



Battery
OPERATED

STEPHANIE BROTHER

BATTERY OPERATED

AN ENEMIES-TO-LOVERS REVERSE HAREM
ROMANCE

STEPHANIE BROTHER

Battery Operated © STEPHANIE BROTHER 2022

All Rights Reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locations is purely coincidental. The characters are all productions of the author's imagination.

Please note that this work is intended only for adults over the age of 18 and all characters represented as 18 or over.

Kindle Edition

Keep up to date with new releases:

[Mailing list](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Facebook Group](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Email](#)

CONTENTS

1. [Lila](#)
2. [Gideon](#)
3. [Lila](#)
4. [Lila](#)
5. [Lila](#)
6. [Lila](#)
7. [Lila](#)
8. [Lila](#)
9. [Cole](#)
10. [Lila](#)
11. [Lila](#)
12. [Lila](#)
13. [Lila](#)
14. [Brady](#)
15. [Lila](#)
16. [Lila](#)
17. [Lila](#)
18. [Lila](#)
19. [Gideon](#)
20. [Brady](#)
21. [Lila](#)
22. [Cole](#)
23. [Lila](#)
24. [Lila](#)
25. [Lila](#)
26. [Lila](#)
27. [Lila](#)
28. [Lila](#)
29. [Lila](#)

[Also by Stephanie Brother](#)

[About the Author](#)

LILA

“Ms. James?”

The man who said my name as I stepped off the elevator was *not* what I was expecting, and it took me a moment to respond.

“That’s me.”

The guy was a geek—no question about it. His thick, dark glasses sat slightly askew on his strong nose. Dark blond hair fell in unruly tufts almost to his shoulders—as if it hadn’t occurred to him to get a haircut in quite a while, or to trim his bushy mustache. He wore a white lab coat over an ancient band t-shirt, black jeans, and high-top sneakers.

“Please call me Lila,” I said. Then I turned to my companion. “And this is my assistant, Penny.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Brad.” He brushed his hand off before shaking with both of us. Then he absentmindedly pushed his glasses up with one long finger.

Oh, yeah, he was a nerd all right. I recognized the type. But unlike the guys I’d studied computer science with in school, this nerd was *hot*.

His brown eyes sparkled, and his square jaw and rakish grin hit all the right notes. I didn’t even mind the oversized mustache he rocked, though the sexy stubble that lined his jaw did more for me. Why was it that men could be unshaven and dressed down but still look sexy when we women had to work at it?

But that was a question to ponder another time. Today, I was here for one reason, and one reason only.

Behind Brad, a plaque with the name of the company hung on the wall. On the other floors the elevator had stopped at, there had been a directory. It was impressive that his startup occupied the whole floor. Real estate wasn't exactly cheap in the Chicago area.

He followed my gaze to the sign and then gave me a direct smile, one eyebrow raised at a cocky angle. "Welcome to the Pleasure Institute."

My skin shivered as the word *pleasure* echoed through my body. It was a concept that I was fascinated with. Indeed, I'd built my brand around it. And I was extra fond of pleasure when it was my own. If Brad and his partner could deliver on what they'd promised, then I was in for a real treat today.

I took one of the equipment bags from Penny as we followed Brad down the hall. His back view wasn't as impressive as the front—his lab coat was too large to showcase his muscular body. That didn't stop me from looking, however.

Penny seemed mesmerized by our host, too. She had a boyfriend, but I didn't blame her for looking. In my opinion, her boyfriend was a lot like her ancient car: rusty, subpar, and likely to let her down at the worst possible moment.

Brad stopped in front of a door on the left. Like the others, it was closed and made of hard polished wood. "I'll just see if my partner's ready."

"Is there a place where I can freshen up?" I asked. Not because I was vain, but because it was part of my job. No one followed an influencer who looked like a slob.

"The ladies' room is just down there." A slight frown formed under Brad's bushy mustache.

It was hard to believe that a man who'd founded a successful startup could be mystified by women's grooming rituals.

But he was still cute as hell.

GIDEON

“Where is she?” Cole, one of my oldest friends, was not his usual calm and collected self as he hovered in front of the bank of computer monitors.

“I can’t just snap my fingers and make her appear,” I pointed out. When he got nervous, I made it my job to radiate calm. “Brady’s text said that she’s on her way up.”

“I just... we just need everything to go right.”

“It will. We’re ready. We know what to do.” Then I looked around the little room. “Everything *is* ready, right?”

“Right.” His voice was steadier now, which was good. We needed this to work, because a lot was at stake today. Maybe everything.

I heard a noise from the hallway. “Is that them?”

“I think so.”

The door opened and Brady slipped inside, nearly shutting it on his oversized lab coat. “Are you guys ready?”

I’d been hearing that question a lot today. I nodded, but Cole turned pale and stroked his long beard in a nervous gesture. “Get your head in the game,” I told him. “This is what we’ve been working toward.”

Brady clapped his cousin on the shoulder. “It’s going to go perfectly. We’ll make sure Lila goes viral.”

Cole took a deep breath and nodded. “Are they ready?” There, that was a new variation on the question.

“Her assistant is helping her in the restroom.”

Cole looked mystified. “She needs help in the bathroom?”

I laughed. “Probably with hair and makeup and stuff. You know how she looks in her videos.” Though I was trying not to think about that today.

“Right,” Cole said.

From the slightly more relaxed look on his face, I gathered he was envisioning the pretty young thing who was our guest for the afternoon. Oh, well—whatever kept him grounded.

“I guess I’ll go back out there,” Brady said.

“Give them a minute.” These guys might not remember how long it took women to spruce themselves up, but I did. Not that I had much time to date these days. Nor did my buddies.

“Okay.” Brady looked around. He wasn’t as nervous as his cousin, but then again, he’d never been the type to take things too seriously. He bounced on the balls of his feet, as if eager to get this party started—or perhaps eager to see Lila again.

Finally, Cole squared his shoulders and cleared his throat. “Let’s do this.” He met my gaze and then Brady’s.

“Guess it’s go time, then.”

The others nodded. Today we were going to give Lila James exactly what she’d asked for.

LILA

“Excited?” Penny asked as she watched me in the mirror.

I paused for a moment as I released a strand of my hair from the curling iron. My hair was naturally wavy, but sometimes it didn’t wave in the right direction. “Hell, yeah. I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.”

Penny frowned. “They only contacted us a week ago.”

A smile broke out on my reflection, reminding me I needed a touch of lip gloss. “That’s not what I mean. They came to *me*. An up-and-coming startup chose me to showcase their new product.”

“Why wouldn’t they? You’re the best.”

Penny was nothing if not loyal. She’d been working for me for nearly a year now, ever since I started earning enough to afford an assistant. It hadn’t been easy, especially at first. Online influencers were a dime a dozen. But once I started sharing my love for the latest technology with my growing audience, I’d found my niche.

“*I* know that,” I said with a grin. “But it’s nice that corporations besides the usual suspects are starting to recognize that.”

“Too bad they can’t offer you a free sample this time.”

That was a shame, but hey, my apartment was full of the products I talked up on various social media accounts. These days, all I had to do was mention that a company had a new version of their smart speaker, tablet, or even a high-tech

coffee maker, and they'd send me one to unbox and review online.

But this was different. The Pleasure Institute of Chicago kept their products under wraps. Their website, though streamlined and professional, had been very tight-lipped about the details. Today, I'd be trying out something no one outside the company had even seen.

"They reached out to me," I repeated as I leaned in to make sure my eyelash extensions were straight. If I didn't wear them, it looked like I didn't have any lashes, let alone eyes, in my videos.

"Damn straight they did." Penny leaned against the counter as she slid the curling iron into a special sleeve that would keep it from scorching things. "They're lucky to have *the* Lila James promote their work."

I shot her a quick grin. She was my employee, yes, but also a friend. "If it's as good as they claim, I'll be singing its praises from now until the end of time."

"Yeah." A slight frown marred Penny's pale skin. "But if it's not... go easy on them, okay?"

As I patted a stray hair into place, I glanced at her reflection. "Of course. It's not like I'd give them a scathing review if it doesn't work out. I know it's still a prototype."

"Good."

"I don't do that," I insisted. "At least not much."

"I know."

But there was an extra line across Penny's forehead. "That's all ancient history," I assured her, dropping the pretense that I didn't know what she was talking about.

She nodded, and to my relief, the worry line disappeared. It was true that I didn't normally trash talk others online, but every once in a while, someone got under my skin, and I couldn't keep my mouth shut. Probably because my job was all about talking. Making videos. Recording podcasts. Doing

livestreams several times a day. When someone rubbed me the wrong way, sometimes I couldn't help but speak up.

But that wouldn't be the case today.

LILA

Brad was waiting for us in the hallway. He smiled as we approached, rapping twice on the sturdy door before opening it and ushering us inside.

His partner got to his feet as we stepped inside the room. I gawked for a moment as I looked up at his tall form. Was the entire company made up of hot nerds? This one had no-nonsense gray eyes and full lips that were pressed together in a stern line. Despite his rather tense posture, his hair was one hundred percent hippie. Dark brown strands were pulled back into a low ponytail at the back of his neck, and a long beard completely obscured his neck and jawline.

He had on a pale blue button-down shirt that was tight enough to show the contours of his muscles. Evidently, these men hadn't gotten the message that tech geeks were supposed to be thin and scrawny.

"I'm Lila." Despite my awe at his looks, my voice was strong and steady. I was in work mode now.

"Colton Douglas." He had a slight accent, possibly Scottish? It wasn't hard to understand him, though. Maybe he'd moved here when he was a child.

"Hi, Colton." If I'd known there were tech start-ups full of men like these, I might have done something different with my computer science degree.

"And this is Ms. James's assistant." Brad's voice sailed over my head, and I looked around to see him give a meaningful stare at his partner.

“Penny,” I supplied, in case he’d forgotten her name.

“Nice to meet you.” Colton gave Penny a warm smile, but then he looked back at Brad.

I couldn’t help examining every aspect of the sleek room, even though it was time to get our equipment set up. Normally, I shot livestreams myself and Penny filmed, edited, and produced the longer videos that were prerecorded. But this was a special event today.

Grinning, I allowed myself to zero in on the reason why. “Is that it?” I’d spotted the gleaming black chair the second I’d walked in, but I hadn’t wanted to be rude and skip the introductions.

“In the flesh, so to speak,” Brad said. “Ladies, I present to you the Massage-Mate 3000.”

“Why 3000?” Penny asked as she stared at the stainless steel and black leather.

“Because it took us 3000 tries to get it right,” Brad said with a warm chuckle.

I walked over and ran my finger over the chair’s arm. Though I was a fan of any kind of technology that made people’s lives better, the kind I liked most was the tech that could make you feel better. *Physically* better, that was.

At my apartment, I had at least three different massagers, designed for feet, hands, and lower back. None of them looked anywhere near as high tech as this chair did, though.

My fingers glided up the smooth leather until I reached the headrest. It looked as if it could give way, allowing a person to lean their head back. The whole chair looked like it reclined, even though it was nowhere near as bulky as those coin-operated massage chairs they used to have at shopping malls when I was a kid.

Curious, I moved to the side of the chair. A black curtain was directly behind it, stretching from wall to wall. I reached toward a slit in the black fabric.

Then Colton was at my side. His strong fingers grasped my arm and pulled it back. “I’m afraid I can’t let you back there, Ms. James. As we told you, this is only a prototype. Certain aspects of the mechanics and the compartment that houses them are unfinished.” His accent seemed a bit stronger—as was his grip on me.

His explanation made sense, but somehow, I got the impression that wasn’t the only reason he didn’t want me to look behind the curtain.

Brad seemed to sense my concern, because he winked at me. “We also want to make sure you’re not a corporate spy.”

It was impossible not to return his grin. The man could probably make people smile at a funeral. Well, at least the women. Penny gave a small laugh, and he turned his megawatt smile on her. If it wasn’t for that overgrown mustache and the thick glasses, he could’ve been a model.

“Let me tell you more about the tech,” he said, motioning Penny and me over to the computer station. “Unlike a regular massage chair, we don’t rely on rollers inside the cushions. We wanted to create an experience as authentic as possible. That’s why we made this.”

He gave me a hand—literally. Except for the fact that it was plastic, it looked like a real skeleton hand. I lifted the fingers, and the joints at the knuckles moved. It worked like a person’s hand would.

“The real thing is made of sturdier materials than that, obviously,” Colton said. “But don’t worry, it won’t hurt you. It’ll be completely covered.” He gave me what looked to be an ordinary leather glove, and I slid the plastic hand into it. Then I rubbed it gently across my forearm. It didn’t quite feel like the touch of an actual person, but it was close.

I passed it to Penny, and she manipulated the thing’s fingers for a few seconds before handing it back to Colton. Then she started pulling equipment out of our bags. “You want the ring-light stand, right?”

“Yes.” My followers were likely already watching my channel, waiting for the live feed. I’d been talking up this event all week, and they were as excited as I was to see some new tech.

Colton fiddled with the computer equipment that lined the wall opposite the massage chair while Penny set up the lights. As for me, I couldn’t help smiling. Technology was the best. It streamlined every part of my life, from the time I awoke from a sunrise simulator until soft ocean noises and a gently undulating mattress ushered me into blissful slumber. Technology made my life a million times better, and I was grateful every day that my job allowed me to share those improvements with my audience.

Though Penny was an excellent videographer, we’d decided a phone mounted in the middle of the ring light pointed directly at the chair was the best way to capture the event today. It was a little out of the ordinary because usually, when I livestreamed, I held the phone myself. That way, I could see my followers’ comments as they scrolled across the screen. But holding the phone while getting a deep tissue massage didn’t seem all that feasible.

To my surprise, Brad placed candles around the room. They were in little glass jars, and after he lit them, the scent of vanilla filled the air. He caught my glance and smiled. “Just trying to set the mood a bit. We want you to enjoy yourself and experience the full effects of the Massage Mate.”

Soft music filled the air—Colton had turned it on from his computer console. It was half starting to feel like a date, but I protested when Brad dimmed the lights. “My audience needs to be able to see me; otherwise, I’ll just be a voice in the dark.”

“Just trying to help you relax,” Brad said. “But if you think the lighting isn’t strong enough, we can—”

“We brought extra lights,” I said, nodding to Penny. For some reason, I didn’t want Brad thinking we were amateurs.

To prove that, I reviewed the details of the shoot with Brad. We’d covered a lot of ground over email, but it was

always different when I was on location. I asked him about which parts of the room could appear in the video, what I could say about the massage chair that wouldn't give away too many trade secrets, and the like.

While we spoke, Penny got the extra lights set up and double-checked the settings on the phone.

“Are we about ready?” I asked, because it was almost time.

Judging by the way Penny was scrolling through the phone, my followers were likely already ready and waiting.

“Just one more thing,” Colton said smoothly. “We want this experience to be as relaxing as possible for you, Lila.” I was pleased he was finally using my first name. Being called Ms. James had never felt right to me. “We’ve done our best to set the mood. To ensure your total relaxation, we ask that Penny wait outside.”

“What?” I said at the same time Penny did. “She’s my assistant.”

Colton smiled. “And she’s done a good job. But she’s not needed now. This next part is all about you and your pleasure.”

He’d said *pleasure*, the magic word, but Penny was part of my process, part of my business. Evidently, she felt the same way. “You won’t even know I’m here. I’ll just stand in the corner over there.”

“You’re not being punished,” I said sharply, my words directed at the two men, not her.

“I’m afraid we have to insist,” Brad said firmly. “Our correspondence with you was very clear, Ms. James.” Great, now he was back to calling me that. “You, and only you, were invited to try out our new prototype.” He turned his good-natured smile to Penny, and her expression softened. “There’s a break room at the end of the hall. My partner will take you there.”

She met my eyes, and I hesitated. Finally, I nodded.

“Enjoy,” Penny said softly as she followed Colton out into the hallway.

“Trust me, in a few minutes you won’t be thinking about anything except for how amazing you feel,” Brad assured me.

He’d better be right. I wasn’t thrilled with giving the benefit of the doubt to strangers, but it was clear they’d put some thought into this and had set things up to make it as enjoyable as possible for me. Turning my back to him, I faced the dark curtain and did some vocal warm-ups.

When I turned around, Brad was watching me carefully. “All good?”

“Yep.”

He gestured toward the waiting chair. I took in its gleaming features once more as I slid off my jacket. Underneath it, I had on a black top with spaghetti straps. That way, the massaging device, if it lived up to the hype, could go to work on my bare shoulders.

I sat down, easing back until I was fully seated. The chair wasn’t exactly padded, but it wasn’t uncomfortable, either. Far from it.

The door opened, and Colton returned. “Is it showtime?” he asked.

“It is.” As always, a mix of feelings filled me. A few butterflies in my stomach... that always happened before filming big like this. But mostly excitement. My fans were the best, and soon, I’d be speaking directly to them. Sharing my enthusiasm for the latest tech products was the highlight of my days. Not everyone got paid to do what they loved.

“Hey, everyone, it’s the big day! Thank you for joining me.” I gave Colton a nod of thanks as he stepped back after starting the recording. Scores of comments were already scrolling across the screen of my phone. There was no way I could make them out, save for the few that were in all caps, but Penny would be monitoring them, checking to make sure no

one said they couldn't hear or something like that. "I am at the one and only Pleasure Institute, and I wish you were here! I've met two of the most charming men."

I tilted my head toward Brad, who was next to me, widening my eyes at my audience. They weren't all female, but enough of them were that I knew they'd appreciate the sight of him. "You can't see the other one, but he's just as hot."

I said that last part in a stage whisper, as if the men couldn't hear me, and Brad chuckled. "Brad, why don't you tell my followers more about what's going to happen here today?"

He crouched down next to me as he spoke to my audience like a pro. They were probably eating him up—I sure wanted to. He was so close I could feel the heat from his body against my arm. This place was already living up to its name.

"Now we just need to do two things before we get started, Ms. James," Brad concluded.

I gave him a winning smile. "What's that?"

"Well, first, we need to get this gorgeous hair out of the way." He ran a hand across my hair in a way that made my scalp tingle and probably made my viewers sigh. I wasn't used to strange men touching me, but I was here for a massage, after all. The stroke of his hand just made me more eager for the scalp-massage part of today's events.

Still, I wish he'd told me beforehand that my hair needed to be up. I could've done it before in front of a mirror. Redoing my hairstyle on a livestream wasn't ideal, but neither was getting my hair caught in some machine.

He handed me an elastic band with a slightly apologetic smile. "The Massage Mate needs to be able to access your neck and shoulders."

I nodded and gathered my hair into a ponytail. It was probably a tad crooked, but hopefully soon I'd be so blissed out I wouldn't care.

"What's the other thing?"

“This.” He reached into the pocket of his lab coat and pulled out something black and silky. For a bizarre moment, I thought it was a pair of panties. Then he shook it, revealing an eye mask.

What the hell?

“You want me to wear *that*?” My voice was a mixture of indignation and something else... maybe hesitation? I needed to get control of the situation—and my vocal cords—again. “Is that really necessary?”

“I assure you, it’s all about your pleasure. I want you focused on the top-notch massage you’re getting, not the screen in front of you. But you’ll still be able to talk to your audience—if you *can* talk, that is. I assure you, in a few minutes, you’re going to be more relaxed than you’ve ever been before.”

His reasoning made sense, but I still hesitated as he held out the mask. Like the hair thing, there’d been no mention of this beforehand, and there should’ve been. Surprises weren’t my thing, especially while on camera.

Brad gave me a very reassuring smile. “You’re perfectly safe, Ms. James. We have thousands of witnesses.”

There didn’t seem to be much of a choice, except to debate him right here and now during a live feed. Obviously, that wasn’t a great solution. Reluctantly, I took the eye mask from him. Then I gave a big smile to my followers.

“Guess I won’t be seeing you for a short while, but I’ll keep talking to you! Or moaning, if this chair is as good as these guys claim.” I leaned forward, giving the phone screen a conspiratorial wink. “But keep an eye on this one here for me, okay? Let me know if he writes Loser on my forehead when I’m all relaxed and out of it.”

Judging by the increase in the number of comments, they liked the idea of being deputized. It wasn’t easy to get a large audience engaged, but it was an important part of the gig.

As I pulled the silky fabric over my eyes, my other senses sharpened. The scent from the vanilla candles grew stronger,

and my skin tingled pleasantly, even though the air in the room wasn't particularly cool. It was more like anticipation. For someone whose life and career focused on pleasure, this was equivalent to my own personal Olympics. I couldn't wait to experience what the machine these men had created could do.

LILA

“Oh my *God*.” The Massage Mate 3000 was everything the men promised, and more. Much, much more. The sensations it produced were heavenly—just as good as a real massage therapist, in my opinion.

Maybe even better.

I knew it was a mechanical contraption kneading my shoulders, but it almost felt like real hands. Technically, I suppose, it counted as machine hands, since the Massage Mate had two of those skeletal hands like the model I’d examined before. I could feel the smooth leather as it glided up and down the bare skin of my shoulders and upper back. My tank top covered my lower back, but it felt just as good there.

