For a second, disappointment curled in my stomach, but then I caught the faint hum of a washing machine somewhere in the house. A glance at the clock told me it was nearly ten.

I never slept this late.

I pushed up on my elbows, running a hand over my face. My body still felt loose, warm, like I'd spent the whole night wrapped up in something good. In him.

This was not just some fantasy I let myself indulge in for a night. I'd let my guard down, told Cody how I felt, and he hadn't run for the hills. He hadn't brushed it off as a complication.

I slid out of bed and found my clothes folded neatly on a nearby chair. That made me smile. Even in his rough, gruff way, Cody was thoughtful. That was something I liked about him, one of many things.

I grabbed the t-shirt he'd worn last night from the floor and slipped it on, inhaling his scent as I made my way out of the bedroom.

The house was quiet except for the low hum of the washing machine, and I found Cody standing in the kitchen, barefoot, flipping a pancake onto a plate. He was fresh out of a shower, hair still damp, wearing a simple T-shirt and sweats.

His eyes flicked up when he noticed me, and something in his expression softened. "Hey, sleepyhead."

I smirked, tugging at the hem of his shirt. "You let me oversleep."

"You needed it." He slid the plate toward me. "Hope you like pancakes. I figured after last night, you deserved breakfast."

Warmth bloomed in my chest. After last night . He wasn't brushing it off. He wasn't acting weird. He was making me breakfast .

I sat at the counter, watching him move around the kitchen like he belonged there—which, of course, he did. But I was the one out of place, wrapped in his shirt, in his house, in his world.

And I liked it way too much.

I bit into the pancake, humming in approval. "These are good. Who taught you to cook?"

"My uncle," Cody said, pouring more batter into the pan. "Said a man should be able to feed himself without relying on a microwave."

I smiled, resting my chin in my hand as I watched him. There's that side of him again. The one most people didn't get to see.

He glanced at me. "What?"

"Nothing," I said, but my heart was already racing. I wanted to bottle this moment up. Keep it forever.

But forever wasn't part of our deal.

I cleared my throat. "I, uh, should probably head home soon."

His movements paused for a fraction of a second before he nodded. "Sure. Whenever

you're ready."

I didn't move. Neither did he.

CODY

I PULLED UP TO EMILY'S house just as the sun started burning off the last traces of morning haze. She sat in the passenger seat, quiet but comfortable, her fingers tracing the rim of her empty cherry soda can.

Last night still played in my head. The way she touched me. The way she trusted me. I wanted to say something. Maybe tell her I didn't mind if she stuck around a little longer. But she had a life to get back to, and I had no right to ask her to change that for me.

She turned to me, lips curving into a soft smile. "Thanks for breakfast. And for last night."

A warm feeling settled in my chest, but I kept my voice level. "Yeah. We had fun."

She hesitated, like she wanted to say something else, but instead, she opened the door and stepped out. I watched her walk up the steps to her front door, a little part of me wishing she'd turn back.

She didn't.

Max groaned. I patted his back. "Yeah, I know." I shook it off and headed straight to the gym.

The moment I walked into the gym, Ryder had a look like he was ready to roast me. "Late start to the day?"

Liam chuckled from where he was wrapping his hands. “Man, you’re glowing. Something you wanna share?”

I rolled my eyes and headed to the heavy bag, throwing a couple of quick jabs. “Not a damn thing.”

Ryder snorted. “Right. And I’m the Pope.”

I ignored them, letting the rhythmic thud of my fists against the bag drown out their nosy remarks. I should’ve expected this. They weren’t blind. And I wasn’t exactly doing a good job of hiding the fact that I felt different this morning.

Lighter.

Even when I pushed through drills and sparring rounds, Emily wasn’t far from my mind. I needed to be careful. She had her life. I had mine. This was supposed to be temporary.

Right?

By Monday morning, I was ready to shake the weekend off and get back to business. But when I checked my phone while grabbing a protein shake, my gut twisted.

Pictures of me and Emily at the arcade were everywhere.

It wasn’t just social media, either. Some tabloid had taken a dig at her, twisting the whole thing to make it seem like she was out partying while Trey was out of town.

My jaw clenched. Emily didn’t deserve that. She was a great mom. She worked her ass off. She finally let herself have a little fun, only for some trashy headline to make it look like she was neglecting her kid.

