

## Two

My lodge is in the Kawarthas, north of Peterborough. A little over two hours from Toronto. I got back just past midnight. I could have stayed in Toronto—I'd paid cash for a room already—but with Quinn gone, there wasn't any reason to linger.

By the time I pulled in, the only light was a bedside reading lamp in a guest room, barely visible through the blinds. We hadn't had any bookings, so I guessed it was a drop in. I stared up at that window a moment, thinking about the unknown guest, wondering what guide services they'd expect in the morning. It didn't matter—that was my job and I was always ready to accommodate a guest—but thinking about it let me mentally switch back into being Nadia Stafford, wilderness lodge proprietor.

It would take more than that tonight. Normally I had a long drive, maybe even a night's rest before I came home after a job, and that gave me time to shift personas. Tonight I was still thinking about Quinn and about Grant Beecham, and neither of them belonged here. I watched the window for another minute, then went down to the dock and did a few laps of the lake in my kayak. By the time I was done, I was me again.

I headed up to the lodge. On the outside, its weathered, roughhewn wood suggested a true wilderness experience, with blazing fires for heat, lanterns for light and an outhouse around the corner. It's an illusion, of course. We have a furnace, electricity, running water, even Jacuzzi tubs in two bedrooms. At a place like Red Oak, it's the illusion that matters—the feeling that you're getting back to nature. Roughing it without actually roughing it.

Most of our clientele needs lessons in everything from holding a canoe paddle to using binoculars, meaning the trails winding through the property are so well marked you could find your way in the dark. Yet we still provide maps and, if you'd like, I'll take you out, just to be safe. I'll also take you biking, canoeing, kayaking, white water rafting, spelunking, rappelling, and shooting, though you'll have to sign a 3 page waiver for that last one.

If you want bonfires and beer or a picnic lunch in the wildflowers or coffee and fresh muffins while watching the sun rise, then Red Oak Lodge is the place for you. If you're looking for gourmet meals, big screen TVs and jet-skis, I can recommend a lovely place thirty minutes northwest . . . at double the cost.

Because no one expected me back, no one had signed up for the 6 A.M. jog. So I could have skipped it. But no sign-ups meant I could go alone.

The morning air was still so cold it was like sucking ice cubes, the endless silence broken only by the rhythmic thump of my feet. When I'm running with guests, I usually do only five kilometers. Today, I went twice that, through White Rock and back.

At this hour, the town was even quieter than the forest. As I jogged down the main street, the only sound was the lone stop sign creaking in the wind.

White Rock is a nowhere town. Every kid who lives there can't wait to get out. For tourists, it's a stopover, not a destination. The town survives as a service center for hunters and snowmobilers and cottagers, a place where you can buy everything you need for survival and nothing that isn't essential to it.

As down home and comfortable as an old pair of sneakers—my kind of town.

Back at the lodge, I detoured to the lake for a dip. Crazy on a May morning, but it certainly knocked any remaining dream cobwebs from my mind. By the time I headed up to the lodge, it was nearly nine. Waiting on the back deck was Emma Walden, the lodge's live-in housekeeper/cook. Her husband, Owen, takes care of the grounds and buildings. They're both past retirement age and were when they came to work for me. As Emma says, this is their retirement.

"Anyone up yet?" I called.

"I made cinnamon buns."

The smell of Emma's rolls woke guests faster than a dunk in the frigid lake.

"You look like a drowned rat. I hope you're planning on drying off before our guests see you."

I leaned over and squeezed a rivulet from my hair onto her clogs. She snapped her dishtowel at me. I snatched it and quick-dried my shoulder-length curls.

"You know where that's been?" she asked.

"No worse than where my hair's been. Has Sammi started work yet?"

"She's here all right. But working?" Emma snorted.

I tried not to sigh too loudly. Sammi Ernst was Emma's part-time assistant, hired a month ago.

"About Sammi, Nadia, we had a problem with the York couple. They didn't mention it until they were checking out, after you left."

Emma explained that they'd complained about Sammi's baby, Destiny. They'd left their kids with their parents, and hadn't appreciated hearing a crying baby on their romantic getaway. I could point out that Destiny rarely cried--Sammi didn't put her down long enough for her to fuss--but I could see the couple's point.

"I know you feel sorry for the girl, Nadia. No job, no man, no one to help with the baby. But that baby is all she cares about. Stella Anderson offered to look after Destiny for free, just because she likes having little ones around, but Sammi won't do it."

"Maybe if I rework Sammi's schedule . . ."

"Maybe if your fired her pretty little butt—" Emma bit off the remark. "I'm sorry, but it burns me up, seeing you being so nice to her, and how does she repay you? Complains like you're her mother giving her chores."

"She's seventeen. At that age, my work ethic sucked too. To get decent help from town, I'd need to pay more than ten bucks an hour, so I'm stuck with Sammi."

"We don't need the help. I just hate seeing you pay for nothing. She doesn't appreciate it. Save your charity for someone who does, hon."

"I'll talk to her." I checked my hair. Dry enough for a few more minutes outside. I handed Emma back her towel. "I'm going to check the hot tub chemicals before I come in."

She pulled a piece of paper from her pocket. "Your messages. Mostly regulars, looking to book for summer, and wanting to talk to you directly."

None of the names on the list were my brother's. Not that I really expected Brad to call. Last time I heard from him was December 2002, when he'd wondered whether his little sister had a two grand he could borrow. I didn't, but I'd scraped it together anyway. Wired him the cash. Never got so much as a thank-you.