And when those fake fingers expertly rubbed my scalp, waves of pure pleasure radiated outward—and downward. I squeezed my thighs together, enjoying the friction. If I had one of these machines, I’d never leave my apartment again.

“You look like you’re quite content,” Colton said in his deep voice.

“I am.” My voice was a dreamy purr, but then, remembering I was on camera, I spoke louder over the music that filled the room. “It’s the most amazing feeling. When you guys start selling this, there’s going to be a bidding war.”

“Tell us more about how it makes you feel.” I was pretty sure that was Brad. His voice wasn’t quite as deep as Colton’s.

“Incredible. Like I don’t have a care in the world. And I don’t—I’m not even thinking, at least not much. I’m just being in the moment and enjoying the hell out of it.”

There was the sound of an office chair rolling toward me. When he spoke, Brad’s voice was closer. “So how would this rate on your NMN scale?”

I grinned. He’d obviously watched my videos.

“NMN?” Colton echoed. Clearly, his partner hadn’t.

“No Man Needed,” I said, my voice calm and mellow. It was a ratings system I’d developed over the past year to measure how well tech outperformed a human being.

“She uses it for rating sex toys,” Brad said, sounding amused.

For a moment, I frowned. Our prior communication hadn’t indicated we’d discuss *that*. But then again, my followers already knew that from time to time, adult stores sent me their latest products—that was one of the reasons my channel was called *Battery Operated*.

At least a few times a month, I’d unbox a toy during a livestream and discuss it with my followers, but I’d only try it out on my own time. Later, when I’d report back, I’d give it an NMN score. For a device to earn a five, it had to be way better than the pleasure a man could provide. The NMN scale was both a sort of running joke on my social media channels and also a unique way to rate products. My followers loved it.

“I’m interested in knowing how our tech measures up.” Brad’s voice still had amusement in it, and maybe something else. Interest? I still didn’t like that he’d sprung this topic on me, but he definitely didn’t sound like he disapproved—after all, he was the cofounder of something called the Pleasure Institute.

And I certainly wasn’t ashamed of any part of my brand. Women’s pleasure had been ignored for far too long. That didn’t happen on my social media accounts.

“I’d say it’s blown way past a five.”

“Good to hear that,” Brad said, pride in his voice.

From the space in front of me, I could almost hear the vibration of the phone as messages from viewers were no doubt popping up on the screen. I’d turned all sounds and notifications off so it wouldn’t interrupt the video, but it was like a phantom sound in my head.

But work-related thoughts faded as the robotic hands had moved to my scalp, and I was glad I’d put my hair up. The equivalent of human thumbs stroked the back of my scalp, and I couldn’t help moaning as I writhed on the chair.

“It’ll work best if you hold still,” Colton said.

“Your invention isn’t making it easy.”

Brad chuckled. “Do you really think this massage is better than one a boyfriend could give you?”

“Absolutely,” I moaned. I didn’t try to say it like that, but it was difficult not to. “A real man would never spend this much time really working my muscles. He’d rub my shoulder for sixty seconds—without the skill of your Massage Mate—and then expect a medal. No way he’d spend this much time on each muscle group. No way a massage from a guy would feel this good.”

“Why not?” Colton asked.

Under the blindfold, my eyelids fluttered, and I bit back a groan. I wanted to ignore my followers and the two men in the room with me and just enjoy the delicious sensations. “Can it work on my lower back again?”

Brad moved in to change the settings, and I could feel him hovering over me. The scent of something woodsy caught my attention. It smelled good. Maybe it was pine? I nearly moaned again, but he was too close, he would’ve heard it.

His strong hands reached around me as he adjusted the chair. Then a section of the back of the seat slid away. A moment later, those strong, talented robotic fingers pressed into my lower back.

“And it’ll all be automatic when the product is finished?” I asked.

“This kind of thing will be done by remote, yes. The seat back has different sections that can slide in and out of place.” The warmth of his body moved away, and I felt a brief moment of disappointment.

When he spoke again, it seemed like he was several feet away. “It’s a bit of a balancing act, literally. We need to make sure the user has enough support that they’ll stay upright, but on the other hand, we don’t want to make the chair too big or bulky.”

“Sign me up when it’s available for sale.” I didn’t often have to pay full price for tech, but this would be worth any price.

“You’ll be the first to know.” That was Colton, over by the computers.

I closed my eyes again, even though it was unnecessary because of the blindfold. But the way the machine was kneading my lower back was heavenly. Its thumbs, if that’s what they could truly be called, were tracing up and down either side of my spine, and it was as if they were drawing out every ache and pain I’d ever had in my lifetime.

It was my job to keep up a running commentary for my viewers, but it was hard when I felt this good. Still, I tried. “If I had a machine like this, I’d be the happiest woman in the world. No bad days. No bad moods.” I chuckled. “I’d be a regular ball of sunshine all the time.”

Brad laughed too. “So no attacking your fellow influencers?”

“What?”

“Just saying, it seems like at times in the past, you weren’t, what’d you call it? In the mood to be a regular ball of sunshine. You’ve got quite a sharp tongue when you’re in a less sunshiny mood.”

“What are you talking about?” I had a feeling I knew, though.

When he spoke again, his words weren't directed at me. "Can you pull up that exchange I showed you before?" Obviously, he was talking to Colton.

Shit.

I couldn't hear anything over the music, but I visualized Colton typing on his keyboard, his long, dark hair hanging down his back.

"I think I found it," he said.

Double shit.

When Brad spoke again, he was over by Colton. He raised his voice so I could hear. "Yeah, that's it. As I said, quite the sharp tongue, Ms. James."

"It's my job," I said nonchalantly. Or at least I hoped that's how I sounded.

"And you're good at it," Brad said. "You eviscerated some guys who have some kind of how-to channel."

My eyes closed under the blindfold. This was why I hated working with amateurs. They always went off script. I needed to figure out how to regain control of this broadcast—but it was hard to think with the incredible sensations the massage machine was providing me. I didn't want to think; I just wanted to enjoy the amazing feelings.

But Brad wasn't backing down. He gave a low whistle. "You called them unprofessional hacks who wouldn't have any female viewers at all if they weren't handsome." There was a pause, and I hoped he was done—but apparently, my luck wasn't in today. "You called them morons. Amateurs. And other choice words," he added.

Colton chuckled. "Maybe we should give you this machine as a service to the public, Ms. James. To keep you from lashing out."

I wanted to tell them that I didn't lash out. At least not usually. That had been a one-time thing. Or, okay, maybe a three- or four-time thing. But only against that channel. Something about those guys had rubbed me the wrong way.

As I was trying to find a way to defend myself without sounding defensive, a muffled noise startled me, temporarily distracting me.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Colton said.

“It came from the hallway,” Brad countered. “Our new employee is moving into an office down the way—it was probably just a box bumping against the wall.” The noise came again, but then the music increased. The melodies flowed through the room, entering my ears and increasing the dreamlike spell the massage was casting over me. My irritation with Brad and Colton was hard to hold onto when my body felt this damn good.

“I wish you all could try this,” I said, speaking louder over the music. Probably the best course of action to get the live stream back on track was to focus on my followers. “How many of you wish you could be where I am right now?”

The notifications were turned off, but I swear, I could hear the echo of the responses anyway. My feed had to be completely full, with envious followers remarking on this amazing technology.

But then the banging noise came again. Actually, it might have been there for a while, a faint background to the surround-sound music. But, God, everything felt so good that I almost didn’t care.

Almost.

The stupid noise was interrupting one of the most sensual experiences of my life. Annoyance warred with pleasure. I was a pro—I didn’t let background sounds intrude into my videos. I opened my mouth to tell them to fix the issue, but Colton spoke first. “You didn’t answer my question before.”

He was obviously trying to keep our livestream on track, and he was probably right. The show must go on, and all that. “About what?”

“About why you said no man could give you a massage this good.”

“Oh.” That was easy to answer. I shifted my hips, pressing myself against those magic robot hands as I warmed up to the theme. “They don’t have the patience for it, for one thing. Plus, they’d never be able to find the knots in my muscles like this thing can.”

“Some men aren’t good at finding the right spot,” Brad said huskily, and I grinned.

“Damn straight. Or they’d just go for the parts they want to touch and ignore the rest. Men, as a whole, seem mostly interested in their own pleasure, not the woman’s.”

“On behalf of my gender, I apologize if that’s how it seemed to you,” Brad said.

“That’s how it *is*.”

“That’s good,” Colton said, and I turned toward his voice, my eyebrows raised though he couldn’t see them.

“It’s good for us, I mean. If people, especially women, aren’t getting what they need, that means there’s a market for our product,” he clarified. “At the very least, we can sell to women who have clueless men in their lives.”

Waves of pleasure radiating from my lower back made my tongue loose. “Which is pretty much all of them.”

But then my eyes flew open as the banging from the hallway continued. Without thinking about it, I ripped off the blindfold. “What the hell *is* that?”

The lights were no longer dimmed, for some reason, so it was a moment before everything started to come back into focus. Colton was over by the door, and Brad was just a few feet away, frowning as he stared at the mask in my hands.

Blinking rapidly, I looked from one man to the other. Neither had an explanation for the noise. Then I focused on the screen of my phone. Squinting slightly, I could just make out some of the comments scrolling rapidly from the bottom of the screen to the top. It looked like the usual mix of questions and comments, but quite a few of the responses were in all caps. Those were the ones that were easiest to make out. To my surprise, the ones I could read were:

OMG!!!

WHAT THE FUCK?!?!

LOOK BEHIND YOU

That last one was from Penny. My heart raced, and my formerly relaxed nerve endings went on high alert. I twisted in the chair, my calm, blissful feeling gone in seconds. The first thing I saw was that the dark curtain was open. As I craned my neck, I could see that there wasn't anything directly behind the chair. No gears. No levers. No mechanics.

What the hell?

I turned to check the other side and near fell out of the chair as instinct made me flinch even before my mind had truly registered what I was seeing.

A strange man was standing right next to me.

LILA

My jaw dropped open as I craned my neck to look up at the man. He was so tall that I had to lean away from him to take him all in, and the muscles in my lower back that had been so soothed a moment ago twinged in complaint.

My stunned mind cataloged his features. Dark brown hair that sat high on his head. A short beard and goatee. Hard blue eyes under thick brows. There was something almost aristocratic about his face. Maybe the shape of his nose or his jaw.

A wave of conflicting thoughts flowed through me as I stared up at him. Surprise, of course. I'd had no idea there was another person in the room. A strange feeling of longing—he was a handsome man. But right on its heels—resentment. That one I couldn't explain. And briefly, recognition of some sort.

But what the hell was he doing here?

I twisted my neck further, and several things hit me at once. Several *horrible* things. The dark curtain behind me was open a few feet. Evidently, this man had been back there the whole time. And then there were his hands. He was wearing black leather gloves.

A groan filled me, quite unlike the ones from a few minutes ago. It had been him the whole time. Not a machine. Not the most perfect massage device known to mankind. It had been a person, a man.

But why? Had these guys gotten in over their heads? Promised to show off their new tech and something had gone

wrong, so they'd tried to bluff their way through this demo? But that didn't make any sense. From the messages on my phone, it was clear that this guy hadn't tried to hide his participation from the viewers.

I grimaced as I realized something. The eye mask! They hadn't wanted me to know he was there—*just* me. Which meant these men were not my friends. And whatever they were up to was not something that would help me and my career.

Briefly, I entertained the impulse to hop up and cut the live feed. But then I dismissed the idea. Ending things off now would make it worse—and could even make people worried about my safety.

Of all the concerns running through my mind, that wasn't one of them. These men were up to something, but it didn't feel unsafe. It felt cold and calculated, but not unsafe—at least not physically. Professionally might be another matter.

“What's going on?” I kept my voice as neutral as possible, trying to throw a note of curiosity into it.

Another round of banging on the door made me jump. This time, Colton opened it, and Penny rushed in. “What the hell?” she demanded of the three men.

Of all the shocking things in the last minute, that was one of the biggest. Penny never said bad words, even very tame ones. “Why did you guys—” she hesitated, looking at my phone, which was still live-streaming. Crap. “I somehow got locked out,” she finished in a quieter tone.

Very aware of the camera, I sat up straight in the chair. My stunned mind tried to focus on a half-dozen different thoughts at once. The things I'd said. What these guys were really up to. And the most alarming question of all—why?

But first and foremost, I spoke to the tens of thousands of people watching live—an amount that was going up every second. “So, today wasn't quite what I was expecting.” I gave my best smile to the camera, trying to look as if I was

completely on top of the situation even though it felt like the exact opposite. “Can someone tell me what’s going on?”

That last question was directed to the guys in the room. It meant letting them control the narrative, which was the last thing I wanted to do, but I couldn’t see any other way out of this.

The new guy standing next to me flexed his gloved fingers. “How’d you like your massage?” The smug grin he shot down at me wasn’t a pleasant one.

“I *was* enjoying it.” I emphasized the past tense. “But now it’s taken a weird turn. What happened to the Massage Mate 3000?”

“Never existed,” he said.

“Then what’s all this about?” In confusion, I turned back to the other two—which only made the fog in my head worse. Brad and Colton were in the process of changing. Brad’s bushy mustache was gone—and even in my current state, I recognized that as an improvement—and he was tugging at his blond hair which turned out to be a wig. His real hair was short and light brown.

Colton’s long brown ponytail wasn’t real either, since it was now lying on top of a keyboard. He winced when he peeled off the beard and then rubbed his strong jaw.

Now all three of them were starting to look familiar. I’d seen them before, but never in person. Never full-sized.

Only on a small screen.

Shit.

I got to my feet, standing on the opposite side of the chair from my masseuse. “I know you.” My voice was shaky, and I fought to steady it.

“Yes, you do,” Colton said, his former Scottish accent evidently as fake as his long hair. He moved next to his buddy with the magic hands.

Despite everything, my first thought was to wonder if they were in the shot. Whatever was going on, there was no point in

my viewers seeing only half of it. I glanced at Penny, and she nodded. Moving smoothly, she eased the phone out of its holder and turned it sideways at a wide enough angle to see all of us.

“But we don’t own a startup,” Colton went on. “Or build fancy tech.”

I turned to Brad. Of the three, he’d seemed the most approachable. The friendliest—but he didn’t look friendly now. His eyes were steady on mine, making me squirm for some reason. But still, it was easier to look at him rather than the stern expression on Colton’s face or the smug look on the other man’s.

“What’s going on, Brad?”

“It’s Brady, actually.” He pointed at Colton. “This is Cole. And that’s Gideon. We’re—”

“*Down to Earth.*” My eyes closed briefly as a lot of things clicked into place. *Down to Earth* was the name of their online channel.

They posted videos about simple things—how to grill the perfect steak. How to change a flat. How to hang a picture straight. Super boring stuff like that. But I doubted my audience was bored by the drama happening right now.

This was bad. Really bad.

“So you remember us.” Gideon’s deep voice was disapproving enough to pull my gaze up to his scornful face.

Brad moved to join the other two and addressed my audience. “Ms. James seems a bit tongue-tied, so I’ll fill you in.” He glanced up at Penny, and she nodded, indicating she was getting the shot. Even in this much of a shitstorm, the show must go on.

“As I alluded to a bit earlier, a few months ago, Ms. James said some things that were both unkind and untrue about our online channel. That we made boring videos and that you’d rather watch paint dry. And your thesis, which seemed to be that the only reason we were getting good ratings—

particularly from young women—is because we were good-looking.”

“Well, the good-looking part is true,” Gideon muttered, and a wave of loathing rose up in me. Not only had these guys tricked me on camera, but they were being smug as hell about it. Or at least the new guy was.

None of this made much sense, but I knew I couldn’t let anyone online or offline see that I was upset. “So, you decided that the best revenge for what I said was to give me a *massage*?” There. Hopefully that would make them seem foolish, or maybe I was just grasping at straws.

“That was just to get you here,” Colton said. Or wait, no, his name was Cole, and the other was Brady. Now that they were standing side by side, I could see a resemblance between them. Were they brothers?

If so, I was surprised I hadn’t remembered that. I’d watched some videos on their channel, but that had been a few months ago. I hadn’t given them much thought since—except to wonder what had gotten into me.

“So there isn’t really a Pleasure Institute of Chicago?” I tried to put contempt in my voice for their choice of a name, but in actuality, it seemed like there should be something like that.

“Nope,” Brady said. “All fake.”

“But why?” I asked again.

It must’ve taken them an enormous amount of effort to get space in this building. If it were any other men, I’d think maybe one of them worked here, but as far as I could remember, they were three country bumpkins who lived in a town so remote it was miles from the smallest and farthest of the Chicago suburbs. I couldn’t remember the name of it, but I knew it was northwest of here.

“We wanted to prove a point,” Cole said.

“We *did* prove a point,” Gideon corrected.

Even though it had been Cole and Brady who had lied to my face, he was the one who bothered me the most. He just looked so full of himself, standing there in black jeans and a tight tee that showcased the muscles of his chest and biceps. I'd attributed the firm, steady pressure of the robotic hands to machine strength, but now I could see exactly where that strength had come from.

"Which is?"

"That we can best your high-tech toys," Brady said with a grin. Unlike Gideon's smirk, I didn't want to smack it off his face.

"No one said that." I spoke without thinking, which was never a good idea during a livestream.

"You did, sweetheart." Gideon's blue eyes were dark as he stared me down. "I believe we have several thousand witnesses." He gestured toward Penny and my phone.

"Tens of thousands," I corrected. "Okay, you give a good massage. But I stand by my comments. Would you really have spent so long and been so thorough if you hadn't been trying to teach me a lesson or whatever your goal was?"

"Depends on who I was touching," Gideon said. The audience was probably melting over those words—as I'm sure the bastard knew.

I switched tactics. "I use tech all day long. It's brought nothing but good things to my life. What am I supposed to do, give all that up and replace it with a guy like you?" I should've said guys, plural, but this Gideon guy was really getting under my skin.

It was Cole who answered. "I'm glad you brought that up." His evil smile didn't have quite the potency of Gideon's, but I instantly knew I'd made a mistake. "That's exactly what we want you to do."

"What?" They weren't making any sense, but my muddled mind wasn't helping the situation. It was jarring to be in the midst of pure, unadulterated pleasure one moment and then to be yanked out into this weird and hostile reality the next.

“We want to replace your tech. We want to prove to you that we’re better,” Brady said.

“Better than what?” My voice was faint again, damn it.

“Than all of it,” Cole answered. “Lila James, you’ve said some very unpleasant things about us, and about men in general, so we’re calling you out. Technology has its place, but it can never replace a human being, or at least it shouldn’t.”

He stood so tall over me that I wished I was wearing five-inch heels. “We challenge you to do without all your high-tech toys. Leave your tech behind and let us show you that you don’t need it. In fact, we’ll replace all your damn tech. Stay with us for a week. If, at the end of it, you’re not convinced that real people are better than your devices, we’ll issue a full and very public apology.”

“*Stay with you?*” These guys were fucking nuts if they thought I was going to move in with one, or any, of them.

“At the inn that Cole and I own. Did you do *any* research on us before you attacked us?” Brady sounded vaguely disappointed in me, which was absurd. If he had any regard for me at all, he wouldn’t have been a part of this.

“I’m not going out to the middle of nowhere for a week.”

“Told you,” Gideon said. “She’s addicted.”

“To *tech?*” Exasperation tinged my voice. They kept changing the narrative and keeping me off balance—something that had never happened before. “I use what makes my life better and discard the rest, the same as anyone else. Same as you, I’m sure. Unless your inn is straight out of the 1850s.”

“We use technology, too, but in reasonable amounts,” Cole insisted.

“We’re not slaves to it,” Gideon added.

“Neither am I.”

“Prove it,” Gideon snapped. “Unless you’re afraid your followers will see that our way is better?”

“Right. Because you’re *Down to Earth* and I’m, what—a woman who doesn’t know what’s best for her? That’s always a good look, when a man tells a woman how she should live her life.”

“That’s not what we’re doing,” Brady said smoothly. “We’re challenging you to try things a different way.”

Gideon jumped in. “If you’re confident that your tech outshines a man, you shouldn’t be afraid to let us put it to the test.”

I couldn’t help rising to his rather obvious bait. “I’m not afraid.”

“You definitely don’t look like a woman who shies away from a challenge,” Brady said with a nod.

Try as I might, I couldn’t keep my righteous anger at the same level when I looked at him.

Frantically, I tried to think of a way out of this without backing down. “I have multiple social media accounts to juggle. And a very tight recording schedule.”

“And you can keep making videos and streaming. So will we,” Gideon replied. Easy for him to say; their channel was small potatoes compared to mine. “I bet your fans are on board.”

Almost involuntarily, I glanced over at Penny and the phone she was holding. Cole noticed. “What are they saying?”