I ran a hand through my hair before making a fist. I could take heat. I was used to it.  
But Emily?

I hoped this wouldn't get to her.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:53 am*

EMILY

Monday morning at City Hall was chaos.

Family Day was less than a week away, which meant back-to-back meetings, last-minute permit approvals, and triple-checking every single vendor. I barely had time to breathe, let alone think about this past weekend.

But apparently, everyone else had time.

As I walked toward my office, I caught the sound of hushed voices and giggles. Linda and a few women from accounting were crowded around a desk, their eyes glued to a screen. I didn't think much of it until I heard my name.

"Emily's looking good these days," one of them uttered.

I slowed my steps. Linda, sensing me, smacked the other woman's arm, but it was too late. Their faces turned guilty as they noticed me standing there.

I followed their gazes to the screen. A tabloid headline stood out, complete with a picture of me and Cody at the arcade. City Hall Sweetheart Parties While Baby Daddy's Away!

I felt my stomach tighten. This was nothing new. For years, I'd been used to people whispering about me and Trey, how I fumbled the bag for not marrying him. How we could've been, in their minds, this successful, picture-perfect family.



The difference was, this time, I wasn't hiding and I wasn't about to be shamed for my choice to protect both myself and Oliver from Trey's selfishness.

I squared my shoulders, forced a calm expression, and stepped closer. "Let me see."

Linda hesitated before tilting the screen toward me. I skimmed the article, rolling my eyes at the dramatics. "Parties? Really? Since when was playing Space Invaders considered a wild night out?"

I could feel my co-workers watching me, waiting for me to shrink back like I always did. I lifted a brow and gave a laugh. "You know, they left out the part where I beat Cody at pinball. That's the real scandal."

Linda snorted before quickly covering her mouth. The tension in the room shifted. I gave them a wink and walked away, my head held high.

For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel the need to apologize for simply living my life. I liked Cody, and I planned to see him at the Warriors Den later tonight. For once, I wasn't going to let the rest of the world tell me that was wrong.

CODY

THE GYM WAS PACKED tonight. Fighters moving through drills, trainers calling out corrections. I should've been locked in and focused yet instead, my eyes kept drifting to Emily.

She sat on the bench near the edge of the mats, watching me. I could feel the weight of her gaze. I smiled at her between rounds and wiped sweat from my forehead. "You're staring pretty hard over there."

Emily, instead of looking embarrassed, lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "Can you

blame me? But I'm headed out for a little bit. See you later. ”

Damn. The look in her eyes sent a jolt straight to my gut. I turned back toward the heavy bag, forcing my attention onto my combos while I tried to robotically tune my mind in for the Intercontinental. Focus. Fight's coming up. No distractions.

Easier said than done. My brain was stuck on last Saturday. I still remembered the way she'd felt beneath me. It wasn't just the pleasure, though, hell, it had been unforgettable. She saw me as more than an athlete. She respected how I lived my life with PTSD and she saw through the tough mask of survival I wore to make it in the world.

I wanted her again, but not just for a night or when no one was watching. I wanted her in my corner for real. But wanting something and knowing how to ask for and keep it? That was a whole different fight.

Emily left at lunchtime. I didn't expect her to show up later in the day, but there she was, walking back into the gym after my post-workout stretch and ice bath. She carried a bag and a cup.

“I figured you could use this,” she said, handing over a protein shake. “And I got you a salmon stir fry with sweet potatoes. It's from that new restaurant I overheard some of the other athletes mention.”

I took the shake, eyeing her as I sipped. “Thoughtful as always. Thanks.”

She hesitated, like she was gathering in her thoughts. “It's crunch time, right? Fight's coming up?”

I nodded, rolling my shoulders. “I can't put a lot of my attention to this like I used to.”

Emily's expression shifted. "On our fake relationship, or our actual one?"

"Cody, let's go!" Before I could even begin to figure out what to say, the trainers walked in. "We got new video of Ray's last fight you need to watch."

Emily took a small step back. "I heard of boxers watching videos to learn their opponent's moves. Is that what that is?"

I nodded. "It's called film study. I'm learning all I can about Ray's weak points."

"I can let you get back to your session."