Because Brad never called, Jack used his name when he needed to get in touch with me. It had been four months now since I'd heard from him.

After our joint job with Quinn, I'd realized that Jack himself had been financing it. So I'd refused payment. He insisted I take it and buy the gazebos and hot tub I dreamed of for the lodge. I'd said he could use my share to take me to Egypt, something we'd joked about. To my surprise, he'd agreed. He still wanted me to take some money, but the rest would go toward our trip.

As fall had dragged on, I'd heard from him only once, in November. He said exactly five words. "Everything okay?" and "All right then" when I said it was. No mention of Egypt. No mention of when he'd call again.

In early December, he'd shown up, bringing me the money. Twenty thousand. I took half, for the gazebos, but refused the rest. When I mentioned Egypt, still jokingly, sensing he'd changed his mind, he'd said his schedule was tight and that it might be a while. I said that was fine, I'd wait.

Then, at Christmas, a ten-person hot tub arrived at my door and I knew we weren't going to Egypt.

When he called a couple of weeks later, he'd muttered something about getting a good deal and we'd "work it out." That was the last I heard from him.

I found Sammi in the kitchen, rocking in a chair she'd dragged in from the front room. The best chair from the front room, I might add. She was cuddling Destiny and crooning to her. Mother and child. A scene to warm the heart . . . if the mother in question wasn't currently being paid to clean the guestrooms.

I'd let Sammi bring Destiny to her job, even picked up a secondhand playpen. But the baby was never in it. Sammi worked holding Destiny on her hip, which made for very sloppily made beds and crudely chopped vegetables.

With her long blond hair, trim figure and big violet eyes, Sammi Ernst was the prettiest girl in White Rock. When I walked in, her face was glowing with an inner beauty that would have made Revlon sign her up on the spot. Then she saw me and the light went out.

"I heard we had a complaint," I said.

"Emma couldn't wait to tattle, could she? Mr. and Mrs. T.O. Yuppies abandoned their kids, then bitched 'cause I'm taking care of mine."

"I hear Mrs. Anderson offered to look after Destiny for you."

"That old bag? She's so fucking senile she'd probably put Destiny out with the recycling and feed her milk to the cat."

Inhale. Exhale.

I reached down to pat Destiny on the head. Sammi swatted my hand away.

"That's her soft spot, you know."

"No, I don't know. I don't have kids, as you're quick to remind me. I don't understand babies. But I do understand this business. Whether or not that couple should have complained doesn't matter because the customer--"

“--is always right,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “You take too much of their shit, Nadia. You wouldn’t see me letting people walk over me like that.”

“No? Maybe you’re right. The next time I’ve just sat down to a meal and a guest demands after dinner drinks served by the lake, I’ll hand them a beer and point them to the path. Then they’ll write an online review complaining about the lousy service. After few of those, our fall our bookings drop, and I won’t be able to keep a housekeeping assistant on the payroll.”

She said nothing, but that told me I’d made my point.

“Do you want this job, Sammi?”

“Fuck, yeah. You think I’d take everyone’s shit if I didn’t need the money?”

“You don’t need to take anyone’s shit. You could apply for welf—social assistance—until Destiny is old enough to go to school.”

She glowered up at me. “No fucking way. I am not winding up like her.” From the venom in her voice, I knew she meant her mother. “I’m going to show Destiny how a real mother acts. I’m going to work for a living and look after us.”

“All right then, tell me if this would work out . . .”

I outlined some changes to her schedule, bringing her in later and having her leave before dinner. Most of her hours would be midday, when guests were out.

“That means fewer hours a day, but you’ll be working five instead of four. And if we have a full house, I may need you for serving at dinner hour and cleanup after. You’ll need someone to pick up Destiny during that time.”

A long pause. Then, “I guess Tess or Kira could . . .”

“I also want to see Destiny in her playpen now and then. And when I was in Toronto, I saw someone wearing this sling for carrying babies. It would keep your hands free--”

“I can’t afford it any more stuff.”

“I’ll buy it. If you want to take it home, you can pay me back. How’s that?”

She complained more about accepting “charity” than my other conditions, but eventually we came to an agreement. I prayed it would work out.

In the brochure for the Red Oak Lodge, there are four seasons. “Summer Sizzle” runs mid-June through August. “Fall Foliage” goes until mid-November. Then “Winter Wonderland” runs through March. The lowest priced one is “Spring Savings,” so named because “Dismal, Muddy and Black-Fly Infested” really doesn’t have the same marketing oomph.

Being early May, we were in the “Muddy” section of that season, with the damp chill fading and the black flies slowly moving in. For people wanting a deal or looking for a break after a long winter, May is a decent enough month. On weekdays we were lucky to have any guests, but weekends we usually ran close to capacity. The lodge has a dozen rooms--including mine--so at full occupancy we can host twenty-two. By Friday evening, we had seventeen, enough to keep one elderly couple, one hostess/guide and one teen girl busy.

For once, Sammi pulled her weight. She didn’t turn into a cleaning dynamo, but she did her “chores” with less complaining and even put Destiny in the playpen for her naps, snapping at me that I’d better not wake her with my “thumping around” or it’d be my own fault if Sammi had to rock her when she should be working.

Even on a staff of three, Sammi was never going to make “employee of the month.” But living out here meant Sammi didn’t have a lot of life choices. Having Sammi at sixteen meant no high school diploma. With her family reputation, no one would hire her. Even if they did,

there wasn't any daycare in town. She couldn't even move out of her mother's home; there were no rental units around. If I could help her make enough money and get enough job experience to leave White Rock, it was the best thing anyone could do for her.