Penny caught my eye, and reluctantly, I nodded. It wouldn’t do any good to hide what they were seeing; everyone on the livestream could see it anyway. Penny started reading off the phone. “Do it. Show them you’re not afraid. Wipe the floor with them, Lila.”

“Guess that answers that question,” Brady said softly.

I wanted to close my eyes. I wanted to take some time. I needed to think—but I didn’t have that luxury. Not during a livestream. “If you pull me out of the real world to play pioneer girl for a week, I need more than a public apology when I prove you wrong.”

“What do you want?” Cole asked.

“A week’s stay in real comfort.” I named one of Chicago’s best hotels. “I’ll need it after my time out in the sticks.”

Brady and Cole exchanged glances. They didn’t look happy, but it was Gideon who answered. “Deal.”

Fire ran through my veins. At the very least, I’d get a lot of good footage of me wiping the floor with these boundary-crossing jerks. The thought of taking my revenge on this trio made me almost look forward to it. I stared directly into the camera and gave my viewers what I hoped was a determined smile. “Looks like I’m taking a trip. Their little inn may never be the same after my visit.”

“Or you might not be,” Brady said.

Guess time would tell which one of us was right. Spoiler alert: I’d make damn sure it was me.

LILA

The moment I stepped onto the small platform of the Elburn station and looked around, my heart sank. A few people were waiting to board the train back to Chicago, but not many. It was clear this was the end of the line.

I'd never taken the Metra this far west of Chicago, but it already felt like I was light years from home—and this wasn't even my final destination. Brady and Colton—no, his name was Cole—were supposed to pick me up and take me on to Smallville, or whatever it was called.

But I didn't see either of them, unless they'd donned disguises again, so I took a moment to pretend I was anywhere else but here.

Maybe back on the train. Yeah, that was a good place to be. Unlike Penny, who'd be driving her ancient car out here later in the day, I was all about public transportation. The El in Chicago got me everywhere I needed to be, except when I could walk. I loved walking around the city. There was always something going on. Always something to see. Always something to do. Plus, no one even batted an eye when I live-streamed with my followers.

Normally, I also enjoyed riding on the larger commuter train that shuttled people out to the suburbs, but every station we passed on the way here was smaller than the last one. When I squinted down the tracks, I couldn't even see the skyscrapers in the distance.

A horn interrupted my thoughts. A groan escaped my lips as I saw a white, rusty pickup truck heading my way. Well, mostly white. It appeared that the passenger door had been liberated from a gray pickup of the same make.

Wonderful.

The brakes squealed as the truck came to a halt in the parking lot. The two men—cousins, I now knew—were in the front. Where the hell did they expect me to sit?

Their method of transportation—though it was admittedly at least a half-step up from Penny’s—was the exact opposite of the gleaming facilities they’d lured me to a week ago. Of course, now I knew that they’d just borrowed a buddy’s office, but still, I’d hoped that their tastes hadn’t changed.

But now I was beginning to suspect they didn’t have any, especially when Brady climbed out of the passenger side, revealing his faded and ripped jeans. His shirt was plaid and button-down, and all he needed was a cowboy hat to complete the country bumpkin look.

The really annoying thing was that he still looked hot, even though he obviously hadn’t spent much time on his clothing choices today. Since these guys likely considered me public enemy number one, perhaps that made sense.

But then Cole opened the driver’s door, and his attire surprised me. Black jeans, yes, but with a clean white dress shirt tucked into them and black boots that weren’t covered in dirt like Brady’s sneakers. I wondered if he’d just come from somewhere important, or if he’d possibly dressed nicely for me.

Yeah. Not likely.

As I waited for them to come help with my luggage, I steeled myself for the week ahead. I’d need to be constantly on guard. These men and their buddy Gideon had already humiliated me in front of thousands of followers. They’d tricked and manipulated me. It didn’t matter if they were attractive or if Brady was currently sporting a good-natured grin. They were the enemy, and I needed to act accordingly.

“Hey, Lila,” Brady said, as if we were old friends.

His eyes swept up and down me, taking in my appearance. I’d worn tan pants, heeled sandals, and a pink blouse under my jacket. It was late spring, but in this part of the country, nights could still get quite cold.

“Good thing we brought the pickup,” Cole said, eyeing my suitcases. But then he gave me a polite nod. “Ms. James.” His tone was formal and reserved.

My luggage consisted of a four-piece matched set, the larger three with wheels that made pulling them along seem nearly effortless. They’d been a gift from a luggage company after I’d written a review in an online magazine of the one piece I’d bought myself.

In the time it took me to pull the strap of a small carry-on piece over my head and shoulders, the men had picked up the other suitcases. “I can’t believe you got all of this on and off the train,” Brady said.

“I had help,” I said stiffly.

Brady just grinned. “Bet there are all kind of commuters willing to help a pretty woman with her bags.”

“Commuters can be female too, you know,” I pointed out.

“True. I haven’t been on the Metra in years, so my thinking might be a little outdated.”

“Was your last trip in the 1950s? Because you don’t look old enough for that.”

Brady winked at me as he tucked one suitcase under his arm and held another off the ground. So much for the top-of-the-line wheels on the cases. “I might be a bit behind the times, but I mean no offense.”

Did Brady have to sound so good-natured even when he was saying dumb things? But I bit back a retort. No sense opening hostilities so soon. For one thing, it wasn’t too late for me to snatch my bags and take a train back to Chicago.

But I knew I couldn’t do that to my reputation. My followers were counting on me to show these cowboys up.

And besides, I'd soon be stuck in the cab of their truck with them, which didn't sound pleasant under any circumstances. Probably it was best if we weren't fighting in that confined space, too.

I followed Brady and Cole, wincing as they tossed my suitcases into the truck bed. It was covered with a layer of old leaves, and I hated seeing them rub against the gorgeous blue-gray shade of my bags. It had always reminded me of a storm.

"Are you sure brought enough stuff?" Cole asked pointedly.

"I make my living from social media," I said, with a slight dig in my voice. Though I couldn't deny the popularity of *Down to Earth*, their online show, it didn't seem very well monetized, and I doubted the income went far among the three of them. "I have to look nice."

Brady grinned as he opened the passenger door. "Doesn't seem like that'd be much of a problem for you."

Whatever he meant by that—and perhaps it was just a straightforward compliment—was canceled out by the fact that he clearly intended for me to sit in the middle between them. "I prefer a window seat."

Cole grumbled as he climbed into the driver's seat. "This isn't a plane."

Brady held out a hand to help me up. "I'd take the middle, but my legs won't fit."

"I have legs too, you know."

His eyes swept down my pants, which were on the tight side. "So I see. Come on, it's not a long drive."

Rolling my eyes, I ignored his hand and climbed into the truck myself. That small show of independence backfired when I got one foot onto the floor of the cab with my back bent and my ass probably right in his face. Quickly, I twisted around, getting into a seated position before sliding over toward Cole.

Brady had a slight grin on his face, and I bit back a frown. Let him enjoy the view—he wouldn't be enjoying much else this week. Not if I had my way.

Then he climbed in after me. "If you don't scoot over, hon, I'll never get the door closed." Brady wasn't as big as his cousin, but with his lean and lanky muscles, he was still quite a bit bigger than me.

Begrudgingly, I inched closer to Cole, angling my body so my legs were still on Brady's side.

"I'm flattered you think I'm that thin, but I'm not," Brady complained.

I moved over more, and I could feel the heat from Cole's skin, but there was still an inch between us.

At least until Brady scooted against me, pressing me up against his cousin while he wrestled the door shut. "There we go."

I felt like the filling in a sandwich cookie. My arms were against their arms. My thighs against their thighs. And my feet—well, they had no room with Brady's scuffed tennis shoes filling the space.

"Where are my feet supposed to go?" One was on top of the other in an uncomfortable way.

Brady grinned and patted his lap. "I'd be glad to hold them for you."

Yeah, that wasn't happening. I wiggled around, trying to get more comfortable, and was very aware of the hard, muscled bodies on either side of me. Then I yelped as I felt a hand on my thigh. Brady buckled his seatbelt, and then rooted around in the space between us.

"Hey!"

He grinned and tugged out a seatbelt buckle. "Just trying to help you stay safe."

"Want me to help you find the other side?" Cole asked in his low voice.

“I can get it myself.” I could—but I had to lean hard against Brady to fish out the other side of the belt.

Cole took advantage of the space I made between us to fasten his own seatbelt.

Once I was buckled in, I felt like I was in a straitjacket. I couldn’t lean more than an inch or two in either direction, not that I wanted to. I sat as straight as possible, trying to touch the two men as little as possible.

“Would you be more comfortable in the back with your luggage?” Brady asked innocently, but I could hear amusement in his voice.

“I just might be.”

“It’s not safe,” Cole said unnecessarily. It wasn’t like I could get out of the truck without one of them moving anyway. “By the time we’d got there, you’d be covered in bruises.”

My heart sank—likely it would be my luggage that would be disfigured after the drive. “How far is it to the inn?” On the online map, the Elburn station and Donovan’s Mill weren’t that far apart. But the map had also shown the roads getting smaller and smaller.

“About forty minutes.”

Incensed, I turned to Brady. “You said it was a short trip.” It was disconcerting to have his face so close to mine.

“That *is* a short trip around here,” he said mildly.

I eyed the small restaurants and shops on either side of the main road we were traveling down and already felt homesick. “How long would it take to drive to Chicago from your place?”

“Just under two hours if there wasn’t much traffic,” Brady said.

“Which would never happen,” Cole added.

I got the feeling Cole and Brady were the type who might finish each other’s sentences. They acted like brothers, maybe

even twins, but I knew from my research that their fathers were brothers. They'd jointly inherited the old farmhouse their grandparents had owned and had opened it as an inn a few years ago.

I'd found out other things, too. According to their dates of graduation at the ancient Donovan's Mill High School, Brady was twenty-eight, three years older than me. And Cole was a year older than him. I'd also found out that they both played football and baseball for their small school. That part didn't surprise me—they were both in good shape now and must work out.

I hadn't found out much about their buddy Gideon—nor had I wanted to. That guy rubbed me the wrong way. But then my mind returned to the small room where I'd seen him. Okay, so, he didn't literally rub me the wrong way. That massage, though a really nasty trick, had been incredible. But even if you discounted that, something about him bothered me.

"When's your friend driving out?" Brady said conversationally.

"Tonight. And she's my assistant." I don't know why I said that. Penny was also a friend. But these two already had the advantage over me with that trick they'd played, and I didn't want to give up any ground. "You have a room for her, right?"

"Of course," Cole said. "We told you that."

"Sorry," I said, my voice deliberately casual. "This is my first time being kidnapped, so I'm a bit unfamiliar with the protocol."

Brady gave a snort that turned into a laugh. "Kidnapped. A little dramatic, don't you think?"

"It's not like you gave me a choice," I pointed out.

"Yeah, we did," Cole said sternly. "We challenged you, but you accepted it. You could've said no."

I bit my bottom lip, holding back a sigh. There'd been no way I could've said no, not with all those people watching. But I wasn't about to admit to them how thoroughly they'd entrapped me.

“Anyway, yes, she has a room. As do you,” Brady said. “And there’s a bathroom down the hall. You, her, and I will have to work out a shower schedule—”

“What? We have to share a bathroom? With you?” I hadn’t shared a bathroom since my freshman year, and never with a man.

Cole slowed the truck just as the last of the town disappeared behind us. “Want us to take you back to the train station? All you have to do is record a full apology, recommend your followers book a stay at our inn, and you’re in the clear.”

“What?” I sputtered in disbelief, unsure which insane thing to focus on first. “You think my followers are going to want to stay at your little inn?”

Cole shrugged, and I could feel his shoulder press against mine. “Stranger things have happened.”

“Is that why you did all this?” I waited a beat, but neither man answered. “In case you haven’t noticed, my viewers are from all over.”

“But eleven percent live in Illinois,” Brady said. “That’s still a pretty big number.” He raised his eyes when I stared up at him. “We do know how to use the internet, you know.”

There was a sick feeling in my stomach. They’d made me leave the comforts of home because they thought my fans, tech-savvy young women, were going to drive all the way out to the middle of nowhere to stay in their dinky little inn? They were crazy if they thought that.

As my mind raced, I focused on the landscape. There was farmland on either side, although up ahead there was a wooded area. And road signs indicated that there was a small town a few miles to the north.

“He was kidding about the bathroom,” Cole said after a period of silence.

I huffed out the breath I’d been holding at that news.

“Yeah, we don’t have to share,” Brady said. “The inn doesn’t actually have modern plumbing, but the outhouse works just fine.”

“What?” I shrieked, only to catch Brady’s grin out of the corner of my eye. But I wasn’t amused—and neither, apparently, was Cole.

“Your room and your assistant’s room both have a private bath,” he said.

It took me a moment to compose myself. “That’s good to know.” Since Cole had been civil enough to cut through Brady’s bull, I decided to speak civilly in return. “How many guest rooms are there?”

“Six.”

“Seriously?”

“What?” Brady asked.

“That just... seems small. Is it a bed and breakfast?” They sometimes had only a few rooms.

“Certainly not,” Cole said, sounding offended.

“Do you serve breakfast?”

“Well... yes,” he admitted.

“Then why isn’t it a bed and breakfast?”

It was Brady who answered, amusement ever present in his voice. “Because real men don’t own B&Bs.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s just that six rooms doesn’t seem like much of an inn.”

“Exactly how much business do you think we get in the scenic town of Donovan’s Mill?” Brady asked.

“Probably not much,” I said truthfully.

Beside me, Cole stirred. His face was in the shadows because the road was twisting through a deep green forest. “We’ll have more rooms soon. We’re expanding.”

There’d been no mention of that on the inn’s website. Or at least I hadn’t spotted it. Truth be told, their website looked like

something from fifteen years ago and was hard to navigate.

“How many guests are staying there this week?” I hoped there wouldn’t be a nice, innocent family there who might get caught in the crossfire.

“Just two,” Brady said. “You and Penny. We closed up shop for the week.”

“And Gideon. He’ll be in and out,” Cole added.

Crap.

“Ah, Mr. Massage Mate 3000.” I didn’t bother to keep the sarcasm from my voice. “Does he live there, too?” A lot of the videos he’d made had been set at the inn.

“He’s got his own place.” Brady didn’t elaborate further.

That was just great. As much as I wanted to smack Brady and Cole for putting me in this position, Gideon was the one I blamed the most. He was the asshole who’d made me feel so damn amazing, only to yank the rug out from underneath me. Plus, he’d been so damn smug.

In vain, I pressed my legs together and tried to make myself as small as possible, so I didn’t have to touch either of them. It was strange, because on the train, I’d been shoulder to shoulder with another passenger, but here in the truck, it felt different. Maybe because my seatmate on the train had been an elderly woman, and these were two virile men.

“I need more space.”

Brady chose to ignore my meaning. “You’ll have it at the inn. It’s in the middle of forty acres of woods.”

“I mean now. You guys are squishing me.”

For some reason, I was hyperaware of every time my arms brushed against theirs. Or my thighs against their hard legs. It made me think about how long it had been since I’d been purposefully touched, not just involuntarily pressed up against someone like this.

“If you don’t want to be in a position like this again, there’s a simple solution,” Cole said, his eyes on the road.

“Don’t go attacking strangers online.”

I jerked away from him and managed to pull my knees up to my chest, my feet resting on the edge of the seat. Hugging my knees to my chest, I bit back a retort.

As far as I was concerned, what they’d done to me was far worse than what I’d done to them. It was the internet. People got snarky. If they didn’t realize that, they were in the wrong business.

And I was damn sure that they’d realize it by the end of the week.

LILA

“Now that you’ve seen the town of Donovan’s Mill, are you ready to see Donovan’s Inn?” Brady said, as Cole made a right turn onto a narrow road with no street sign.

“There was a town?” I said, resisting the urge to rub my stiff muscles. “I must’ve blinked and missed it.”

“Funny,” Cole said. Unlike me, he had room for his feet. Then again, that was probably a good thing since he was driving. Though I was in no hurry for my week’s stay in the sticks, I sure as hell wouldn’t mind getting out of this car.

“You just insulted us and 1,682 other people,” Brady informed me.

“Really? The population’s under two thousand?” Though Donovan’s Mill mostly seemed to only consist of a town square, a courthouse, two streets of shops and a few assorted churches and schools, that still seemed like an incredibly small number of people.

“In the town itself. But there are farms all around us just outside the town lines.”

That would probably add another twenty or so people to the population. A thought occurred to me. “If the town is Donovan’s Mill, why isn’t the inn Donovan’s Mill Inn?”

“Because the inn doesn’t belong to the town. It belongs to the Donovan family.” The pride in Cole’s voice made him sound warmer.

“Ah. So you two are like founding fathers?”

“Our great-great-grandparents were,” Brady said. It was hard to believe that they both had the surname Donovan. Where were the grandkids of women who’d gotten married and taken on their husbands’ names?

The twisting road through the trees curved sharply to the left and my arm smashed up against Brady’s firm bicep before I righted myself. Then it curved the other way, and I was pressed against Cole. “Are we almost there?” I said through gritted teeth.

But no answer was required because there was a clearing up ahead, and I got my first glimpse of the inn.

It looked like a typical farmhouse—at least the kind I’d seen in movies—only it was longer somehow. The wood was weathered into a deep gray. It looked as if some of the doors and shutters had been painted at one point. Probably that point was in a different century.

Cole parked next to an old Mazda a little way away from a large barn. No other residences were in sight, and the woods closed in on all sides, the tall trees towering over the old house. Though I had to admit that the canopy of trees was rather pretty, the whole scene struck me as both isolated and sad.

But at least I could get out of this truck.

Perhaps Brady felt the same way, because he opened his door and jumped out the second Cole shut the engine off. I scrambled after him, eager for fresh air and the chance to stretch my limbs, but I underestimated how long those limbs had been cramped. As I rushed forward, my legs didn’t unfold properly, and I would’ve faceplanted in the dirt if Brady hadn’t caught my arm, righting me.

“Easy there.” He waited until I was steady and then he grasped me by the waist and lifted me out. While I didn’t enjoy being treated like the suitcases Cole was lifting out of the back of the truck, I had to admit that Brady’s touch didn’t exactly feel bad, at least not now that we weren’t cramped together in the truck.

He let me go. I took a few stiff steps towards the structures, and then I stopped. Not because my legs ached, but because of the deep breath I'd just taken.

The air smelled incredible. Like a forest-scented air freshener, only better. A million times better. I inhaled deeply, my eyes briefly closing. I wasn't sure I'd ever encountered air this fresh.

“Are you okay?” Brady asked. “You're not hyperventilating, are you?”

The concern on his face was genuine, and I couldn't help giving him a small smile. “It smells really good out here.”

His smile lit up his face. “Yeah, it does. Come on in, we'll show you around.”

“Not just yet.” I fished a compact out of my bag and brushed some powder on my face. Squinting, I checked my makeup, and then I pulled out my phone and turned on my phone.

“I made it,” I spoke into the camera. “I feel like I'm a million miles from Chicago, but damn, the air's amazingly fresh out here.” Comments started scrolling across my phone as I spoke. Normally, I did a half-dozen live streams like this a day, so my followers were used to me popping up in their feeds.

“I'm with Brady and Cole.” I switched to the back camera and to Brady, who waved, and then toward Cole, but he was already carrying my bags toward the inn. I let my gaze travel downward and decided that my audience wasn't going to be disappointed by his back view. “That's right, my week in the sticks has started, as promised. And these two gentlemen are innkeepers, not the engineers of the greatest massage tech known to womankind—unfortunately.”

I turned the camera back on Brady, who seemed quite comfortable with it pointed his way. “See that handsome face?” I asked my viewers. “If I'm never heard from again, that's the face you describe to the police sketch artist.”

Brady chuckled. “Might just be easier to take a screenshot right now. Then again, maybe check in with Lila first,” he said. “It may be that she likes it here so much, she’ll decide to stay.”

Judging by the increase in comments on the screen, my viewers liked his comments. “All right, I’m going to make sure these guys don’t drop my stuff in the dirt. Stick around for your first exciting glimpse of the inside of the inn. That is, assuming it has electricity. If not, stick around anyway, and I’ll describe it for you in the dark.” I stopped the live stream.

“Smooth,” Brady said as we walked to front porch. “Does that bother you?”

“What?”

“Bringing your audience with you wherever you go.”

“Not at all. It’s what pays the bills. The more content, the more followers.”

“We don’t do live feeds,” Brady said. “Just videos we record.” He held open an ancient screen door with holes in it.

“It’s different, recording live,” I said, unsure why I was sharing with him. But I was so used to sharing my thoughts with my followers that I couldn’t seem to help it. “It feels more like talking to a friend. But sometimes I like to record things, too, to get them just right.”

The dimness inside the inn took a few moments to get used to. And the air in here, while not exactly bad, was nothing like outside. It smelled like a vacant house, even though it clearly wasn’t. And it smelled like dust, too. I wasn’t exactly the world’s best housekeeper, but I was meticulous about dust. There was no way I was going to let it ruin all the high-tech things in my place.