I gave her an apologetic look. "Talk later?"

She nodded, but the smile she gave me didn't quite reach her eyes. "Yeah, of course."

She set my food down and left. Her question stayed behind with me.

I replayed it in my head as I wrapped my hands again. Our fake relationship, or our actual one? She left fast. Did I mess up by not answering? If the trainers hadn't walked in—if I'd had the chance—what would I have said?

EMILY

I LEFT THE GYM FASTER than I probably should have, but I couldn't shake the embarrassment creeping up my neck. Our fake relationship, or our actual one? Why did I say that?

I should've just left things alone. But no, I had to go and ask Cody that question. And worse, he didn't answer. Maybe that was his answer.

I sighed as I pushed open the door to Mama's boutique, the soft chime of the bell above announcing my arrival. The familiar scent of vanilla and fresh cotton welcomed me in. I needed to take my mind off the fact that I'd just made things ten times more awkward between Cody and me.

Mama stood behind the counter, adjusting the display of pastel scarves. She barely glanced up before giving me the look . The one that said I know something's up, and I will find out what it is.

"Doing some retail therapy?" she asked, a teasing note in her voice.

I grabbed a hanger off the rack and turned it toward the light, pretending to examine the cute floral blouse like it was the most interesting thing in the world. "Just looking for an outfit for Family Day."

"Uh-huh." Mama set down a scarf and leaned on the counter. "You look different."

My stomach flipped. "Different how?"

"Happier."

I let out a laugh, a little too quickly. "I'll be happy when this week is over."

She hummed like she didn't believe me for a second.

I could feel her gaze on me, knowing, patient. She could probably tell things shifted, that I was flustered, and the reason for it was a certain gruff, ridiculously attractive MMA fighter.

I kept my eyes on the clothes, pretending to focus. My head was still back at Warriors Den, replaying Cody's stoic expression. Had I imagined our connection? Or had I just

made a complete fool of myself?

After another ten minutes of browsing, mostly to avoid Mama's knowing glances, I finally picked out a soft pink matching top and shorts set. It was a simple but cute outfit for Family Day. Mama rang me up, still eyeing me like she was waiting for me to spill my secrets. I was done making a mess of things today. I'd tell her after Family Day, after I had a chance to breathe and the media shifted focus on Cody's big fight. I gave her a quick hug before heading out the door, promising I'd stop by later in the week.

Once I settled into my car, I let out a long breath. This was...a lot. Between the gym, my own runaway feelings, and now Mama's watchful eyes, I felt like I was being pulled in too many directions at once.

Just as I started the engine, my phone rang.

Oliver.

A relieved smile crossed my lips as I answered. "Hey, sweetie. How's my big guy?"

"Hi, Mom!" His little voice chirped, bright and full of excitement. "Guess what?"

"What?" I grinned, leaning back in my seat.

"I got to see real horses at the Derby. And they run super fast." His words tumbled out in a rush. "And I got to eat a big pretzel! And Dad got me a hat, but it's too big."

I laughed. "That all sounds so fun. I bet you had the best time."

"I did." He paused for a second, then his voice took on a different kind of excitement. "Hey, is Cody gonna be at Family Day?"

“Uh...yeah, he’ll be there.”

“Cool! He’s really strong, right?”

“He is.” I smiled. “Why do you ask?”

“I wanna see him punch something.” Oliver giggled. “But not a person. That’s bad.”

I laughed again. “I’ll see what I can do. Maybe he’ll show you some cool moves.”

“That would be so cool.” He yawned, the excitement in his voice softening. “I can’t wait to see you, Mom. Family Day is gonna be the best.”

“It sure is, sweetheart.” My chest ached with love for him. “I’ll see you so soon, okay? Sleep tight.”

“Night, Mom.”

I hung up, staring at my phone for a moment before setting it down in my lap. Oliver was excited to see Cody. The question was, how did Cody really feel about us?

I started the car, heading home with more questions than answers.

Later on that night, a knock at the door made me jump from the couch. I glanced at the clock. 10:17 PM. Who on earth...?

I set my book down and padded toward the front door in my simple cotton robe and matching nightie, my heart thumping a little. When I opened it, Cody stood there, looking tired yet determined.

I blinked in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I was in my head too much today. I think it’s because I hadn’t seen you.”