The room we were in was fairly big, and I recognized it from the photos as the main lounge area for the inn. There were several round tables, as well as sofas and armchairs. It looked like far too much space for the amount of people the inn could house.

Brady reached past me to flip on a light. “See? We do have electricity.”

“Thank god for small favors.”

He walked over to the fireplace. It was a fairly decent size. I was used to gas fireplaces in the city, so it was strange to see the open hearth. The mantel housed a flock of carved wooden boards, and above that was a photo of a pleasant-looking couple. The man had a gray goatee and glasses, and his arm was around the woman, who had a smile that could only be described as grandmotherly.

“Your grandparents?” I asked when Brady followed my gaze.

“Yep. They were married for fifty-nine years.”

“That’s a shame they didn’t make sixty.”

“Yeah.” His face fell. “They were just a couple of months short of it. My grandmother went first, and then my grandfather a few weeks later. I kind of figured it would be like that—they were crazy about each other.”

“They look very much in love.” My beef with their grandsons didn’t change the truth of that statement.

“They were. Anyone who met them knew that right away,” Brady said. He moved deeper into the room as he talked. “Anyway, as you might have guessed, this is kind of the common area. We serve breakfast here, and people generally gather here in the evening... at least when it’s too cold to go outside.”

“What do you serve for breakfast? Cereal? Toast? Yogurt?” My eyes darted around, trying to spot which table might hold that kind of thing, but there weren’t any obvious candidates.

Brady looked at me like I was nuts. “Of course not. I make eggs, sausage, bacon, and either pancakes or waffles.”

“Every day?” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d made a breakfast that elaborate. Usually, I grabbed a protein bar and coffee.

“Yeah. Well, when we have guests.” He blinked and then looked away, his expression darkening. I gathered he hadn’t wanted to admit they didn’t always have guests, but it seemed kind of obvious to me. I doubted most people in the area known as Chicagoland even knew his town existed, let alone this inn. But Brady seemed incapable of staying down for long, and he moved in between two huge and ancient-looking wardrobes. He opened one and gestured inside. Colorful, if somewhat faded, boxes were piled up inside. “Board games for the guests to use.”

I tried to wrinkle my nose and roll my eyes at the same time, and the end result was probably pretty odd looking. But what was with this guy? He was in his twenties. He was supposed to be staying up all night playing *Call of Duty* or *Resident Evil*. Or soccer with his friends. Or, you know, going out on a date.

“Board games? Seriously?” I wished I had the camera on so that my followers could see how lame this place was.

Brady looked confused. “What about them?”

I moved toward him. “You do know there’s a reason why *board* sounds the same as bored, right? I mean, what kind of grown adult would—wait, is that *Mousetrap*?”

He spotted the box I was pointing at. “Yeah. It was always one of my favorites. Do you like it?”

“I did when I was a kid.” My dad had always been so patient helping me set it up. As I looked more closely, I spotted several games I’d liked decades ago. Plus *Sorry*, which was one of Dad’s favorites. Still, board games weren’t much of an incentive for a stay in the middle of nowhere.

“Guess what’s in this one,” Brady said, pointing to the other wardrobe with a magician’s flourish.

“A lion? A witch?”

He chuckled, getting my joke right away. Then he theatrically opened one of the doors. “Books!” Then he opened the other door. “And everyone’s favorite—puzzles!”

My expression must've been puzzled, but I just shrugged my shoulders. "I'll be sure to mention that in my review of the inn." Of course, I'd use it as a point against the place, but he didn't have to know that.

The sound of a throat clearing announced that Cole was back. Did he always look so strict? Clearly, I hadn't been forgiven for my attack on *Down to Earth*, at least not by him. Brady seemed the more forgiving type, but looks could be deceiving. After all, he'd been okay with the Massage Mate 3000 fiasco. He'd been the first one I'd met, actually. And the first one who'd lied to me.

"Did you show her her room yet?" Cole asked his cousin, ignoring me.

"We were just headed that way," Brady said. He strode toward a hallway leading off the main room. Cole went too, and I trailed after them.

The hallway was dimly lit, and there were paintings of forest scenes on both walls. Brady paused briefly by the third door on the left. "This is Penny's room."

Cole moved on ahead and opened a door at the end of the hall. "And this one's yours."

I squeezed past Cole's big form into the room. As I'd expected, it was on the dark and dreary side. A queen-sized bed with an unfortunate dip in the middle dominated the room. The dressers were big and bulky and made out of some kind of dark wood. Nothing looked new, but to my relief, nothing looked dirty, either. But the vibe was rather on the depressive side. My preferred style was gleaming stainless steel in my kitchen and light-colored furniture that didn't take a pair of bodybuilders to lift it. The only things even remotely light-colored in here were my suitcases.

A doorway led off to the world's smallest bathroom, with a shower stall big enough for an extremely petite person, a toilet, and a sink. At least I didn't have to share it with anyone.

I padded across the well-worn carpet until I reached the heavy curtains over the window. With effort, I pulled them

back.

My room sported a view of the weathered barn, but I paid no attention to that. I could also see the deep green woods around them, and it was a refreshing sight. “Why don’t you keep the curtains open?” Surely the few people who came out here did so for the trees. It wasn’t not like there were a bunch of other reasons.

“Are you an innkeeper now, Ms. James?” Cole said archly.

“No, I’m not, but that view has to be your inn’s best selling point.”

“You won’t be saying that after you’ve tried my cooking,” Brady said with an easy grin.

There was no smile on Cole’s face as I addressed him. “Since we’re stuck together for a week, you really should consider calling me Lila.”

“Fine. Ready to continue the tour?”

“I can’t wait.”

He rolled his eyes, looking unconvinced. Honestly, I couldn’t really say that I blamed him, but I followed him down the hall. He’d changed out of the white dress shirt he had on before and was wearing an olive-green sweater that looked homemade. Had the late grandmother made it? Probably.

I thought about the info I’d seen at the Donovan’s Mill High School website. Cole definitely looked like he’d played football. His shoulders were broad and his biceps well defined, even under the bulky sweater. He strode along the hallway with confidence. I didn’t know much about football, but I could imagine a member of the opposing team trying to tackle him—and failing miserably.

From behind me, Brady spoke up. “That’s the kitchen on the left.”

I glanced in as we passed by. It was large and the appliances looked like they’d seen a few decades. But they weren’t ancient, and they were clean. Seeing it made me wonder what we’d be eating tonight. I hoped the guys had

something planned, because until Penny arrived, I didn't have any way to get into town. Somehow, I didn't think that DoorDash delivered out here.

Cole led us past a half-opened door that seemed to house some kind of study. Ahead of us was a glass door that led to a deck. He slid the door open and ushered me out ahead of him.

Blinking from the bright light, I examined the backyard. There was a good-sized clearing, and I could imagine Brady and Cole playing there as kids. There was an old tire hanging from an enormous tree, plus some boards about ten feet up that might have once been a treehouse. On the opposite side of the yard was what looked to be a very old log cabin.

Brady came to stand next to me as I leaned against the railing. "That's the old smokehouse," he said.

"Smokehouse?" My first thought was that it was a place for people to smoke.

"It's where meat was cured. But long before I was born, it was converted into a cottage." He scooted closer and pointed with one long finger. "See the part that's darker? That was the original smokehouse. Then the part to the right is the add-on."

The addition looked newer than the smokehouse, but still pretty old. But there were perfectly modern-looking windows on either side of the door. They looked brand new.

"They are," Brady said when I mentioned it to him. "I told you, we're expanding."

"It's going to be the honeymoon suite when it's done," Cole said from behind me.

Okay, now I knew these guys were delusional. They seriously thought that people were going to spend their honeymoon in a shack that was used to house dead animals? It was astonishing that Brady and Cole had kept this place in business as long as they had.

"Come see my pride and joy," Brady said, ushering me over to a grill. A grill—that was his pride and joy. This guy needed a girlfriend. From the way he looked, with his boyish

charm, it kind of surprised me that he didn't have one. Then again, he did live in a town of only 1600 people.

“Why are there two grills?” I asked. The second one was oddly shaped, too.

“That's Cole's pride and joy,” Brady explained, patting the dome-like shape on top. “It's a pizza oven.”

“I thought you did the cooking?”

“I do. And most of the grilling. But Cole makes the best pizza in the state.”

“You do realize I live in Chicago, right?” I barely resisted snorting as I followed him down the stairs into the yard. There was a fire pit down there, and under the deck was an assortment of mismatched lawn chairs piled against the side of the building.

Cole led us through another sliding glass door into a finished basement. It was about the same size as the lounge upstairs, but there was a pool table, darts, and a bar at one end of the room. At the opposite end, there was an unlit hallway. “What's down there?”

“Bathroom, laundry room, and the unfinished part of the basement. It's mostly for storage,” Brady answered promptly. “We call this the rec room.”

“Mind if I take a video of it?”

When Brady nodded, I patted my hair into place, put on a smile, and then started the live stream. “You all, I'm learning so much about the inn where I'll be spending the next week. They've thought of everything. Upstairs are board games.” I raised my eyebrows and made a face to show my followers exactly what I thought of this.

I circled the room as I talked. “And this place holds a lot of promise. There are darts—those might come in handy.” I trailed a finger along the hard little dart. “And a pool table. Color me excited.”

Still talking, I moved to the bar. “All right, this has some potential.” I panned the camera along the shelf behind the bar.

It was stocked with a bunch of dusty bottles, and something else.

I zoomed the camera in. “Are those high school sports trophies? Guess that makes this a sports bar. A sports bar without a TV, apparently.”

Brady chuckled and opened a cabinet on the wall, revealing a flatscreen TV that would’ve been considered large a decade or so ago.

“I stand corrected,” I said, giving him a nod. “And here I thought the microwave I saw upstairs was the most advanced tech you owned. But who needs tech when you can bring nature inside. Look at these decorations!”

On the wall above me were an assortment of wreaths made of leaves, dried flowers in old vases, and even a set of large antlers. “I may have to hire their decorator for my place. Think I should?” Maybe I was being a bit snarky, but as a wave of responses from my followers filled the screen, it reminded me of how much these guys had humiliated me a week ago in their fake Pleasure Institute.

Continuing around the room, I showed my viewers the door to the other half of the basement. “They won’t let me back there,” I said, for theatrical effect, “but I’m pretty sure that’s where they stash the bodies of people who criticize their inn.”

The silence behind me let me know that they weren’t going to dignify that with a response. I winked at my viewers. “But don’t worry, if they try anything, they might find out where I stash the bodies of people who promise me amazing massage tech and don’t deliver.”

Judging by the increase in comments, my viewers liked that. I ended my tour of the basement by pointing out more sets of antlers and wreaths made of bundles of old, dried-out sticks. “I’m pretty sure this decorating style is called Early American Twig.”

As I stopped the feed, I was pretty pleased with my last dig at the guys who were holding me hostage here all week. At

least until I heard a rich, deep baritone behind me. “Just what this inn needs—a narrator.”

My stomach sank as I spotted the tall, dark, and exasperating figure standing at the base of the stairs.

Gideon was here.

COLE

Lila stood in the middle of her room, seemingly perfectly at ease while Brady pawed through the contents of her suitcase. She calmly tugged the spaghetti straps of a small crop top onto a hanger as Brady spotted an electric shaver.

“Ah ha,” he said, a bit unnecessarily. “This has got to go.”

Lila shrugged. “Fine, but when my legs look like a yeti’s, you might regret that decision.”

“We’ll get you a disposable razor,” I told her.

She draped the top over the back of a chair. “And how is that better? Seriously, I get that you guys are all about the low-tech lifestyle, but my shaver is better for the environment. Better than throwing all that plastic in a landfill, at any rate.”

“You’ll get it back at the end of the week,” Brady said. “We’re just trying to prove to you that you don’t have to rely on all of these devices.” He fought back a smile. “And if you look like a yeti at the end of the week, then I guess the joke’s on us.”

“Either way the joke’s on you,” Lila muttered as she folded a pair of yoga pants.

Brady started rooting through her suitcase again, and this time he emerged with a small pair of silk panties dangling from his little finger.

Good god, did she really wear panties that small?

Lila smacked Brady's hand, and the panties fell back into her suitcase. "Keep your hands off my underwear," she scolded. She was disciplined enough not to look over at the phone Gideon was holding to make sure he'd gotten that, but I wasn't. My friend's face was frozen in concentration as he panned the camera around the room.

He probably thought that Lila had been paying him a compliment by choosing him to record this scene, but I knew better. I'd seen her reaction when he'd startled her downstairs. I could practically see her hackles rise. It was obvious that she blamed Gideon the most for our stunt with the fake massage tech. Of course, she didn't seem inclined to let Brady or me off the hook either, but she seemed the most pissed off at him.

The whole thing actually had been his idea, but she had no way of knowing that. Even with our other jobs, it was a struggle for Brady and me to keep this place afloat. The taxes on the house and the land went up every single year. Gideon had offered many times to pay for upgrades, but I wouldn't take him up on his offer. That wasn't what friends were for.

When we'd first gotten word that a popular online influencer had disparaged us out of the blue, I was mad. So was Brady. But not Gideon. He hatched a plan.

"And this."

I tuned back into the conversation to see Brady holding a thick toothbrush.

"You can't be serious," Lila said.

"It's electric."

"I need to be able to brush my teeth!" She turned to me with puppy-dog eyes under those thick lashes.

"I'm sure you can keep your teeth clean without a toothbrush capable of running NASA," I said.

Lila pouted, but Brady pulled a simple white toothbrush sealed in plastic out of his back pocket and handed it to her. "We're a full-service inn, you know."

She took it begrudgingly and examined it. “You spelled the name of the inn wrong.”

“What?” Brady snatched it back and examined it while Lila smirked. My cousin had a bit of a naïve streak, but luckily, it only came out when he was around beautiful women.

And Lila sure was beautiful. There was no question of that. The first time I laid eyes on her in person, back in that fake lab, I’d wanted to plunge my fingers in her mane of honey brown hair. I’d actually been jealous that Gideon got to give her a scalp massage—not that he’d been able to feel the texture of her locks through the gloves he wore.

“What other tech have you tried to sneak in?” Brady asked Lila, but his gaze was on me, and I realized I wasn’t doing my part.

Plunging my hand into her suitcase, I ignored the smooth, silky undergarments and zeroed in on something I’d caught a glimpse of before. An eReader.

“Oh, come on,” Lila complained. “You guys are all about the old-fashioned lifestyle. Shouldn’t you want me to read?”

Brady spoke before I could. “Back in the olden days, there were these low-tech devices that people could use, and we just happen to have a bunch of them out in the lounge. They’re called books.”

“Don’t use terms she doesn’t understand,” Gideon said from behind the camera.

Lila’s pink lips curved into a snarl as she turned to him before she caught herself. “Books... I think I’ve heard of them.”

“They’re made out of paper,” Gideon said, his voice full of sarcasm designed to make our guest see red. “Paper comes from trees. And trees are those large green things surrounding the inn.”

“I wondered what those were,” Lila said, unfazed. “Guess not everything’s been replaced by tech... yet.”

I shuddered at the thought. I loved the woods around the house. Brady and I had spent our summers out there from dawn until dusk. But I didn't think Lila was truly anti-nature. She just seemed anti-Gideon.

As I set her eReader down on the growing pile of things we were confiscating, she sulked at me. "So if you guys are supposed to replace my tech, is one of you going to come read me a bedtime story at night?"

A not-safe-for-work image filled my mind. It involved me sitting next to a very scantily clad Ms. James and reading her an adult story that would make her toes curl. I had to admit, it was an intriguing thought—mainly because Lila was an intriguing woman.

She was beautiful, yes, with curves in all the right places. But it was more than that. Once she'd come onto our radar, I'd watched a lot of her videos to find out who she was and why she went after us. I still hadn't figured out the latter, but that didn't change the fact that she was a vivacious young woman.

When she talked about something that excited her, her green eyes lit up and her smile made me smile, too. She could be snarky, yes, but as far as I could tell, she hadn't been outright mean to anyone but us. She was even endlessly patient with her assistant. Though Penny didn't usually appear on camera, Lila often sought out her opinion, and she seemed very good with the shy young woman.

The main word that came to mind when I thought of Lila was *sassy*. The word itself sounded very dated, but it was what my grandfather always used to describe a spirited woman—my grandmother included.

Somehow, it suited Lila.

When we were hatching our plan, I'd sometimes speak of Lila in ways that gave the other two pause. Brady once told me that I sounded like half of me wanted to punish her and the other half of me wanted to fuck her. Then Gideon had made a very off-color remark about combining the two, but it was Brady's observation that had stuck with me.

Lila had insulted me, my cousin, my friend, and my home... which meant, in essence, that she had attacked my family. That pissed me off, but I couldn't help recognizing that it seemed out of character for her.

And I couldn't shake the conviction that she was one intriguing, vibrant, and sassy young woman.

"What's this?" Brady was holding an oblong black bag. Lila grabbed for it, but he spun around, dodging her reach. He'd never been the biggest guy on the football field in high school, but he was fast. Once he got the ball, he'd dodge and weave until he'd cleared the end zone.

"Give me that," Lila said, lunging for it again, but Brady easily avoided her.

"I will if it's not electronic," Brady said. He untied the draw strings of the black fabric and shook the bag. Something hot pink fell into his other hand. "What do we have here?"

"It's none of your business," Lila said.

"It definitely looks electronic to me," I said. The item was made of translucent pink plastic, and while the device was foreign to me, the shape wasn't.

"And battery operated," Gideon observed.

Brady fiddled with a dial, and suddenly it was buzzing and quaking. And not just a little, either. That thing would've vibrated its way off of Brady's open palm if he hadn't shut it off. "That's definitely on the naughty list." He grinned at Lila. "So to speak."

He tossed it to me, and it took me so much by surprise I nearly fumbled it. I examined it, struck by how realistic the shape was. Except for being hot-pink and translucent. "Do women really like this kind of thing?"

"Hell, yeah," Lila said. "Shall I reiterate what I said on the day of the ambush? Real men don't know what they're doing half the time—or more. But fortunately, we live in the modern world, so women have technology that will give them what men can't."

“If I recall, we proved you wrong on the day of the ambush, as you call it,” Gideon said. He was rewarded with a flying bullet vibe. Somehow, he dodged it and kept the camera relatively steady. “How much of that crap did you bring?”

“Lots,” Brady answered for her, holding up another toy. This one was phallic as well, but there was a little extra part at the base that stuck out and then curved upward. “What’s this thing for?”

“You’d be amazed how many men ask that,” Lila said dryly. “But okay, fine, take my stuff. Just stop handling it.”

Her tone was perfect. As if she was resigned to losing this battle, but still had hope of winning the war. Her followers probably loved that kind of thing.

But then she was back in high form, hamming it up for the camera. “I knew I’d be bored to tears this week, but if you want me to live like a nun as well, bring it on. I’ll survive—somehow.”

“Did we miss anything?” Brady asked, rifling through the clothes and makeup in another one of her suitcases.

“Not that I can think of, but by all means, keep manhandling my lingerie. I’m sure you gents don’t get many cheap thrills this far out in the middle of nowhere.”

“You’d be surprised,” Gideon said. “Are we done here?”

Lila rolled her eyes as she faced the camera and gave a quick sign-off directly to her audience. Then she gave Gideon a nod, and he stopped recording and tossed her phone on the bed.

“*Are we done here?*” Lila imitated Gideon in a mocking voice. “I thought you were supposed to be a professional.” Her tone indicated that she thought no such thing.

“We pre-record our videos,” I said, trying to keep things calm. “And edit all the extraneous stuff out.”

“So I’ve seen. I think your video on watching paint dry was nominated for an Emmy, wasn’t it?”

“It’s one of our most popular ones,” Brady said, unaffected by her sarcasm. He moved behind the bed where we’d stashed a basket out of sight of the camera. He put Lila’s eReader, electric toothbrush, and shaver in it and then gathered up the toys.

“Wait, you’re really taking all my stuff?” Lila asked, sounding surprised.

He paused, looking absurdly casual while holding a fake pink penis. “Didn’t we just go through this?”

“I thought that was just for the camera.”

“Livestreaming is your reason for being, Princess, not ours.” Gideon was leaning against the dresser, his arms crossed.

“I thought that was the whole purpose of your insane plan—to somehow drum up some interest for this dump.”

“This was my grandparents’ house,” I said quietly but firmly.

My tone gave Lila pause, but then she soldiered on. “As a house, it’s fine. Full of character. And memories. And... sticks. But you have to admit that as a tourist destination, it leaves a lot to be desired. You said you closed up shop for this week, but were there even any reservations to cancel?”

“Yes,” Brady said. Luckily, he didn’t mention that it had just been a two-night stay by a couple on a road trip up to the Great Lakes.

“Okay, fine, whatever. Look, I’ll be good on camera, but when it’s not on, there’s no reason for me to live like a cavewoman all week.”

“That was the deal,” Gideon said.

“I need my stuff.”

Gideon scoffed, but for just a second, I caught a glimpse of something in Lila’s eyes. Something hopeless. Something that made me think this wasn’t just about personal care items and sex toys. But no one else seemed to notice.

“You can last a week,” Gideon said, and Lila’s gaze hardened and the emotion I’d caught before was gone. “And if you can’t,” Gideon continued, “that’s a win for us as well. Everyone will book a room to see the place that finally conquered Lila James.”

“Not going to happen,” she said. The air between them seemed to solidify as they stared each other down. I exchanged a quick glance with Brady. We both knew we weren’t part of this.

They might’ve glared at each other forever, if a sound hadn’t intruded. It was faint at first, but then it grew louder. And more dissonant.

“What the hell is that?” Gideon said, finally breaking eye contact with our guest.

“A train?” Brady asked as the unholy noise grew louder. We weren’t that close to the tracks, and we did hear freight trains now and then—but never this loud.

“A train with emphysema, perhaps.” Gideon strode to the window, nearly knocking over one of the light stands Lila had set up before we started recording. “What the hell is that?”

Lila steadied the light and went to join him at the window. “That...” she began, a trifle dramatically. I supposed it was an occupational hazard in her line of work. “That would be my assistant’s car.”

LILA

Penny's room was the mirror image of mine, but the bed was a double, not a queen. The mattress still sagged in the middle, though.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here," she said as she put a sweater into a dresser drawer. Unlike mine, her luggage hadn't been searched by the wardens. "But just as I was about to leave, Jeff came over, and... I ended up leaving later than I meant to."

Normally, if I found out that a woman got delayed when her boyfriend came over, I'd assume they'd gotten frisky. But with Penny and Jeff, it was safer to assume they'd gotten into a fight. The fatigue on my assistant's face seemed to confirm that. "He's still not happy that you're spending the week out here?"

"Nope." She brushed a stray hair away from her face. Her long, dark hair was tied up in a ponytail that rested on one shoulder, but a few strands had escaped. I'd kill to have hair like hers. If mine got any longer than medium length, it turned to pure frizz. "Especially not with three men here."

"Would it make him feel any better to know that they're jerks?" I gave her a smile that she seemed too weary to return.

"Probably not." Right. Because Penny had a track record of falling for jerks—or at least she did in Jeff's case.

Suddenly, I felt guilty. The fact that we were sequestered out here was my fault, not hers. "You can go back, if you want. I mean, it would be nice to be able to record some

footage and get some good video out of this, but not if it's going to mess up your relationship." Though in my opinion, it was pretty messed up already. Why she put up with that loser was beyond me.

"No, I'll stay. Who knows, maybe some time apart will do us good."

The faint hope in her voice made my heart ache, but I nodded. "Maybe."

Penny seemed to rally as she closed her empty suitcase and set it by the wall. "Besides, if I leave you alone with these guys, there might be an actual body count by the end of the week."

"You saw my live stream before?"

She nodded. "I like that part about Early American Twig being the décor." She looked around the dull room. "Though the decorations up here aren't quite as bad."

"What decorations?" Except for the light fixtures, the room looked like it could've been straight out of *Little House on the Prairie*.

"The paintings in the hallway."

Oh. I hadn't paid them much attention, but Penny was the one who had majored in art, not me. Yet we'd both still ended up out here in the middle of nowhere. There was definitely some irony in that.

I remembered something Brady had told me. "Dinner's in forty-five minutes. Would you like a tour of the place? The area out back is pretty pleasant." I wondered if it was the right time of the year for fireflies. I hadn't seen them since I was young. My parents and I had lived in one of the many Chicago suburbs, and definitely not one of the more prosperous ones.

Penny looked torn. "I was actually thinking maybe I could grab a quick nap. It was quite the drive getting out here."

"I bet it was. So sure, take a nap."

"I'll set my alarm."

“Penny, it’s fine. If you’re tired, take as long as you need.” I started for the door but then turned back. “On the other hand, forty-five minutes is the perfect length for a nap.”

Penny grinned. “Meaning you don’t want to be alone with them for dinner.”

“Exactly.” I checked the time on my phone. “So I’ll be back to get you at six unless that saggy mattress swallows you up by then.”

I went back to my room, but there was absolutely nothing to do there unless I wanted to refold my clothes. Which, even though I was bored to tears, I really, really didn’t.

Those guys were assholes for taking my stuff. Who the hell was going to know as long as we didn’t show it on camera? And thank god my eReader was password protected. I wondered what it said about me that I didn’t mind them seeing my sex toys, but I would’ve been mortified for them to see the erotic stories I sometimes read while using them.

But I had nothing to be embarrassed about. They were the uncouth country bumpkins who needed to be worried.

Unable to sit still, I roamed down the hallway with no particular destination.

“Pssst.”

I passed the entryway to the kitchen and then doubled back. Brady was there, looking in his element even though he seemed to be doing a dozen things at once. There was a pot on each burner. Something in the oven. Meats and veggies on cutting boards.

“It smells good,” I said honestly. I couldn’t identify all the scents, but I was pretty sure that homemade bread was one of them. It made my mouth water.

“Want to help?” Brady asked.

“Me?” My friends generally ushered me out of the kitchen, not into it. “I don’t know how to do any of that stuff.”

“But I do, and I could use some help.”

I took a step back. “Seriously, I can’t cook.”

Brady seemed unfazed. “Luckily, I can. And I’ll tell you a little secret. If you help cook, you don’t have to do dishes.” He gestured at the gazillion pots, pans, and bowls on the counter. “It’s a pretty sweet deal.”

Involuntarily, I stepped toward him. “Honestly, I would if I could, but I don’t know what I’m doing.” But the thought of washing all these dishes was enough to carry me all the way to Brady’s side.

“Let me guess. You have some kind of high-tech combination of pressure cooker, air fryer, and sous vide that you put freeze-dried astronaut food in, and it produces a Michelin-starred gourmet meal.”

“Actually, I have the DoorDash app on my phone.” I smiled as he chuckled, but honestly, I was a little impressed that he knew what sous vide was. I wasn’t sure I did. “And okay, you’re right, helping out sounds better than doing dishes.”

“Smart girl.”

“But wait, what about Penny?” I didn’t want her to be stuck doing all these dishes with Cole and Gideon. That was adding insult to injury. Maybe we could drive into town and get something? If anything was open after six.

“She gets a pass tonight,” Brady said. “She looked wiped.”

I nodded, a little surprised that he’d noticed. “She had a hard time finding this place.” I didn’t want to get into the stuff about her and Jeff.

“Most people do.”

“And yet you wonder why you don’t have more reservations.”

“We’ll get there,” he said confidently.

“How?” The word came out rather baldly, but I wasn’t trying to be snarky. I just couldn’t see how he could be so

optimistic about this place.

He winked. “Well, for one thing, after you try my cooking, you’ll be singing my praises to your audience.”

“I told you, they’re not the type to come all the way out in the woods.”

“They are, actually. They just don’t know it yet.”

It was absurd, but Brady sounded confident, making me wonder if there was more to his plans for the inn than I knew about. But that was his concern, not mine. “What should I do?”

Brady plucked a wooden cutting board from a low cabinet. He cleared space for me at the counter. “Can I trust you with a knife?” He set what looked to me like a cleaver on top of the board.

“As long as Gideon’s not around.”

“Well, he’s not in the room. Hopefully, that’s good enough.” Brady took the lid off a pot on the stove and steam filled the air. Using a slotted spoon, he scooped limp, boiled vegetables onto the cutting board. I recognized broccoli, cabbage, and carrots, but not the rest of the mushy mess. “Chop those up in small pieces. Under an inch, if you can.”

Steam poured off the hot veggies, masking the smell of the baking bread. Even someone with my non-existent cooking skills could see that they were soft, soggy, and gross.

Nevertheless, chopping them seemed easier than cleaning the pot they’d been in. Wielding the huge butcher’s knife felt strange, but as long as I kept it away from my fingers, I didn’t see how I could go too far wrong. Plus, the vegetables were so soft that the blade slid easily through them.

Brady set a pie plate next to me. “Put them in here when they’re small enough.”

Wait, was he planning on cooking them again? Even I knew they were obviously overcooked. But I did as he said, and while I continued chopping, he added some dark chicken

meat that was shredded into little pieces. “What are we making?”

“It’s one of my specialties,” he said confidently. “It’s very popular—you’ll see.”

I sincerely doubted I would, but I kept that to myself.

Then Brady took a plump, golden brown loaf of bread out of the oven, and I forgot about everything else. By the time he retrieved the second loaf, I was practically salivating. “That smells incredible.”

He grinned. “I bet your Door Date doesn’t deliver fresh bread all that often.”

“DoorDash. And no, it doesn’t.”

I ignored my task as I watched him expertly extract the loaves from the pans and put them on a wire cooling rack. “Any chance we can just dive in right now?”

“Not unless you want a burned mouth.”

I licked my lips. “You know, some places only give hostages bread and water. I have a feeling I wouldn’t mind too much if you did that here.”

He shrugged, a small smile on his face as he stirred what looked like gravy. “Any chance you could consider yourself a guest rather than a hostage?”

In both cases, it meant I was stuck somewhere I didn’t want to be for a week. “What’s the difference?”

He looked pretty cute as he cocked his head to the side, thinking it over. His hair was short, which normally I didn’t like on a guy, but it worked for him. “Guests get decorative soap. And we trust them with darts and pool cues in the rec room.”

“Hmm... you might not want to do that, yet.”

“Duly noted. Had me that pan, will you?”

I carefully grasped the edges of the pie pan and held it out to him. He ladled gravy into it and then added some mushy

meat from a different pot. Yuck. If ever there was a night to fill up on bread, this was it.

Speaking of bread, Brady cut off the heels of one loaf and set it on my cutting board. “When that’s cool enough to touch, shred it and stir it into the mix.”

The concoction was nearly making me sick to my stomach, which was odd because everything had smelled so good when I first came in here. But I did what Brady said. “Now what?”

“Now nothing. I’ll put it in the oven so it doesn’t get cold before it’s time to serve it. Will that be enough for you and Penny?”

My stomach recoiled, but I told him it was. Since I doubted we’d eat a single bite, it would last for a very long time.

Brady laughed. “Too bad, because it’s not for you.”

I sagged against the counter in relief. “Thank god. Who’s it for?” I eyed the nasty-looking stuff again. I wouldn’t feel bad making Gideon eat it.

“It’s for the barn cats.”

Oh.

The pan of slop looked less gross now that I knew its purpose. “Why do you have barn cats? Are there mice out there?”

Brady took some kind of dark roast out of a pan and expertly transferred it to a waiting platter. “There have always been some cats around. My gran used to feed them. But now there are a lot more. I think cats from neighboring farms come over some nights and pretend to be strays.”

“Sounds like they like your cooking.”

“They do tend to eat it pretty quickly,” he said with a shrug. “Which is good. That way they can be on their way before the coyotes come out.”

“Coyotes?” I echoed in disbelief. We were two hours outside of Chicago, not in the Wild West.

“Yeah. They seem to have a set hunting route, and they usually get here pretty late. That’s why I feed the cats around eight. Want to come with me when I take the food out?”

The honest answer was yes, but I hesitated. “Are you sure the coyotes won’t be out then?”

“I’ve never seen them then. Trust me, when they’re around, you’ll know it. They make a racket.”

Great. My sponsors were going to be pissed if I ended up becoming dog chow.

Brady grinned at the expression on my face. “Such a city girl,” he chided. Then he changed tacks. “Think you can handle slicing the bread?”

“Maybe?”

He laughed again and got me started.

LILA

“Everything is delicious,” Penny said. She was seated across the table from me, next to Gideon. Brady was next to me, and Cole sat at the head of the table. “It’s a genuine feast.”

I nodded as I washed down a bite of tender roast beef with a sip of Merlot. “An amazing feast.” Days ago, I’d decided that I wouldn’t allow myself to find any good in this place, but that resolution was fading fast. The meal was just too damn wonderful.

“Brady’s the best,” Cole said as he picked up a piece of bread soaked in gravy. “He learned from the best.”

“Your grandmother?” I asked. Cole had his mouth full, but he nodded.

“My dad wasn’t the best cook,” Brady said. “So every summer when I was here, I learned as much as I could from my gran.”

“I’d say she had an excellent student,” Penny said. Normally, she was fairly quiet around new people, but it seemed that the nap had revived her. Either that, or it was doing her good to be away from Jeff.

Something about what Brady had said triggered a memory from the research I’d done about the inn and this family. “Did you both spend your summers here?”

Cole wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Just Brady. I was raised by my grandparents, so I’ve always lived here.”

“Really?” I wanted to ask about his parents, but it seemed pretty personal.

But he didn’t seem to mind. “My folks had me when they were both still in high school. They had no interest in raising a kid, so my grandparents took me in.”

“Sounds like they were kids themselves,” I said.

“Yep.” Cole cleared his throat. “Worked out for me, though. My grandparents were the best.”

Brady nodded. “Summers here were the best part of my childhood.”

“Where did you live during the school year?”

“Here in town,” he said. “My dad was an assistant manager at the local hardware store.”

“Was?”

“Haven’t seen him in years.”

Oh. Crap, there were a lot of landmines in this conversation.

Penny saved me by keeping the ball rolling as she turned to Gideon. “How do you fit into all this?”

His dark eyes flashed to me before he answered. “I’m just a stray they picked up along the way.”

Penny met my eyes, and I gave a small shrug. She likely knew as well as I did that Gideon’s response wasn’t a real answer. It was his way of shutting down that line of questioning.

Brady asked some questions about my family, so I gave him the basics, how it was just my mom and me now, but that she’d moved to Florida a few years back.

Penny’s story was different from all of ours. Unlike us, she was still very close to both her parents and her large family consisted of several cousins her age whom she thought of as sisters. I was a little envious as I listened to her. I had no siblings, and just one cousin whom I’d only met twice.

Before we got off the subject of families, Penny asked about the paintings in the hallway. “Did your grandmother do those?”

Cole looked mildly surprised. “How’d you know?”

“They seem like they were done by someone who really knows the woods well. Knows them and loves them.”

“That would be our gran. She took hikes nearly every day of her life,” Brady said. “Glad you like the paintings.”

“I really do,” Penny said. “In that one by my room, the angle of the sun striking the trees makes the whole painting come to life. I love how she used a palette knife to give more texture to the clouds in the sky. I swear, I can almost see them moving.”

The three men were staring at Penny in a way that made her cheeks pink. “She’s an artist,” I informed them.

“Not really,” she said quickly. “I just admire art.”

“Well, it sounds like you know your stuff,” Cole said, giving her a smile. Though he could be gruff, I got the impression he’d beam at anyone who complimented his grandmother.

Which reminded me of something. Something not good. “Did your grandmother make those wreathes of twigs in the basement?” I asked hesitantly.

Brady chuckled. “No, she didn’t, and I agree, they’re pretty ugly.”

“Not when compared to the antlers,” I ventured, and both he and his cousin laughed. Gideon remained stone-faced, however. I didn’t know what that guy’s story was, and I didn’t want to.

“We spend a lot of our time making repairs. Decorating hasn’t been at the top of the list,” Cole explained.

“Maybe you’d get more customers if it was,” I blurted out.

That got Gideon’s attention. “Pretty things on the walls don’t make reservations magically appear out of thin air,” he

said gruffly. “It might make guests think better of the inn once they’re here, but it won’t get them here.”

“It would if there were pictures of those pretty things on the website.”

Cole looked interested. “We do have some pictures up.”

“But they take forever to load. I doubt most people would even bother to wait for them. Plus, there’s nothing there as nice as your grandmother’s landscapes.”

Penny sat up straighter in her chair. “If you could get a photographer to take some good nature scenes, that might help attract customers. You’d need someone who has an eye for it, like your grandmother.”

“And like you?” Cole asked.

Penny looked taken aback, but she nodded slowly. “I could try. I’ve only got my phone with me, but it’s got a good lens on it.”

“May as well since we’re stuck here for a week,” I added.

Brady sighed. “Would it hurt you to think of it as *getting* to stay here for a week instead of *having* to?”

“It might.”

He shook his head. “At the risk of sounding childish, you started this.”

There was nothing to say to that because it was true.

Cole ignored the exchange between Brady and me. “But if what you’re saying is true, it wouldn’t do any good to put new pictures on the website.”

“Not that website, no,” I began. “It’s too slow and it’s horribly outdated. It needs to be responsive so that people can access it on their laptop or their phone. And if you’re upgrading, an online reservation system would help. People don’t like to have to call places anymore.”

“That would explain a lot,” Brady said.

Cole just looked thoughtful.

He seemed lost in thought for the rest of the meal, which wasn't a bad thing. The food was just so damn good that I was more interested in eating than talking. By the time I was done, I felt fuller than I had in years. I was tempted to change into stretchy yoga pants.

But since we didn't have to do dishes, Brady took us out back and lit the fire pit. The inn's lawn chairs were rather old and threadbare, but Brady made a trip inside and returned with wool throws straight from the dryer.

Between the warm blankets, the crackling fire, and the rest of the wine, it was a pleasant evening. The stars were more vivid than anything I'd ever seen before, and the cool nip in the air just made me want to snuggle under the blankets even more.

By the time I returned to my room, the food, the wine and the fresh air had all combined to make me good and tired. As I brushed my teeth with the incredibly cheap and flimsy brush the inn had provided, I hoped that meant I'd sleep straight through the night.

Hopefully.

LILA

I slept like a baby—at first. Even though the sagging mattress meant I kept rolling into the middle of the bed and getting stuck there, I slept deeply.

Until I didn't.

It was around three o'clock when I had to admit things weren't going well. Normally at this point in the night I'd read for a while on my eReader, but thanks to the electronics police, I couldn't do that. They'd also taken away other means of helping myself relax before bed.

Those bastards.

Of course, they couldn't have known what happened when I couldn't sleep well, but I did, and I really didn't want it to happen here.

I thought about getting up and going out into the lounge. I was probably desperate enough to start a damn puzzle. But who knew, maybe these country boys were the type to shoot first and ask questions later if they heard someone wandering around at night.

Then again, innkeepers who did that kind of thing wouldn't stay in business very long; but hey, it looked like that was the case anyway.

I caught up on the news on my phone, the only electronic device they'd allowed me to keep, and that was only because I had to be able to record. But despite my reputation as a tech

girl, I'd never liked using the phone at night. Even with blue-light blockers on, it messed up my sleep.

As if my sleep wasn't already messed up enough.

Except for the dip in the middle, the mattress wasn't uncomfortable. I lay on my side, trying to figure out my options.

I didn't notice I was drifting off until it was too late...

The sidewalk under my feet was old and crumbling, but I knew where to step to avoid the cracks and the parts that were raised up by tree roots. Even though I was fifteen, I was practically skipping. Getting out of school sometimes felt like being released from prison.

Without warning, my steps faltered as I approached our home. It wasn't much. It had two bedrooms, one bath, a kitchen, a living room, and an unfinished basement. But still, it was ours.

But something was wrong.

It took me a moment to realize that my dad's car was in the driveway. Not the 1973 Ford Gran Torino that was his prized possession. That was kept safely in the one-car garage. My dad had spent years restoring it, often surrounded by neighborhood boys who were equally fascinated with its care and maintenance.

No, this was the car my dad used for work, and it wasn't even four o'clock yet. He never came home from work this early.

Eager to see him, I opened the screen door. It was nice not to have to use my key in the lock. Most days, I was here for hours before my parents got home from work.

"Dad?"

It took me a moment for my eyes to adjust from the bright light outside. "Dad?"

I headed for the kitchen, thinking that he might be in there getting a snack. But then I caught sight of something out of the corner of my eye.

Skidding to a halt, I turned to him. He was in his favorite easy chair, the one he watched television from. “What are you doing home so early?”

The TV wasn’t on. He wasn’t reading the newspaper, either.

“Dad?”

He didn’t look up.

He didn’t say my name.

He didn’t move at all.

“Dad?”

I woke up with a gasp, clutching the sheets to my chest as my heart raced. My mouth was open in an O of horror, but no sound came out. I couldn’t see anything as I tried to suck air into my lungs. It felt like waking from a coma. Like I’d have to relearn how to do everything.

“It’s over,” I mouthed, a sentiment I was repeating in my mind. It was just a dream—a really bad one, but a dream nonetheless. It was over and it couldn’t hurt me anymore.

Until next time.

Gradually, my breathing calmed, but I still couldn’t see. It felt like morning, and I could hear birds singing. Eventually, I realized the issue must be those ugly, heavy curtains that covered the window. I looked at my phone, and it was nearly seven. The sun should definitely be up by now.

I untangled myself from the covers. As always, they’d gotten twisted up while I fought my way out of the nightmare.

Shakily, I padded over to the window and lifted the heavy curtain. I was still sweating from the bad dream. It would’ve been nice to feel the fresh, cool air rush over me, but the window appeared to be painted shut.