That admission sent a flutter through my chest, but I kept my expression neutral. I noticed his eyes skimming the outline of my body in the thin robe. I stepped aside to let him in. “Where’s Max?”

“Noshing on a rawhide in the truck. He’ll be ok for a while.”

I nodded, closing the door behind him. “Want some water? Or I think I have some sports drinks in the fridge.”

“Water’s good.”

I grabbed a bottle and handed it to him before settling on the couch. Cody took a sip, then joined me, his posture relaxed but his eyes still carrying unspoken words. I twiddled my fingers. If I was ever going to get rid of this tension, I needed to speak up. “I didn’t mean to throw you off at the gym,” I said softly, tucking my legs under me. “I just—”

“You didn’t. I just wasn’t expecting it.” He twisted the cap back onto the bottle and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’ve been thinking about you when I shouldn’t be.”

My stomach flipped. “Oh.”

His lips quirked, the hint of a smirk there. “Yeah. ‘Oh.’”

I swallowed, tracing a pattern on the couch cushion. “I pulled back because I didn’t want to pressure you. I know how important this fight is.”

Cody shifted, turning to face me more fully. “It is, but it doesn’t mean I want space from you. I thought that was what I needed a while ago, but I was wrong.” His gaze locked onto mine. “Em, I don’t want you to pull away.”

My breath caught in my throat. The vulnerability in his voice, the way he was looking at me, it was more certain.

I hesitated, unsure of what to say, until I thought of Oliver. I smiled a little. “You know, my son thinks you walk on water.”

Cody’s brow lifted. “That so?”

“He can’t wait to see you at Family Day.”

He reached for my hand, his fingers brushing over mine. “What about his mom?”

I swallowed hard. “What about her?”

Cody gave a gentle squeeze of my hand. “You pulled away.” His voice was quieter as he revealed his feelings. “I don’t want you to.”

I should have been nervous, but I wasn’t. Not this time. Instead, warmth spread through me, soft and sure. “I don’t want to, either.”

A slow smile spread across his lips. He sat back against the couch, his arm draped along the backrest like he was trying to keep himself in check. Such an old-fashioned guy.

“I like having you here,” I admitted, my voice softer than I intended.

He still wore a smile, the ‘aw shucks’ kind that made me melt. “Yeah?”



Instead of answering, I moved. A major move for me. Pulse fluttering, I changed positions and shifted onto his lap, my knees bracketing his hips. Though surprise lit up his face, his hands found my waist on instinct. His fingers flexed like he was already struggling with how much to touch me.

“Yeah.” I leaned in until our noses brushed. “I don’t want you to leave just yet.”

A sharp breath left him, his grip tightening. “You know I can’t say no to you when you look at me like that.”

“Good,” I whispered before sealing my mouth to his.

His control snapped.

One of his hands slid up my back, pulling me flush against him, while the other gripped my thigh, sliding the robe up in the process and anchoring me in place. I could feel the strength coiled beneath his skin, the heat of him searing through my clothes.

I rolled my hips experimentally, and a low groan rumbled through his chest. “You’re making it real hard to be a gentleman right now.”

I smiled against his lips, threading my fingers into his hair. “Then don’t be.”

I’d spent too long playing it safe, holding myself back. But with Cody? I wanted this. Judging by the deep intentional look of lust in his eyes, he wanted it just as badly.

I untied my robe and tossed it on the cushion next to me.

The fabric of my nightie slipped off my shoulders. Cody’s eyes stormed with a hunger that set off every nerve ending in my body. His hands roamed over my skin.

With a soft gasp, I lifted my nightie, baring myself to him completely, a silent invitation that he accepted.

Straddling him on the couch, I felt a surge of power. Cody's hands squeezed my breasts, brushed over my stomach while his mouth found my nipples. I tilted my head back in a moan.

He caught the back of my neck, cradling my head, and leaned in. His lips brushed mine as he traced them with his tongue.

The room spun. I rocked my hips against his hard cock that pressed against his jeans, desperate to feel more of that heat.

"Cody," I moaned into his mouth. "I want you in me."

He yanked the zipper of his fly down. I got his cock free of his briefs and shifted my hips again, this time to let the lips of my vagina lightly skim the tip. He made me stop only for the brief seconds it took for him to remove a condom from his wallet and get it on.