The view of the tall trees was calming, even if I couldn’t experience the fresh air. After a few minutes, I headed toward the shower. The small stall was the same shape as a port-a-

potty, but at least the water was refreshing. I started it mildly warm, and then raised the heat as my body returned to its normal temperature.

I tried not to think while the water ran over my skin. Or at least I tried not to think about the nightmare. Instead, I thought about Brady, Cole, and Gideon, and not in a good way. Not in the way I sometimes daydreamed about men when I was in the shower.

This was their fault. If they hadn't brought me out here, I'd have slept in my own bed and utilized the routines that kept the nightmares at bay. They had no right to do this to me.

But they had, and now it was my turn to get back at them. By the end of the week, they'd be sorry as hell they'd dragged me out here.

Really, really sorry.

"Did everyone get enough to eat?" Brady asked. The breakfast spread he'd made was all that he promised and then some, but unlike last night, I picked at my food. I didn't usually eat a meal that big in the evening, and I wondered if it had contributed to my sleep issues.

"Yes, thanks," Penny said in a small voice. She wasn't much of a morning person, but she'd managed to show up for breakfast looking alert and put together.

I, on the other hand, was usually eager to start my day by this point, but not today.

Cole and Brady were the only ones who ate heartily. Gideon was nowhere to be seen, thankfully. Hopefully he'd gone back to his home, wherever it was.

Cole pushed back his plate. "Before we do dishes, I thought we could have a strategy meeting."

It took me a moment to process his words as I stared at the piece of blueberry waffle I'd speared with my fork. "Strategy?"

"For the rest of the week."

“What’s there to go over? You’re making me stay here. I don’t want to be here. End of story.”

“Are you always this cheerful in the morning?” Brady asked with a sunny smile. I was beginning to see why so many of my friends hated morning people.

“This isn’t a prison sentence, Lila. If we work together, we can increase the visibility of the inn and get you some good content for your social media channels.” Cole said that in a perfectly reasonable voice, but I didn’t buy it. Not for one second.

“No way. You’re rewriting history. We didn’t come here to help each other out and sing kumbaya. You tricked me, challenged me, and forced me to be here.” With my fork, I smashed the end of a sausage link, wishing I could grind a certain pair of innkeepers into mush instead.

“Wow, we sound like real assholes when you put it that way.” As always, Brady’s voice was good-natured. “Seems surprising that we’d do that to a completely innocent young woman, doesn’t it, Cole?”

“Yeah. Seems like we’d save that kind of thing for someone who wronged us first.”

Penny put her hand on my arm as I prepared to frisbee my waffle at the nearest male target. “It might be a good idea to talk about how the week’s going to go. If we’re all on the same page, it might cut down on the hostility.”

Easy for her to say. Hostility was all I had going for me today. That and caffeine. Thank god for coffee.

“Thank you,” Cole said to Penny. “So, Lila, how often would you normally post something new online in a week’s time?”

“Every day,” I mumbled. My head ached, almost like I was hungover. It was always like that after I had a nightmare.

“She chats live with her audience a half-dozen times a day,” Penny elaborated. “But at least four or five times a week, we record, edit, and post longer, more elaborate videos.”

“Like when you unveil a new tech product?”

“It’s called unboxing,” I grumbled. “But that’s not all we do.” I gave Penny a pleading look and she took over, explaining how we sometimes went to businesses to try out products, or how I sometimes showed how I used technology to streamline my life.

“And three times a week, viewers send their questions to Lila, and she answers them live on air,” Penny concluded.

Cole frowned. “Like an advice columnist?”

“Sort of like that,” I confirmed.

“Exactly like that,” Penny insisted. “Don’t you still write a monthly column for one of the tech websites?”

“Yes. And I write reviews for them, too.”

Cole shook his head. “And that earns you a living and lets you hire an assistant?”

“Yes.” God, my head hurt. But I was proud of the career I’d made and couldn’t resist telling them about it. “It’s all about the number of followers you have. The bigger your audience, the easier it is to monetize your content. Well... not exactly *easy*. But having a big audience makes it possible.”

“How many views do you usually get on your videos?” Penny asked the guys. She was doing a good job keeping things going, which was strange, because normally, I was the assertive one. Perhaps she sensed how rotten I felt right now.

“You’ll have to ask Gideon,” Brady said. “He’s the numbers guy. I get the sense that our audience is increasing, but not to the point that we’re making much money.”

“Yet,” Cole added. “But our real goal is to drum up business for the inn, not to make a fortune.”

I nearly snorted. If only they knew how few influencers were making a fortune from this kind of thing.

“The basic plan is that the videos lead to the classes. The classes—hopefully—lead to people booking stays here,” Brady said.

“Classes?” Penny asked.

“Yeah,” Brady said. “What we’ll do is we’ll make a few videos on a certain topic, like how to grill or how to repair drywall. Then we’ll offer an in-person class on the subject. Like a workshop.”

That was news to me. “There wasn’t any mention of classes on your website.”

“The inn’s website?” Cole asked. “No, we put the announcement at the end of our videos.”

“And only there?” Their lack of strategy was making the pounding in my head worse.

“Yeah, why?”

“Because no one’s going to see it there. Few people watch videos all the way through.”

“They do when it’s a how-to video. Otherwise, they’d never know how to finish the project,” Brady argued.

I cupped my forehead in my hands. “What do the metrics say?”

“Metrics?” Cole echoed.

God, these guys were amateurs. “You should be able to see exactly how long people watch your videos and at which point they stop watching.”

“Really?” Cole sounded skeptical.

“Can you show us how to find that info?” Brady asked.

“Sure,” I said. Clearly, it was the headache talking, because the last thing I wanted to do was to help my jailers.

“But what about this week?” Penny asked.

Cole chuckled. “We could use you at city council meetings. You’d keep us from straying too far from the agenda.”

“You’re on the city council?” For some reason, it wasn’t a total surprise. Cole had a certain gravitas to him.

“Yeah. I work for Donovan’s Mill part-time. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to firm up our schedule for the week. We’ve both got to work.”

“What do you do?” Penny asked Brady.

He grinned. “I cook at a local diner.”

That tracked. “So, what, you don’t want to leave us alone, is that it?”

“Something like that,” Brady said with a grin. “You might miss technology so much that you run off with our radio.”

For a moment, I just stared at him, my mouth open. “You have a radio?”

He nodded.

Penny seemed just as shocked as I was. “For, like, weather emergencies?”

“No, to listen to. Music, news, talk shows, and the like.” Brady seemed puzzled by our astonishment.

Good god. These guys listened to the *radio*. Not Spotify. Not music from their phones. Not even YouTube... but an actual radio. My head ached worse as I contemplated that.

“Moving on,” Cole said in his deep voice that did actually sound like it belonged in a city council meeting, “we agreed to replace the technology we’re denying you this week. So we need to know what a typical week would look like for you. Besides recording videos and live streams, what else do you do each day?”

“Exercise,” I said instantly. “I usually run in the morning.”

“Excellent,” Brady said. “You can do that here.”

“You have a treadmill?”

“No, we have a forest.”

“You expect me to run in the *woods*?” Where, most likely, the uneven ground would trip me, or a snake would fall down on my head?

“We could hike instead,” he suggested.

“Hike?” It sounded like a foreign word.

“You love to walk around downtown,” Penny pointed out.

“Where there are sidewalks. And people to watch. And hot chocolate shops to stop at.”

Brady waved a dismissive hand my way. “You can get all that out here. Except for the sidewalks. And there are no people to watch, but hey, squirrels are fascinating little critters. As for the hot chocolate, I can make you some when we get back.”

“We’re really hiking?”

“Why not? I work the evening shift at the diner, so my morning’s free.”

I shook my head and then immediately regretted it. “I need aspirin.”

“I can get you some of that, too,” Brady said. He had a cheerful answer for everything, which at the moment was as annoying as hell.

But after our meeting wrapped up ten minutes later, I didn’t say no when he brought me two pills and a bottle of water. Today, I’d take all the help I could get.

LILA

“Isn’t this more fun than walking around a dirty city, breathing in the smog?” Brady asked from ten paces ahead of me.

“Nope,” I said truthfully. I was a city girl, through and through, and I loved walking around Chicago. “But I have to admit... it doesn’t suck.”

Brady laughed. “Were you expecting it to?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, glad you changed your mind.” He turned and waited for me. The long-sleeved shirt he wore was tight enough to reveal that he wasn’t breathing hard. That, along with his tight jeans, the small pack on his back, and his well-worn hiking boots made him look right at home out here on the trail. “And I can admit, it’s nice walking downtown, too. It’s an entirely different experience, but you can still stretch your legs, and there’s a lot to see.”

“Do you get to Chicago often?”

“Once or twice a year. I like to walk by the lakefront when I can.”

“I like that, too.”

“Do you live far from it?”

“Ten or eleven blocks.”

“Can you translate that into miles?”

“No,” I said, and we both laughed.

But mostly, we hiked in silence, with Brady leading the way. I didn't mind, because as he'd said, the view was great. Both the natural view, and the one of his backside in his faded blue jeans.

Of course, he didn't know I considered that last part a great addition to the scenery. At least I hoped he didn't.

We walked on, and I couldn't get enough of the fresh air. It was pine scented, but in a natural way, not like the air freshener you sprayed out of a bottle.

When we'd set out, I'd stared at the ground, not wanting to trip over a fallen tree branch, or even worse—something alive. But now I felt confident enough to look around. Even without Brady's fine form, there was a ton to look at. Evergreens and pines, and a whole bunch of other trees I couldn't name surrounded us.

And Brady had been right, the squirrels were fun to watch. Somehow, the ones out here were more interesting to observe than the ones in parks who cautiously approached, looking for a handout.

"Let's take a break," Brady said. He was standing by a fork in the trail up ahead. "This is where I stop when I run out here."

"Before going back?" I frowned. We hadn't actually been walking for very long.

He chuckled. "No, but from this point on, the trail's a big loop. So when I reach this point, I drink from my water bottle, stash it behind this log, and then pick it up when I come back this way."

"Are the squirrels known water bottle thieves?"

"They would be if they could open them." He sat down on a thick log. "Come on, take a break."

He opened his pack and pulled out two water bottles as I stood next to him. He cocked an eyebrow as he looked up at me. "I don't bite."

"Yeah, but the log might."

Brady gave me a shrewd look. “What’s with you today? Something’s seemed off ever since you got up this morning.”

“You don’t know me well enough to determine that,” I said obstinately, even though he was completely correct. Then I sighed. “I’m afraid if I sit down there, the rough bark will snag my yoga pants.”

His expression cleared as he understood. “Ah. Gotcha.”

I didn’t make a habit of wearing yoga pants when I was out and about, but I tended to dress for comfort after a bad night.

Brady handed me a water bottle, and I gratefully took a long drink. While I did that, he emptied out the small backpack, smoothed it flat, and set it on the log next to him. “Can you sit on that?” He cracked a smile as he looked up at me. “Or my lap’s available, too. Your choice.”

“I choose the pack,” I said hastily. “Thanks.”

While it wasn’t the most comfortable surface to sit on, it was probably better than the bark. And it was a pretty vantage point to take a break. Now that I was no longer moving, it was easier to hear the birdsong and other sounds of the woods.

For a while, we sat in companionable silence. My headache was gone, thank god. I wasn’t sure if that was from the aspirin or the fresh air. Either way, I was grateful. And now that it was no longer pounding, I could focus more on the discussion we’d had this morning around the breakfast table.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“You and Cole both work, right?”

“Part-time, yes.”

“And you run an inn that’s in dire need of upgrades.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Brady said easily. “Where are you going with this?”

“I just wonder why you bother with your *Down to Earth* videos at all. No offense, but they can’t make you that much

money.” Wait, had I just said *no offense*? My plan for the week had been to offend as much as possible. Oops.

“They don’t, but that’s not why we started making them in the first place.”

“So why did you?”

“It was Gideon’s idea, actually. See, Gramps taught me and Cole all kinds of stuff. Starting a fire. Grilling. Fishing. Carpentry. But Gideon never knew his father—he took off when he was three. So he never had a dad or grandfather to teach him the things that we learned from a young age. His idea was to make videos for other men who didn’t learn those kinds of skills from their dads.”

“So no women allowed?”

Gideon shook his head. “You asked how it started, and that was the original idea for it. Of course we want to teach those skills to anyone who wants to learn. And as you pointed out when you disparaged us months ago, a growing percentage of our viewers are women.”

That’s right, that was part of what set me off in the first place—but only part. And there was another question I wanted to ask. It involved my least favorite member of *Down to Earth*, but curiosity won out. “If Gideon didn’t have someone to teach him those skills, how’d he learn them?” I’d seen a listing of his videos on their social media channel. He’d made videos on carpentry, home repair, and auto maintenance. He’d even done a few on budgeting and finances.

“I don’t know about all of it, but he learned some things the same way we did.”

“From your grandfather?”

“From our grandparents,” Brady corrected. “I learned a lot from Gran, too.”

“But how did you all meet Gideon? Did he grow up around here?”

Brady took a drink of water before answering, and I couldn’t help staring at the way his Adam’s apple bobbed as

he swallowed. “It’s kind of a long story. Remember how I said I spent summers out here?”

“Yes. And Cole lived out here full-time.”

“Right.” He put the cap back on his water bottle as he stared off into the trees. “Well, when I was around fourteen, my dad started dating this woman who lived about an hour away. They got really serious, really fast, and as soon as the school year ended, my dad convinced my grandparents to take not only me for the summer, but also the woman’s teenage son.”

“Gideon,” I said, interested in the story in spite of myself.

“Exactly. He and I both arrived on the doorstep here, and Cole—instead of being jealous that our grandparents’ attention was split three ways—was friends with him from the start. We both were. We had an amazing summer, a lot of it spent right here in these woods.”

I could almost see the three boys running along the path, laughing and joking around. “Are your dad and Gideon’s mom still together?”

“God, no,” he said. “I don’t even know where my dad is. Last I heard, out in Vegas. As for Gideon’s mom, she moved on after the summer ended. She had a lot of short-term affairs, according to him.”

“I don’t understand, though. If Gideon and his mom lived in the suburbs, how’d you stay in touch?”

Brady laughed and elbowed me gently. “Same as anyone else would. By phone or online. This wasn’t the Dark Ages; I’m only a few years older than you.”

“Okay, it’s just... you three seem really close.”

He nodded. “There’s a reason for that. We kept in touch, like I said, but it was a hard time. I’d just started high school, and I was a weedy little guy. I got bullied a lot.”

“I’m sorry.” I patted his thigh. “Didn’t Cole stick up for you?”

“Of course, but he was only a sophomore, and he got picked on a lot, too.”

“Why?”

“Basically, because kids can be cruel,” Brady said, and I nodded in agreement. “They targeted him, and then me a year later when I entered high school. The theme seemed to be ‘how the mighty have fallen.’ A hundred years ago, my family owned the mill the town is named for. We employed dozens of townsmen. But in the past few decades, we’ve barely been able to keep the land. Had to sell off nearly half our land when I was ten.”

“Kids will come up with any excuse to bully someone who’s even a little different,” I said, and Brady gave me a faint smile. “Or who’s not big enough to protect themselves... yet.”

“Exactly. Luckily, we knew someone who was big enough to protect himself and others.”

“Gideon?” That took me by surprise.

“Yep. When we talked, he’d hear how miserable we were. And I think Cole told him stuff, too. He was more worried about me getting beat up than himself. Anyway, Gideon contacted our grandparents and asked if he could stay here and go to school in Donovan’s Mill. He said that he often felt that his mom resented him for holding her back, and he wanted a fresh start. He said he’d be no trouble, he’d pay for his food and stay out back in the smokehouse.”

“The smokehouse?” That was a horrifying thought.

“Well, it was a cottage by then. We slept there many times during that first summer when Gran got tired of us staying up all night reading comic books and laughing and chatting. But anyway, my grandparents insisted that he stay in the main house. God knew we had enough room. And from that moment on, he became an honorary grandson.”

“And what happened at school?”

“With him by our side, no one ever picked on us again.”

“Really?” As much as I didn’t want to admit it, my heart was softening for the boy who moved to a new town just to protect his friends. “But he was older than you, right? What about when he graduated?”

Brady grinned. “Well, we weren’t as scrawny by then. Generally, you don’t earn football trophies if you are. But it was more than that. Somehow, Gideon helped us fit in. It was our town and they were our classmates, but they didn’t really accept us until the three of us became pals. I can’t fully explain it, but I’ll forever be grateful for it. And for him.”

“It sounds like you helped him, too.”

“Definitely. He really opened up when he moved here. He was used to being treated as a burden, and no one here thought of him like that.” Brady looked over at me, and I was surprised to see that his eyes were moist.

I stared up at him and couldn’t help the smile that spread over my face.

“What?” Brady asked as I continued to look into his clear, blue eyes.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re kind of a hard person to hate?”

He chuckled. “I can’t say that they have. It seems like an odd thing to say to someone, but under the circumstances, I’ll take it.”

“Good.” I stood up, stretching my muscles as I did so. I bit back a grin as I caught Brady staring at my legs. Tender moment or not, he was still a man. I shook out the backpack and handed it to him. “Ready to head back?”

“Definitely.”

After that, we all had lunch together. Brady made BLTs, and they were delicious. Then Penny and I worked out a strategy for what videos we wanted to make this week. After her assertiveness this morning, she’d reverted back to her usual quiet self, but that might’ve been because she couldn’t get

hold of Jeff. She was worried that he wouldn't answer his phone, but I thought it was more likely that he was punishing her for leaving him for a week. Again, I felt a little guilt at that, but mostly, I wished she'd come to her senses and dump his sorry ass.

Brady went for his shift at the diner in the afternoon, and Cole headed out back to work on the cottage they were fixing up. I heard a lot of hammering and sawing. That only intensified when an SUV parked out front and Gideon joined him.

Gideon stayed for dinner, which was leftovers from the night before, but he and Cole mostly talked to each other in low voices about business with the inn. If Brady had been here, I bet we all would've conversed with each other. He was becoming the bridge between our two factions.

And then it was night. Penny headed to her room early, saying she was tired, but I suspected she was going to try to contact Jeff again. Gideon left, and Cole retired to the study that he apparently used as an office.

Which just left me.

I wandered restlessly around the inn, determined to stay up until I was so exhausted I'd be guaranteed a deep and dream-free sleep. But that was easier said than done, since there was so little to do around here. I threw some darts downstairs for a while. I tried to get into one of the ancient paperbacks in the lounge.

Hell, I even pulled out the game of *Mouse Trap* and tried to get the elaborate trap set up. But either it was easier with two people, or it was missing a piece or two and I couldn't remember how to do it. Besides, it reminded me of my father, and he wasn't who I should be thinking about this close to bed. Not unless I wanted another nightmare.

After all that, it wasn't even nine yet. There was no way I was going to be able to stay up for another couple of hours without something better to do.

In desperation, I padded into the kitchen to see if there was any leftover wine. A partial bottle of Merlot lifted my spirits as I hunted down a wine glass. As I opened one cabinet after another, I heard a rustling noise.

Looking down, I spotted a yellow Post-it note sticking to the edge of my slipper—I must've stepped on it. Curious, I finished pouring my wine, and then I bent over to pick it up.

A frown spread across my face as I read it.

BRADY

“Brady!”

I looked up from the grill at my favorite coworker. Sandy was in her forties and was a cheerful, raunchy mother figure to most of us here at the diner.

“Table five says their burger’s too rare.”

I took the platter from her and, within seconds, had the burger sizzling on the griddle. Everything had to be done quickly in a diner, even this late at night. High school kids filled the booths—as Cole, Gideon, and I had when we were that age—and people who worked late came here before heading home.

“So how’re things with your houseguest?” Sandy said with a grin. “I take it she’s still not your biggest fan.”

“Not yet.” I flipped the burger onto a new bun and added a generous heap of crispy fries. That should please the customer.

“You can’t really blame her for that, though.” Sandy took the platter and laughed. “But wow, the way she talks about you three. I’d say you boys have met your match. She’s a feisty one.”

She was indeed. All except for this morning. Something had been wrong during breakfast, but I couldn’t figure out what. It had been bothering me all day.

Sandy kept up her questions as we got the food out. “Is she as pretty in person as she is online?”

“Prettier,” I said honestly.

Sandy’s laugh this time was more of a cackle. “It’ll be interesting to see which one of you boys falls head over heels first.”

“Not likely,” I said. Or at least it wasn’t likely to be reciprocated. “She hates us.”

“Again, can you blame her? But she’ll come around. She’s got a good head on her shoulders. Eventually she’ll see that you three are catches.”

“Then how come no one’s caught us yet?”

“It’s not for lack of trying,” she said with a wink. Even though she was at least fifteen years older than him, she flirted heavily with Gideon every time he came in here.

A customer called her name, and she spoke quickly. “When’s your next shift?”