He grabbed my hips, fingers digging into soft flesh as he pulled me down onto him. Our eyes met again, and I saw something raw and powerful flicker in his gaze.

The moment he was buried inside me, it was like coming home. Every nerve ending lit up in delight, sparks flying between our bodies.

He groaned as he started to move, a slow deep thrust that had me arching my back in response. He kissed me hard while moving his hips in a rhythm that threatened to upend me. It was just how I needed it.

With each thrust, he plunged deeper, hitting that sweet spot inside me with every

stroke, filling the silence with the wet sound of skin slapping against skin.

The room spun faster and faster, my mind blanking out as pleasure consumed me.

“Cody,” I whispered, close to the edge. “I’m almost there.”

His teeth bit into his lower lip as he picked up the pace, hips pistoning hard against mine. He felt so good. It was too much.

I shut my eyes and moaned loud as pleasure crashed over me.

His hands tightened on my hips, his touch firm yet gentle as he rode out the wave of my orgasm with me. Then I felt his body shuddering against mine.

The sensation of him coming was so intimate. I felt close to him in that moment. My eyes filled with tears.

Cody ended up staying with me that night. Max had the whole run of the downstairs to himself for the next several hours as Cody and I sought release and pleasure in my bed. Afterward, we lay tangled in the sheets, our bodies still warm from the fire we’d built together. He traced slow, lazy patterns along my spine. I nestled closer, breathing him in, letting the steady rhythm of his heart calm the rush of my emotions.

Neither of us spoke, but words weren’t necessary. In that moment, everything felt right. I didn’t want to think about what came next for us, or when we had to face everyone again. I just wanted to exist here, wrapped up in him, in us, for as long as I could.

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:53 am*

EMILY

The days that followed blurred into a stretch of stolen moments and tangled sheets, of late night talks in the dark and the quiet comfort of waking up beside him. Cody and I fell into an easy rhythm, drawn together by something neither of us put a name to, but both of us felt. Every touch and exchange deepened the pull between us.

I let myself enjoy this time we had before Family Day and his Intercontinental fight that loomed ahead. But in the back of my mind, I knew that after this week, everything could change.

The sun was high on the day before my big event. It cast long shadows over the white tents and vendor booths lining the square. Family Day was coming together. Tables were set, banners fluttered in the warm breeze, and volunteers ran around to check last-minute details. It was satisfying, but at this point, I was getting used to my mind being stuck on Cody.

I shook my head and refocused as I made my way past the stage setup. Work first. Sort out my love life later.

“Mom!”

I turned just in time to see Oliver sprinting toward me, suitcase wheels rattling over the pavement. My heart squeezed at the sight of him. I kneeled just in time for him to throw himself into my arms.

“You’re back early,” I laughed, smoothing his hair.

“Daddy had to go to the office,” he said, already pulling away to look around. “I told him I saw you here.”

My mood plummeted. Of course. Trey had dropped him off like a package instead of bringing him home properly. Just business as usual.

I took a slow breath and forced a smile. “Did your horse win?”

Oliver’s face scrunched. “No. Daddy’s mad because he said he had money riding on it.”

I bit my tongue to keep from sighing. Oliver, oblivious, was already scanning the area, eyes bright with excitement.

“This is gonna be so awesome tomorrow.”

I nodded, ruffling his hair. “It will be. Let’s go home, okay? You need to rest up for tomorrow.”

Oliver grabbed my hand, still talking up a storm about tomorrow, but I could hardly hear him over the quiet frustration humming in my chest. Trey hadn’t even cared enough to settle Oliver in himself.

No.

I wasn’t going to let him ruin this weekend. Not when there were better things—better people—to focus on.

CODY

MAX SAT AT MY FEET , watching me lace up my boots like he knew today wasn’t

a normal gym day. His tail thumped against the floor, ears perked in curiosity.

“Yeah, I know, bud,” I muttered, standing up and rolling out my shoulders. “Family Day. A public event. A whole lot of people.”

I wasn’t nervous about being around crowds. I’d fought in front of thousands. This time, though, it wasn’t just about me. This was for Emily and Oliver. I made a promise to them, and even if the show Em and I put on for the town was fake, what I built with her and her son was real.