“Hell if I know.” The manager of the diner seemed to like keeping us in suspense about when we’d be on the schedule. I’d asked for fewer shifts this week because of Lila’s stay, but that kind of request didn’t go very far around here.

I didn’t mind the cooking. That and joking around with my coworkers was the fun part. But I sure as hell didn’t like being jerked around by management.

It was late when I got home, but Cole was in the office. My grandfather had used it as more of a den, but when we inherited the place, Cole took it over. He used the large desk in there to take care of business both for the inn and the city council.

Except right now, his business seemed to be sleeping. I knocked on the doorframe, softly at first and then a bit louder. Finally, he jerked upright, looking confused.

He spotted me and shook his head as if to wipe his mind clear. “What time is it?”

“Nearly midnight.”

“Shit.”

You wouldn't have caught either of us saying that word when our grandparents were around. Swearing was the one thing they were very strict about.

I took a seat in the chair across from my cousin. He'd offered to put a desk in here for me, too, but I didn't need it. The kitchen was my office.

“What were you working on besides sawing logs?” I asked.

“The books.”

“Why? Gideon's going to be here tomorrow. Let him do it.” He was incredible with financial stuff.

Cole shook his head, and we launched into a very familiar argument. “I don't know why you won't take his help.”

“I do,” my cousin protested.

“Only when you have to. But you know Gran and Gramps considered him their grandson, too. He feels like a brother to me—just like you do. So what's the deal?”

“Because I shouldn't need help.” Cole was still grumpy from his ill-timed nap, but then again, he was always grumpy on this topic.

“I think you mean *we*. We are co-owners, you know.”

He grunted, which was all the response I was going to get to that. But then Cole surprised me. “I was also looking at online reservation systems you can add to a website.”

“Anything decent?”

“They're all expensive as hell, but I can see why people might expect them.”

“Got to spend money to make money, I suppose.”

“That only works if you have money in the first place.” The weariness on Cole's face no longer had anything to do with sleep.

“We’ll get there. We just have to find our niche. Figure out what works for us and make it happen. And everyone’s struggling right now. The diner is. Hell, the hardware store shut down.” My absentee dad had quit years back, but I’d kept an eye on the place ever since he abandoned it—and me.

Because Cole looked so weary, I decided to table the never-ending discussion for another time. “How were our guests this evening?”

He frowned as if he hadn’t thought of it. “They were fine.”

“Did Gideon come over?”

“Yeah. We worked on the smokehouse.” Cole shook his head, thinking it over. “Dinner was quiet but civil. We ate the leftovers from yesterday.”

That reminded me of something. “Thanks for feeding the cats.”

“You’re welcome,” Cole said automatically. Then his gaze sharpened. “Wait, what?”

“The barn cats. I left you a note asking you to put their food out.”

“I didn’t see a note.”

Shit.

I got to my feet, feeling uneasy. If they weren’t fed, some of them might be still out there by the barn waiting—and making them prime targets for the coyotes.

Cole followed me into the kitchen, and I cursed softly as I saw the yellow post-it on the counter. “It’s right there. How could you miss it?”

“It wasn’t. I swear I checked, and when I didn’t see anything, I figured you’d fed them early.”

“In the afternoon?” Irritated, I pulled open the refrigerator door to gather up some scraps. But then Cole put his hand on my shoulder, stopping me.

“Look at this.”

I squinted as I examined the square of yellow paper he was pointing at. There was a faint outline of a shoe print on the note, as well as feminine handwriting that definitely didn't belong to either of us. I read it aloud: "I put food out for the cats—Lila."

"Huh," Cole said. "Guess she doesn't hate us as much as she thinks."

"Either that, or she just doesn't hate cats," I said. Still, Lila's kindness gave me hope. Overall, she didn't seem like a vindictive person. Neither were we, but somehow, we'd all gotten off on the wrong foot.

An extremely wrong foot.

But maybe there was a possibility that could change.

LILA

By the middle of the night, I was pretty sure I'd consumed all of the content on Reddit and was starting in on YouTube. I kept the sound down while I watched a video about a woman who discovered her coworker was her long-lost sister.

My eyelids started to droop, but I fought to keep them open. Fortunately, the bed was helping with that. I was perched on my side, but when my muscles relaxed, I'd start to roll into the valley in the middle of the mattress. Righting myself would snap me back into alertness.

There was a soft knock at the door. Maybe Penny had wandered out for a glass of water and had seen the light under the door?

“Come in.”

Except it wasn't Penny.

“Can't sleep?” A tall figure filled the doorframe, though I could only see his silhouette.

Clutching the covers tightly, I sat up, resting my back against the sturdy headboard. “No.”

Brady walked into the room, fully dressed even though it was after midnight. “It's hard sleeping in a strange place sometimes.”

“It's not that.” The lamp on the nightstand only illuminated a small circle around the bed, so I could barely see the expression on his face. I drew my legs to the side, making

room, and he sat on the edge of the bed. “I have a kind of routine I do before bed. It helps me sleep.”

He nodded. “And you can’t do that routine here?”

“No.” My voice was bitter. He and his buddies were the reason I couldn’t.

“Is it possible to improvise a little? If you tell me what your ritual is, maybe I can help.”

“I doubt that,” I said, but his earnest expression made it hard to stay upset with him. “But thanks.”

“Come on, try me. I’m an inventive guy. What’s the routine? Tea? A warm bubble bath? A chapter out of a good book? A mind-blowing orgasm? A—”

Involuntarily, I swallowed hard, pulling away from him and hugging my knees to my chest. It was more than obvious he noticed my very physical response. Crap.

“No shit? Really?” He stared at me for a moment, but I didn’t say anything. “Well, feel free. This is your room for the week, and you can do whatever you want in it.” He grinned. “The dirtier, the better.”

That pissed me off. “I’m not some kind of sex fiend,” I growled. “I just sleep better if I do that before bed, okay? I’m an adult, I should be able to do what I’d like.”

“I agree on every point,” he said. His voice sounded neutral again, but I couldn’t quite meet his eye. “So what’s stopping you?”

“You and your friends confiscated my toys.”

He chuckled, and I wanted to smack him. “Maybe this is one of those times when you should try things the old-fashioned way.”

If that had worked, I wouldn’t be having this very uncomfortable conversation with him now. “It’s not the same. For women, anyway. That’s yet another area where you men have it easier.” Why did it feel like the universe was set up in men’s favor?

I took a quick peek and caught his nod. “Probably true. But still, what if battery-operated devices had never been invented? Would you really never be able to get to sleep?” He looked two-thirds curious and only one-third turned on, which was probably a better ratio than I’d get from most men.

“I’d sleep. Just not... well.” God, this was the last thing I wanted to admit to him. “I get nightmares sometimes.” My voice wasn’t much more than a whisper, but I knew he heard me. “If I don’t sleep deeply, I have nightmares.” Nights when that happened were the worst, which was the only reason I was telling him this.

Brady’s eyes were troubled. “If I knew where Cole stashed your stuff, I’d get it for you, but I don’t, I swear.”

I believed him, but it didn’t change my situation. Clutching the sheet tighter against my chest, I wished I were anywhere else. This wasn’t my world, and these guys definitely weren’t my friends.

Though if I had to pick, Brady was the least objectionable of the three. His blue eyes seemed to show understanding. At the very least, he wasn’t mocking me. God knows Gideon would have after what I’d just shared.

“Is there anything else I can do to help you sleep? Rub your back, maybe?”

His offer made me want to laugh and cry at the same time. “That’s how I got into this mess in the first place.”

“Good point.” Brady’s easy grin made the corner of my mouth involuntarily twitch upward. “So maybe I can help you another way.”

“How?”

He raised an eyebrow, as if there was something obvious I wasn’t getting. “When we brought you out here, we said we’d replace the high-tech devices you use every day. So why don’t you let me make good on that?”

It took a moment for his meaning to sink in. Shock had me shaking my head in disbelief. There’s no way in hell he could

mean what I thought he meant... right? “You have *got* to be joking.”

He shrugged. “You need your tech to sleep. I’m supposed to replace it. Let me do my job.”

I stared at him as if he were from Mars. He didn’t *look* like he was joking. He looked sincere, as if this were a reasonable offer.

Which.

Was.

Insane.

“You *can’t* be serious,” I said, drawing out every word. Except he looked pretty damn serious.

“If it makes it easier, I’ll keep my eyes closed the whole time. Hell, I’ll hold two AA batteries in my other hand and make a buzzing noise.” His mouth didn’t twitch, but there was amusement in his gaze.

A small laugh escaped my lips even as my brain stayed locked in *no-way* mode. Feeling at an uncharacteristic loss for words, I shook my head helplessly.

Which didn’t deter him at all. “You’re my guest here this week. If you can’t sleep, I need to do everything in my power to remedy that.” Brady was somehow able to make a completely bizarre situation sound almost reasonable. “This is one hundred percent about giving you a hand, so to speak. I won’t even enjoy it—I promise.”

The absurd urge to laugh hit me. Was he this good-natured and utterly unflappable in every situation, no matter how crazy?

He leaned in and lowered his voice. “I also promise you’ll enjoy it.”

He placed his hand on my shin, his thumb rubbing my skin over the cover. When I didn’t shake him off, he ran his fingers past my ankle and squeezed my foot.

It was disconcerting to stare into such vivid blue eyes, but I did it anyway, wanting to understand what he was really after. There was interest there. He was a red-blooded male—that much was clear. And I suspected that if I let my gaze fall to his pants, I'd see more evidence of his interest.

But... as much as I hated to give one of these guys any credit, there was sincerity there, too. Maybe he sometimes dealt with nightmares. Maybe he knew just how damn bad they could get.

And maybe he honestly wanted to help.

“All right.” I barely recognized the small voice that had spoken the two syllables as my own, but I didn't take back my answer. In fact, I patted the mattress next to me.

Brady squeezed my foot again and gave me a slow, sexy smile.

My heart rate quickened, and this time, I smiled back.

LILA

Time stood still as Brady held my gaze. Part of me wanted to take back the invitation. After all, a few days ago I hated this man.

But that was before. Before I'd taken a hike with him, and we'd prepared a meal together. Well, not that I'd done much of the work, but I'd gotten to know him a little.

And somehow, trust had come with it.

Brady toed off his shoes and then walked to the other side of the bed, lifting the covers and sliding over to the valley in the middle.

I was actually trembling, waiting to see what he'd do next.

"This mattress needs to be replaced," he said, which was not what I was expecting at all.

A surprised laugh escaped me. "Yeah, it does."

"But there's something else I need to do first," he said, and the smile he gave me made my thighs clench.

"Should I turn off the light?" The hesitant voice didn't seem like it belonged to me. I wasn't a virgin, so I shouldn't act like one. Thanks to my toys and the occasional naughty story, I had amazing orgasms on a regular basis. But it had been a hell of a long time since a man had given me one.

"Do whatever you like. This is all about you. This is your turndown service."

He made me laugh, and that made me relax. I flipped off the light and then turned toward him, settling on my side. He did the same, and I could hear his soft breathing in the dark.

It was too dark to see him, but that also made this feel kind of anonymous.

“Can I touch you?” Brady asked.

“Where?” I mean, I knew where he’d touch me eventually, but I wasn’t sure where he’d start.

“How about here?” His hand settled on the side of my head, and his fingers sank into my hair. “I’ve been wanting to do this for a long time.” He stroked my hair away from my face. “There’s just so much of it.”

“Everybody has a lot of hair compared to you.”

“True. But not everyone has hair this soft and silky.”

My eyes closed, more out of pleasure than from the fact that I couldn’t see. Goosebumps covered my bare arms, and I gave a soft sigh as I relaxed into his touch.

“Like that?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“If you roll over with your back to me, I’ll have a better angle.”

That sounded reasonable—and pleasurable. But as soon as I rolled over, the valley in the middle of the mattress had me sliding back against him. My back pressed against his sculpted chest. Since I was wearing a tube top with spaghetti straps, I could feel the soft fabric of the long-sleeved t-shirt he had on.

Boy shorts completed my makeshift pajamas, and the thin fabric did nothing to hide the fact that my ass was smashed against his jeans—and the hardness underneath.

I squirmed, trying to put a few inches between us, but gravity kept pulling me back toward him.

Brady groaned as I inadvertently ground against his erection. “Is it too late to take back my promise not to enjoy this?”

“Yes.”

“Just checking.”

He slid one hand under my head, pushing the pillow out of the way. He supported me while he ran both hands through my hair, and it felt amazing.

Except...

“This feels like a massage.”

To his credit, Brady stilled his hands immediately. “And you haven’t had the best of luck with massages lately.”

“Definitely not.” I wished I could have him continue, but it somehow felt like a danger zone.

“I don’t think any of us came across really well during our first online and in-person encounters.” His voice was so close to my ear that it seemed to resonate through my skin.

“I can’t argue with that,” I said softly.

“But I hope we can move past it.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. That I hoped so too? Maybe that was true, but it wasn’t very realistic.

Brady didn’t seem to need me to answer. He slid his arm under me, and I rested my head on his bicep. He slid his fingers down my arm using firm strokes. As his strong hand moved up and down my bare skin, I melted back into him, no longer trying to hold myself away from him.

With my cheek resting against the sleeve of his shirt, I inhaled. I caught a whiff of food scents that must’ve been from the diner. But under that was something else. Something like the fresh pine scents I couldn’t get enough of in the woods this morning.

Slowly, as if to give me a chance to object, Brady’s fingers moved lower. As his hand rubbed across mine, my pulse sped up. His movements were so sure, so hypnotic. Strong fingers slid down my body, squeezed the top of my thigh, and then did it again. “That feels good,” I moaned.

His nose nuzzled my hair when he spoke. “I’m glad to hear it.”

He slid his hand to the front of my little shorts, the warmth from his fingers sinking through the fabric. I pressed myself against his hand at the same time he pulled me back. Heat from his erection warmed my ass while his hand cupped my mound. My hips began to gyrate as I enjoyed the sensation of feeling his hand in front of me and his body behind me.

“Can I slide these down?” Brady asked softly.

I nodded. It wasn’t like he could get the job done without access. And if I were alone with one of my confiscated toys, I’d already have my shorts off.

His arm started to slide out from under my head, but to my surprise, I didn’t want it to. I liked the way our bodies were touching in so many places. So instead, I reached down and lowered the shorts, wiggling until they were down around my thighs. Then Brady took over and slid them down my legs until I was able to kick them off.

I shivered, grateful for the darkness. I was practically naked, and he was still dressed. That was what I’d signed up for, but still, it made my skin heat. It was erotic being nearly naked in his arms.

Brady’s hand descended on my pelvis as his warm body spooned mine. His fingers slid over my mound, and my legs parted slightly, but that wasn’t where he was heading. Instead, his fingers danced over my thigh. It was a delightful sensation, but the throbbing between my legs was getting more insistent.

“God, your skin is warm.” His voice was rumbly, and my pulse spiked—especially when one of his fingers slid lower. “And your hair smells so good.”

“I thought you weren’t going to enjoy this.” I had to try twice to get the words out of my dry mouth.

“I thought so, too.”

He abruptly changed course again, running his large palm over my thigh, and I regretted having spoken up. He’d been so close to where I’d needed him to be.

But his mind was on other things at the moment. “Your skin is so smooth. I thought you said you’d turn into a yeti if we took away your electric shaver.”

“I still shaved, it just took forever,” I muttered. Especially since the shower stall was barely bigger than a coffin.

“So smooth,” Brady said again, his voice husky. Then he hooked his hand under the back of my knee and folded my leg up toward my chest. “Here, feel for yourself.”

Automatically, I hugged my knee to my chest. The cool air on my heated slit made me groan. If the air could caress me there, then so could he.

And he did.

I nearly jumped when he cupped my folds, but not from shock. More from anticipation. His hand felt like liquid heat, and I couldn’t help grinding myself against him.

He chuckled. “I’ve never seen someone so eager... to prevent nightmares.”

Yeah. Right. That’s how this had started... but it definitely wasn’t what I was focused on right now. My mind was pretty blank, actually. It usually didn’t get that way until seconds before orgasming.

Brady splayed his long fingers open, one on either side of my slit... and one in the middle.

Oh, god. He held me open, and my breathing sped up as I clutched my bent leg and waited. The only thought running through my head was *please*.

And then a strong finger pressed against my clit, nearly setting me off just from that. I moaned, squeezing my eyes closed.

“Guess I found the right spot.” His voice was smug, but I didn’t care. Not with the way he was stroking me.

I buried my face against the corded muscles of his bicep as he caressed me. His finger traced long strokes up and down my seam, spreading moisture as he went.

It felt amazing, but I wanted more.

He flicked a finger across my clit, making me gasp, and then his fingers zeroed in on my entrance. He circled it, my juices making his finger glide easily. With each circuit, he spread me open more.

My hips pumped against his hand, wanting to feel him deeper inside me. His fingers... his tongue... his cock... at this point, I'd take anything. It had been so damn long since anyone had touched me like this. And it was clear he knew what he was doing.

My breath caught as he slid two fingers inside me, the sudden pressure making me still. But after a moment, my hips started grinding again, and he twisted his fingers, touching all my walls at once.

This. *This* was what a toy couldn't do. It couldn't judge my response and adjust accordingly.

Brady could... and he did.

Switching things up, he pushed what felt like his thumb inside me, deep enough to make me groan, and two long fingers brushed against either side of my clit. I squirmed as he teased me. I rubbed against the hard bulge in his jeans, and it took my arousal to a new level. "Please," I moaned.

He obliged, gliding over my heated folds as I writhed on the bed. He switched things up and slid what felt like two fingers into me. God, they definitely hit all the right spots. He managed to keep caressing my clit in a way that felt amazing without being overwhelming.

Brady's touch was magic as he worked me into a frenzy. My brain short-circuited as Brady pushed me toward the edge. I couldn't think, I could only feel.

And I felt something explosive coming closer every second.

Strong fingers pumped in and out of me, but Brady didn't neglect the pulsing in my clit. The pressure built from deep inside, and my limbs were shaking so much I could barely keep holding my knee up to my chest. "Oh, god."

Brady leaned forward, resting his cheek against mine as I braced against the oncoming onslaught. “Don’t fight it,” he whispered.

With a gasp, I realized I had been holding back. Maybe because I didn’t want to lose control in front of him? But suddenly, I knew I could.

I took deep breaths, drawing air into my lungs, and relaxed the muscles I’d been tensing. With that surrender, Brady’s touch felt even stronger, and my hips bucked as I cried out.

“That’s it, come for me.”

I barely heard him as my inner walls spasmed around his fingers. I clenched down on him hard, but it felt so damn good. I cried out again and then pressed my face against the sleeve of his shirt, trying to muffle the noise.

Sensations washed over me as I thrashed around on the bed. As I writhed against him, my ass ground against his jeans, and he groaned into my ear. He worked my clit harder, extending the orgasm.

The scream that bubbled up in my throat would’ve alerted the entire household, so I did the only thing I could think of. I bit down on the fabric covering his arm.

“Bad girl,” he whispered. He pulled his arm out from under my head and grasped a handful of my hair, tugging it as all tension drained from my body. I slumped down, my face against the mattress, the sound of my heavy breathing filling the room.

Brady finally withdrew his fingers, and he wrapped his arm around my stomach, hugging me back against him.

His warm body engulfed mine as the powerful waves that had rocked through me began to recede. But every aftershock made me press back against him.

He was still hard. I wanted to touch him, to bring him as much pleasure as he’d brought me, but drowsiness descended rapidly.

Brady's arm was still wrapped around me, and I put mine on top of his. "I—"

"It's okay," he whispered, seeming to understand even though I wasn't sure what I'd been about to say. "Go to sleep."

My tired muscles relaxed. My breathing slowed. It was a feeling I craved. It promised deep sleep and a peaceful night.

Brady's body was a warm cocoon around mine as I drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

LILA

Sunlight beamed down on my face, but I felt too cozy and content to open my eyes. I stretched, enjoying the way the sheets brushed against my warm skin.

As I tested my muscles, I felt a gentle ache. The kind that came from clenching hard. It was the kind of feeling I only got from—

Brady.

My eyes flew open as I turned to his side of the bed, shielding my eyes from the light with my forearm.

He wasn't there.

After an initial bout of disappointment, I chided myself. What had I thought, that he'd cuddle me all night? That was something a *boyfriend* did. Well, some boyfriends. But it definitely wasn't the behavior expected of a guy who was just trying to prove that he was better than your high-tech toys.

I sank back onto the mattress with a groan. He'd proved that and more. Last night, he'd literally rocked me to my core. It had been one of the best orgasms of my life, and I'd slept straight through the night afterwards.

No restlessness. No tossing and turning. No nightmares.

Thank god.

Or, rather, thank Brady.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I realized he must've drawn back the curtains before he left. Was the early morning

sunshine retaliation for me leaving him high and dry last night?

But that didn't really seem like something he'd do. Maybe he thought I'd appreciate some light in here, and I did, even though I was half tempted to turn my back to the window and go back to sleep.