I went to grab my keys. Max followed me to the door, watching as I hesitated for half a second. This wasn’t my usual scene, but neither was Emily, and I’d never wanted something more.

I arrived at the event fifteen minutes later, parking in the designated spot Emily had for me. The sounds of Family Day hit me the second I stepped onto the festival grounds. There was laughter, conversation, the occasional burst of music from a nearby speaker. It was nothing like the arenas I was used to, where tension coiled in the air from blood-hungry fighters. This was lighter.

It made me feel like a fish out of water.

Max walked beside me, every now and then his head looking in the direction of the smells coming from the food stands. Booths lined the park, vendors selling everything from handmade crafts to barbecue plates. Kids ran past me with balloon animals and sticky fingers, and I caught the scent of fried dough and roasted corn. It was the kind of event I’d never thought twice about before.

And then I spotted Emily.

Dressed in a pink shorts outfit I wanted to peel off her curves later, she stood near the

main pavilion. She chatted with a group of volunteers. As if she could sense me watching, she turned. The second she smiled, some of the stiffness in my shoulders eased. I started toward her. Before I could make it halfway, Oliver came barreling toward me.

“Cody! You made it!” He skidded to a stop in front of me.

“Of course I did, kid. Told you I’d be here.”

He grabbed my wrist, tugging me forward. “Come on. I have so much to show you.”

For the next half hour, I let Oliver drag me through the festival, pointing out everything from the bouncy house to the dunk tank. Security stood at a comfortable distance, making sure any potential MMA fans knew to respect our space. A few people gave me curious glances, but it wasn’t the usual recognition I got in the fight world. It was more subtle, mostly parents sizing me up, probably trying to figure out what a guy like me was doing here.

A couple of dads eventually struck up conversations, asking about my training regimen, how I prepped for fights. I answered their questions as best I could, keeping things light, but I could feel myself loosening up. It wasn’t so bad. Different, sure, but not bad.

By the time my scheduled Q&A rolled around, a decent-sized crowd had gathered. I stood on the small stage, microphone in hand, scanning the audience. Teens and young adults made up most of the front rows, eager to ask about my career.

“What’s the toughest part of being an MMA fighter?” one kid asked.

“Probably the mental game,” I answered honestly. “Your body can be in peak condition, but if your head isn’t in the right place, you’re done before the fight even

starts.”

Another teenager raised his hand. “How do you handle losing?”

“You don’t let it break you. You learn from it. Every loss teaches you something, and if you’re smart, you use it to get better.”

More questions followed about fitness, mindset, even diet. I answered them all, feeling more at ease as the conversation flowed.

Then, someone called out, “Show us a move.”

A few people laughed, but I could tell they were actually interested. I glanced toward the crowd, my eyes landing on Emily. She was watching me with this look—one I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen before. Like she was seeing me in a new light.

I cleared my throat and gestured toward Oliver. “Alright, my assistant here is gonna help me out.”

Oliver beamed as he scrambled up onto the stage, and I showed him a few simple techniques: how to break a wrist grip, how to stay balanced when throwing a punch. He followed my instructions to the letter, grinning the whole time.

The crowd loved it. I did too.

When it was over, Oliver hopped off the stage and ran to Emily, who wrapped an arm around him, laughing at something he said. I took a second to take it in. This wasn’t my world. But with them, it didn’t feel so far off.

EMILY



I HAD ALREADY SPOTTED Trey earlier, stationed at his company's stand, shaking hands and flashing his businessman smile to anyone who walked by. Typical. Always the charmer when he had an audience. I made the conscious decision to ignore him, knowing full well he'd find an excuse to come my way eventually.

I just hadn't expected him to pick now.

Cody had just wrapped up his demonstration, and the energy was still buzzing around us. Oliver was practically bouncing on his toes, thrilled to have been part of the action.

"Well, this is cute."

I stiffened before slowly turning. Trey stood with his usual air of narcissistic confidence, hands in his pockets, appearing all too pleased with himself.

"Didn't know fighters did charity work," he said, eyes flicking to Cody. "Figured you'd be busy doing actual training."

Cody didn't take the bait. He simply stood there, relaxed. However, I knew him well enough now to recognize the subtle tension in his stance. He wasn't here to fight Trey.

Neither was I.

But I wasn't about to let Trey waltz in and act like he had some kind of authority over my life. I took a slow step forward, keeping my voice calm but firm. "What do you want?"

He scoffed as if I were the unreasonable one. "Just checking in. Seeing how my son's doing."

I folded my arms. “You mean the son you dropped off with his suitcase like a package delivery?”

A few people nearby had gone quiet, subtly tuning in. Trey noticed too, shifting his weight uncomfortably. “Don’t be dramatic, Emily. I had work to do.”

“Right.” My voice was thick with sarcasm. “Because placing bets on a horse race is such grueling work.”

His jaw tensed. “You don’t know anything about what I do.”

I got out of earshot of the people. I lowered my voice so only he could hear. “And you don’t know anything about what it means to be a father,” I shot back. “Oliver deserves better than a part-time dad. I’m done, Trey. Done letting you make me feel small and acting like you have a say in my life.”

Trey’s expression flashed from anger to frustration. He hated being called out, and this was the first time I really spoke my mind to him.

“I don’t know what kind of fantasy you’re living in,” he sneered. “But this?” He gestured between Cody and me. “I did my research. He’s just a grunt vet with PTSD who now has an excuse to throw his fists around. Playing family with this guy ain’t it.”

I opened my mouth to fire back, but before I could, Trey turned his attention to Cody, a cruel smile curling his lips. “Must be nice, huh, Stone? Getting handed the easy role? Babysitting instead of actually competing.”

Cody’s fists clenched at his sides, obvious to anyone standing nearby that he had the urge to wipe the jerk grin off Trey’s face. Instead, he held back and matched his stare. “Careful.”

Trey just huffed a laugh. “What? You’re the big, tough fighter, right? Maybe you want to show off a little.”

And then, in the most absurd, ego-fueled decision I’d ever seen, my ex raised his fists in some ridiculous mock boxing stance.

A few people snickered. I had enough.

“Oh, for God’s sake—” I started, but before I could finish, Trey threw an exaggerated jab toward Cody, like he was making some kind of point.

Cody didn’t even acknowledge it. He just stepped aside smoothly, letting the punch whiff past him.

But Trey’s timing was spectacularly bad.

One of the guys from the crowd, someone who had clearly been watching Cody’s demo a little too enthusiastically, chose that exact moment to try mimicking a move. He threw his own punch, stepping into the movement the way Cody had demonstrated earlier.

Unfortunately for Trey, he walked right into it.

The impact wasn’t devastating, but it was direct. A solid, clean shot to the nose.

Gasps rippled through the crowd. Trey staggered back, eyes wide, hands flying up to his face. A second later, blood started dripping between his fingers.

“Oh, shit,” someone muttered.

Silence hung in the air for a beat. Then Cody shrugged. “Told you, man. You gotta

bob and weave.”

Laughter exploded around us.

Trey’s face went bright red, his mortification complete. He looked around, as if searching for some way to salvage his dignity, but it was useless. He had just been publicly humiliated in front of half the town.

His eyes snapped to me, and for the first time in a long time, I saw the realization that he had lost. This involved more than the ridiculous attempt at posturing, but the hold he used to have over me.

Without another word, he turned and stormed off.

I exhaled, my pulse finally settling.

Oliver, standing beside me, let out a delighted, “Whoa.”

Cody met my gaze, one brow raised, waiting for my reaction.

I let out a breathless laugh. “Well,” I said, “that was satisfying.”

Cody tried really hard to contain his smile and failed miserably. “Guess Family Day isn’t so bad after all.”

### CODY

The transition from Family Day to the Intercontinental Battle Royale was a blur of training, media obligations, and late-night thoughts that wouldn't let me sleep.

But in all of it, one image stuck with me. Emily, standing her ground against Trey.

I'd known she was strong. I'd seen it in the way she handled everything life threw at her, in the way she cared for Oliver, in the way she never let anything break her. But watching her take control, refusing to let Trey manipulate her ever again, that was something else.

The guy had a good suit and a slick way with words, but he was nothing compared to her. He didn't deserve a woman like Emily.

And then came the harder thought which kept nagging me even as I threw myself into training for this fight.

Did I deserve her?

This thing between us started as a way to handle a situation. It evolved into a real and beautiful thing that shook me more than anything I faced in the cage.

I'd spent so long keeping people at arm's length, making sure no one got too close. It was easier that way. Emily had slipped past every defense I had. And now, as I stood backstage, waiting for my cue to step into the cage, I knew this fight wasn't just about taking down Marcus Ray. It was about proving something to myself, to her.

The arena was electric, the crowd roaring with energy as I stepped into the lights. Adrenaline and the pulse of the fight already thrummed through me.

But my focus zeroed in on one thing.

Emily sat in the front row, right where I'd asked her to be. She looked out of place in a setting like this, surrounded by bloodthirsty fans and flashing lights, but at the same time, she belonged there.

Because she was my person.

The realization hit hard and fast, leaving me out of breath before the fight even started.

Marcus Ray stood across from me, a hulking powerhouse of a man, all muscle and brute force. He was dangerous, but I was smarter. I'd spent my career taking on guys like him who relied on intimidation and raw strength.

I had a plan.

The bell rang, and we clashed.

The fight was brutal, a war of skill and endurance. Marcus came at me hard, throwing heavy punches, trying to overpower me. I kept my movements sharp, calculated, dodging, countering, making him work for every inch.

Second round came. He got in a good hit, knocking me back a step. The crowd roared, sensing blood. But I shook it off, refocusing.

By the third round, he was getting desperate, swinging wild. That was my opening. One clean shot.

I saw it the second he left himself open. My fist connected with his jaw, a solid, devastating blow. He staggered, then crumpled.

The ref stepped in.

Fight over.

The arena exploded.

I barely had time to catch my breath before I felt her.

Emily was suddenly there, pushing past the officials, slipping into the cage like she belonged there. Things seemed to happen like the rapid fire flashes of a camera. Her arms were around me. Her lips were on mine. She kissed me, right there in front of everyone. The crowd lost their minds.

And for the first time, I didn't care about the fight, the press, or the whole damn world. Only her.

When she pulled back, her eyes met mine, full of emotion and heat that seared the air in my lungs. "I've got to be straight with you," I said, voice rough from the fight. "What's happening between us is no act. It's all real for me."

Her eyes widened, emotions flickering too fast to catch. Was it surprise—or fear?

"Emily," I continued, my heart pounding harder than it had during the fight. "I'm not looking for a fling or some escape from my demons. You've become a part of me."

She shifted, hesitation clear in her stance. "Cody, you don't have to—"

"Em, please," I cut in, needing her to hear this, to believe it. "You mean more to me than anyone else ever has."

“I’ve felt that way about you for a while.” She bit her lip. “Can you really see us together? Or is this just the high from your win talking?”

“I have never been more certain of anything in my life.” I cupped her face, making sure she saw the truth in my eyes. “I want to spend my whole life proving it to you.”

Emily

## EPILOGUE – A YEAR LATER

Summer had settled into Sunridge, thick and warm, the scent of fresh-cut grass drifting through the backyard. I carried a pitcher of homemade lemonade outside, smiling as I watched Oliver and Cody near the fence.

Oliver was bouncing on his toes, gloves too big on his small hands, while Cody knelt in front of him, adjusting his stance. “Remember—guard up, chin down. And always be ready to move.”

Oliver nodded seriously. “Like bob and weave?”

Cody smirked. “That’s right. Bob and weave. We don’t need another Trey situation.”

I laughed, shaking my head as I set the lemonade on the patio table. “Are you still talking about that?”

Cody looked over his shoulder, his grin slow and knowing. “A man gets punched in the face by his own ego, you don’t just forget.”

Oliver landed a soft punch against Cody’s palm. “Can I be as strong as you one day?”

He ruffled his hair. “You’re already stronger than you know.”



My heart swelled as I watched them, the life we'd built in the past year more solid than anything I could have imagined. Trey had signed over his rights and taken off for New York, too busy chasing his next business venture to care about anything else.

It was okay, because Oliver had everything he needed right here. So did I.

Cody stood and walked toward me, wrapping an arm around my waist. His lips brushed my temple before he murmured, "Told you I was in this for the long haul."

I leaned into him, lacing our fingers together. "Forever," I reminded him.

And this time, I knew it was real.

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