But then an electronic beeping filled the room. Bolting upright, I fumbled with my phone, trying to turn the alarm off. I pressed button after button, but the noise didn't abate. Then I realized that the alarm on my phone wasn't supposed to go off for another hour.

Sliding my feet over the edge of the bed, I scanned the room. Finally, I spotted a little white clock on the dresser that definitely hadn't been there yesterday. Pulling the sheet around me, I padded across the room and hit the button on the top. The beeping ceased.

Perplexed, I examined the little plastic clock. There were a few buttons and a little hatch on the back. Hmm... I guess Brady wasn't opposed to all battery-operated devices.

But the question was why he'd set it. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and spotted the answer. There was a little yellow Post-it on the dresser with the same handwriting used to ask Cole to feed the cats yesterday.

Get dressed and meet me out back, sleepyhead. There's something we need to do before breakfast.

I pulled open the heavy dresser drawer and took out some clean clothes before stopping to question what I was doing. Just because Brady wanted an early morning meeting didn't mean I had to oblige. Yet somehow, I found myself heading into the bathroom to take a quick shower.

Half an hour later, I eased the sliding door shut behind me and descended the steps of the little deck. I was better dressed for hiking today. I'd donned jeans in case we'd be sitting on a rough log again. And I was glad I'd put on my pink hoodie when I felt the nip in the morning air.

Brady was nowhere to be seen, but the door to the smokehouse cottage thingie, the one they were fixing up, was open, so I headed over there. Brady's note said there was something we needed to do. Hopefully, that didn't involve construction. I'd be about as useless at that as I was at cooking.

"Brady?" My voice was just a whisper, not because I thought the sleeping inhabitants of the inn could hear me out here. No, it was more because the morning air was so crisp and still, it seemed a shame to disturb it. The birds were singing, but they added to the peaceful atmosphere.

He appeared in the doorway, and for a moment, I was struck anew by how handsome he was. His body was lean but strong. I'd felt his muscles pressing against me last night. They were the kind that came from working outdoors, not from a gym.

His biceps stretched the sleeves of his flannel shirt. His arms weren't those of a bodybuilder, but they were sure ripped enough to catch a woman's eye.

The smile that he aimed at me made my heart rate increase, and I couldn't imagine how he was still single. Unless it was because no woman could find him out here.

"Morning," he said.

"Good morning." The events of last night flooded my brain and I felt shy—which wasn't a sensation I was very familiar with. Maybe I'd have to ask Penny how to deal with it later. It was her default mode.

"How'd you sleep?"

The corners of my mouth twitched upward. "I think you know."

He chuckled. "Yeah, probably. You were out seconds after the main event."

Though he didn't look upset, guilt hit. "I'm sorry, I should have—"

“That was the whole point of the exercise, remember?” He cocked his head to the side. “To help you sleep deeply. Any job worth doing is worth doing well.”

The smirk on his face told me he knew he’d done well but that he wasn’t going to be obnoxious about it. My words from yesterday echoed in my head. He definitely was a hard person to hate.

“So what’s on the agenda for this morning?” I asked. “Another hike?”

“More or less.” He disappeared into the cottage and returned holding a plastic case and two long poles.

I took a step back. “Please tell me those are hiking poles.”

He grinned. “Sure. Hiking poles with a cork and a hook at the end.”

“I don’t fish.”

“You also said you don’t cook, yet you helped with dinner the other night.”

“I helped with the dinner for the cats,” I corrected.

“That still counts.” Brady closed the door to the smokehouse behind him. “By the way, thank you for feeding those guys last night.”

“You’re welcome. They were pretty happy to see me.”

“I bet. Did my note fall on the floor or something?”

“Yes.”

Brady shook his head. “Cole still should’ve known they needed to be fed. He’s not the biggest cat person, though. Sees them as pests. My Gramps did, too.”

It was hard to think of the purring little creatures as pests. They’d swarmed around my ankles last night like I was their savior. “It sounds like you turned out more like your grandmother and Cole like your grandfather.”

“Yeah, basically.” He tried to hand me a fishing pole, but I dodged out of the way.

“I don’t fish.” I said it more emphatically this time.

He rolled his eyes and handed me the tackle box, which I reluctantly took. At least it didn’t have any hooks dangling off it. “Do you eat fish?”

“Of course.” Okay, most of it was sushi, not what you might catch round here, but that still counted.

“Then let’s go catch us some trout for breakfast.”

He took off toward the path we’d taken yesterday, and I had to hurry to catch up to him. “Fish? For *breakfast*?”

He shot me a look and shook his head. “You really are a city girl, aren’t you?”

“Never claimed otherwise.” I did my best to match his long strides.

“Well then, city girl, you’re in for a treat.”

Trout didn’t sound like much of a treat. Then again, he’d given me a massive treat last night, so maybe I could extend the benefit of the doubt to him.

We’d only been walking for a few minutes when Brady veered off onto a smaller path I hadn’t noticed yesterday. After what I judged was the equivalent of a half-dozen city blocks, we arrived at a small lake.

Brady strode onto a wooden dock, but I paused a moment to take in the scenic picture our surroundings made. The lake wasn’t big, but it was almost perfectly round, lined by trees with their leaves blowing in the wind. This was the kind of view these guys needed to put up on their website.

“Why is there a dock if there aren’t any boats?” I joined Brady on the small wooden structure.

“They’re over there.” He pointed toward a large tree not too far away. Two small vessels, a canoe and a rowboat, if I wasn’t mistaken, were upside down and leaning against the trunk.

“Oh.” Absentmindedly, I handed him his tackle box as I tried to imagine what it would be like to relax on a boat on this

serene little lake. It would be nothing like Lake Michigan with its sizable waves.

I knew nothing about paddling a rowboat or a canoe, but it seemed like a pretty pleasant way to pass the time.

Brady knelt down and rummaged through the tackle box. “We can go out on the lake some other time.” He seemed to have read my mind. “Today, our mission is to catch and cook some food before the others have to resort to cereal out of a box.”

Clearly, the chef in him disapproved of that idea, but cereal sounded pretty damn good compared to trout. However, I didn’t tell him that—I was too busy enjoying watching the competent way he moved. Soon, he had both fishing poles locked and loaded, or whatever it was one did with fishing poles.

“I sincerely hope one of those isn’t for me.” I tried my best not to notice the squirming worm on the hook, but it was hard not to.

Brady chuckled. “Not a fan of fishing—who would’ve guessed?” He drew his arm back and did something to make the hook and cork fly far out into water. Oh, yeah, it was called casting. Probably.

Then he placed the pole into a little cup-like holder at the end of the dock. “Can you at least keep an eye on that one?”

“What am I watching for?”

“Let me know if the cork goes under.”

Ah. That I probably could do.

He cast again and kept his pole in his hands. “You know, maybe you’d like fishing if we added some technology to the process.”

“Like what? Email the fish and ask it to come bite on the worm?”

“More like a rod with an electric reel so you don’t have to fight the fish yourself. Or I think they have special radar

systems that can show you where the fish are. Think your fans would like it if you reviewed something like that?”

“I can ask.” Sometimes I posted polls asking what tech they wanted me to explore next. I could just see it: the choice between a three-hundred-dollar state-of-the-art vibrator or an automatic fishing rod.

I sat down on the dock, my legs crossed as I watched Brady. He went very still as he held the rod, but I got the feeling his senses were on high alert. I was right, because he yanked the fishing pole back almost before the cork disappeared under the surface.

He cranked the reel hard, and in almost no time, he had a slimy, wiggling fish in front of him. “There’s a net in the tacklebox.”

Ignoring the strong impulse to put as much distance between myself and the gross fish as possible, I located the net and handed it to him. No way was I going to have any part in this.

“Such a city girl.” He grinned, seeming amused by my reluctance. “Come on, let’s catch us some more breakfast.”

LILA

I could feel Brady's eyes on me as the four of us sat around the table. "Well?"

"Okay, you were right." I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't deny the truth.

"Right about what?" Cole asked.

"Having trout for breakfast," Brady elaborated. "Lila didn't think she'd like it."

"No one fries up fish like Brady," Cole said.

"It's delicious," Penny said, seemingly oblivious to the fact that when I'd told her what Brady was making, she'd been just as horrified as me.

"Yeah... if you can ignore the fact that it's fish."

Brady raised an eyebrow as he held up a thick slice of toast. "Protein gets your day off to a good start. Aren't most of you city types into the low-carb lifestyle?"

"I like carbs," I protested. Especially homemade bread. Especially *Brady's* homemade bread.

"Me too," Penny said. "Will you be baking bread again soon?"

Cole chuckled at her eagerness, and her face turned pink. "I just meant, maybe we could take some pictures for the website."

“Good idea.” The loaves that Brady made were a work of art.

Cole cleared his throat. “So, what kind of high-tech devices do we need to replace today?”

It took a lot not to glance at Brady when his cousin said that. I felt fairly certain he was staring at me, perhaps with a smug look. “Penny and I had some ideas for videos we wanted to shoot.”

“Finally going to teach your viewers how to fish?” Brady asked, and this time I did look up. As expected, he looked amused.

“As fascinating as that sounds, we were thinking of going more for the comedy aspect. Penny and I sketched out some ideas yesterday.”

Cole raised an eyebrow. “You script your pre-recorded videos?”

“It’s more like a loose outline. But yeah, sometimes we discuss ahead of time things we think our viewers would like to see.”

“Makes sense,” Cole said. “What will you film today?”

“It was Penny’s idea,” I said, turning things over to her. Unlike yesterday when she was inexplicably Ms. Business, she was quiet and reserved today. I wondered if that meant she’d gotten in touch with her deadbeat boyfriend.

Penny set down her glass of juice and looked a little alarmed to be called on. “Well, um, we thought we could kind of do a parody of Lila’s videos where she demonstrates high-tech products. Instead, we’ll find some—no offense—low-tech things around the inn and have her share how to use them.”

“Like what?” Brady asked. “I’m pretty sure you’re not going to be explaining how anything in the kitchen works.”

His observation made me grin. “Definitely not. We were thinking like the dartboard downstairs or starting a fire in the fire pit.”

Brady frowned. “You think your followers want to know how to use those things?”

“No,” I said, struggling to explain it. “As Penny said, it’s more of a parody. We’ll make it seem like it’s some revolutionary procedure and talk it up. I think they’ll like it.”

“Me too,” Cole said. He pushed back from the table. “And I know something else you can use, too.”

Before I could ask what he meant, he was on his feet and heading down the hallway.

“Will that take all day?” Brady asked.

“It’ll take a few hours to get the right footage, and from a couple of different angles,” I said. “Then Penny will edit all the different takes together.”

“I’m beginning to see the merits of having a videographer.”

Penny smiled at his assessment. “We were thinking of going into town for lunch. Maybe get some shots of Donovan’s Mill while we’re at it,” she said.

“Are there any restaurants you’d recommend?” I asked Brady.

Brady frowned. “To someone from Chicago? No. To someone who’s never seen food before? Yes.”

I grinned. “It can’t be that bad. What about your diner?”

He leaned his chair back. “Honestly, I think it’s your best bet. There’s a coffee shop, but they only serve sandwiches.”

“I saw a pizza place on my way in,” Penny said.

“You can sometimes get a fairly decent pie there, but Cole’s going to make us pizza tonight. He’s mighty proud of his pizza oven.”

“Sounds like your diner is best. Will you be working?” I tried to tell myself that it didn’t matter to me what his answer was.

He gave me a wink. “Yep. That’s the only reason I recommended it.”

Cole reappeared, a twinkle in his eye. “Are you ladies done?”

“I’m stuffed,” I said, pushing back from the table. I still couldn’t believe that I’d actually enjoyed fish for breakfast. But so far, I’d liked everything Brady had served me—orgasms included.

“Then follow me.”

“Don’t worry about the dishes,” Brady said to his cousin, his sarcasm evident. But Cole seemed too excited to respond as he led us into the lounge.

He strode over to a small table set against the window. There was something on it, but I couldn’t see past his broad back. Then he stepped out of the way with a flourish. “Behold, the inn’s business center.”

Sitting on the table was an ancient typewriter that looked straight out of the 1950s. Penny and I laughed while Cole grinned. “It’s perfect,” I told him. “Our audience will love my review of this kind of tech.”

“Where’d you get it?” Penny asked.

“It was my grandmother’s. I had it stored with her things. I know it still works, though. I’ll get you some paper from my office.”

I examined it closer, pressing down a key. It was hard to push. How on earth had people typed on those things? Guess I was going to find out.

“Thanks,” I said when Cole returned with some paper. “This is perfect.”

Penny and I spent the morning recording video. It was fun, but it was also work. This was what I did for a living, and I took it seriously. Then again, the point of the videos today was to be fun and funny. But that was for the finished product, not the steps it took to get there.

For the most part, the men kept out of our way while we shot. Cole drove off shortly after breakfast, possibly to take care of his city council duties. He returned a few hours later.

Gideon showed up after that. Didn't that guy have a job? He always seemed to be here.

And Brady stopped by to talk to us on his way to work. "When you get there, ask to be seated in Sandy's section," he said. "She's the best."

"Will do."

When it was time to break for lunch, Penny went out to her car while I ran back to my room to use the bathroom. When I was done, I nearly ran into Gideon in the hallway.

"Easy there," he said, his hands on my forearms, steadying me. Though I didn't want him touching me, it was better than me slamming into his chest. Not that it wasn't a nice, strong, broad chest—it was just that it belonged to a not-so-nice person. "What's your hurry?"

"Penny and I are going out to lunch."

His eyebrow arched. "If it's Brady's diner, that's not much of a reason to hurry."

"He's a good cook," I protested.

"Agreed, but his food is better here where he has free rein."

"And what do you do for a living?"

"A little of this, a little of that." He took a step back as he let me go. "I heard you added actual fishing to your fish-out-of-water routine."

"Brady did the fishing, not me. If you'll excuse me, Penny's waiting for me." I brushed past him and did my best not to stomp down the hallway. That guy just irritated me.

When I reached the lounge, I discovered Penny was waiting for me—but not by the car. The look on her face told me everything.

"It won't start," she said, looking defeated.

Such a shock. Though her car breaking down out here in the middle of nowhere was a problem, I was also surprised by the disappointment I felt at not being able to see Brady's diner. Or maybe it was disappointment that I wouldn't be putting some space between Gideon and myself.

Speaking of Gideon, he passed by behind us without a word, like the jerk he was. But a moment later, he returned from the direction of the study with Cole behind him. "We'll take a look," was all he said as they strode outside.

I exchanged glances with Penny. Sure, these guys posted the occasional video about how to change your wiper fluid, but that didn't mean they knew much about cars.

Then again, it wasn't like they could make Penny's ancient station wagon any worse.

"I'd better go out there," Penny said, dangling the keys from her hand. "Sorry about lunch."

"Good luck," I told her. There were probably enough leftovers in the fridge for a handful of humans and a fleet of cats, but truth be told, I was still full from breakfast. Full from *trout*, of all things.

I went to Penny's room and settled in front of the laptop she used to splice together our videos. The footage we'd gotten made me smile. But it also felt good to actually use a computer without a man showing up to tell me I wasn't allowed to use any twenty-first century tech. Since I had the chance, I shut the door and did some web surfing.

An hour or two later, I was out in the lounge when a voice took me by surprise. "Having fun?"

I'd been so intent on my task that I hadn't noticed Gideon's entrance. "It is kind of fun, yes." I tapped a few more keys on the typewriter to demonstrate. "I like making the thing go back at the end of the row."

"I believe it's called a carriage."

Turning my chair, I looked up at him. It had felt like regressing a century or so to go from Penny's laptop to this old thing, but it was fascinating, nonetheless. "Is that your field? Are you a typewriter repairman?"

He leaned against the back of a sofa and folded his arms across his chest. "Damn, you figured it out." Though there was a smudge of what was likely motor oil on his cheek, he still looked good. But like a Wikipedia entry for arrogance. "So why is the high priestess of high tech playing with a typewriter?"

"Nothing else to do. You took away all my toys." I winced as I said that. The last thing I wanted to do was to bring up the subject of sex toys or their human substitutes right now. Brady had made me feel incredible last night, but I didn't want anyone else to know about it. Least of all Gideon.

Just then, the sound of a roaring engine reached my ears. "You fixed it?"

Gideon shrugged. "It was mostly Cole."

I paused, listening. "It still sounds like... how did you put it?"

"Like a train engine with emphysema."

"Right." That seemed apt.

He noticed my frown. "Look, we got it started, we didn't give it a complete overhaul. That thing is on its last leg—or wheel, I should say. You have to know that."

"Yeah. I do. But Penny's not one to give up on lost causes." Yes, I was talking about her boyfriend as well, but Gideon didn't need to know that. "Thank you for your help."

He nodded. "Thank Cole." He straightened up but paused before leaving. "I wouldn't try to drive it too far."

"Understood." We were in agreement about that.

He left, and a few minutes later, Penny and Cole came in. He headed to his office, and she came in and plopped down on an armchair.

“You figured out how to use that thing?” she asked.

“It’s not that hard,” I said. Yeah, I’d had to search on my phone for instructions on how to insert the paper, but I’d figured it out in the end. “How’s the car?”

“Still old, but it runs now.”

“That was nice of Cole to fix it.”

Penny frowned. “It was Gideon. All Cole did was to hit the gas pedal when Gideon told him to.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

That didn’t make any sense. Gideon said that he hadn’t had much to do with it, and he didn’t seem like a modest man to me.

“Do you still want to go into town to get some lunch?” she asked.

Hmm, in a train engine with emphysema? “It’s kind of late. How about we just snack on something here? Plus Cole’s making pizza tonight. Might as well save room for that.”

She nodded, getting to her feet. Her long ponytail swung free. Had I mentioned I’d kill for her dark glossy hair? “We can grab something and then record your newfound typewriter skill.”

I shrugged as I stood. “There’ll be time for that later. How about we get some food and then try out one of those board games?”

Penny cocked her head as she looked at me. “Lila James wants to take a break and play a board game? Has all this fresh air made you into a totally different person?”

I grinned. “Maybe it has.”

Later, much later, after Penny and I ate, hung out, and shot some footage of me with the typewriter, I went to find Cole. He’d been in his study all afternoon, so I looked there first.

The door was open. I rapped my fingers against the frame before stepping inside—and stopped dead.

He looked up from his desk. “Hey, Lila.”

No words came to me as I stared at him. “Wh-what are you wearing?” I pointed at the monstrosity on his broad chest.

He glanced down. “This is my pizza-making shirt.”

“Why?”

He was wearing a hideous Hawaiian shirt that seemed to encompass all the colors of the rainbow and quite a few likely known only to an alien society. His shirt was so loud it made Penny’s car seem quiet by comparison.

He grinned at the expression on my face. “It’s kind of an old family joke, but it started when Brady and I bought a Hawaiian shirt for my grandfather for Christmas.”

“Was it as bad as that?” Looking directly at it burned my eyes.

“Worse, if you can imagine.”

I couldn’t. “Why do you wear it to make pizza? So if you spill any sauce, no one will be able to tell?”

“It eventually became a family tradition.”

A very upsetting thought occurred to me. “Please tell me this doesn’t mean you’re putting pineapple on the pizza.”

“God, no.” He shuddered. “But I’m glad you stopped by. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Okay.”

“Do you think you can shut the door and stop staring at my shirt in horror?”

“I’ll try.” Shutting the door turned out to be the easy part.

“Have a seat.”

I sat across from the desk trying to look in his direction without actually looking directly at him. “What’s up?”

“Brady told me about what happened last night.”

That got my attention. “What?” I yelped as my pulse tripled.

“He said you told him that you get nightmares.”

My heart continued to pound hard in my chest. “And?”

Cole grinned. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. If you like to make yourself feel good before bed to help you sleep, that’s your business.”

Wait... did that mean he didn’t know that Brady had lent a hand last night?

Cole took a key out of his pocket and unlocked a drawer under his desk. He took out the basket they’d used when they confiscated my stuff. “I can’t give you back everything, since that’s not what this week is about, but why don’t you pick out one toy to take with you?” His amused expression faded as he looked my way. “Nightmares are no fun.”

“Thanks.” I got shakily to my feet and moved around the desk. Normally, even someone as shameless as me would be a bit embarrassed to rummage around a basket of sex toys in front of a guy, but I was just so relieved that he didn’t seem to know what Brady and I had done last night.

I pulled out a silver bullet vibe, in part because it was reliable and also because it would fit in my pocket. No way in hell I wanted to risk Gideon catching me walking the hallways with a translucent pink cock in my hands.

Cole looked skeptical. “Will that little thing get the job done?”

“Yes.” But not as well as his cousin could.

He locked my stuff up again and I remained standing. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. And there’s one more thing,” he said as I started for the door.

Shit. Maybe he did know about Brady and me.

But all he did was hand me a brown paper bag. “I picked this up when I was in town this morning.”

“What is it?”

Cole leaned back in his massive desk chair and rubbed his hand against his chin. “Aren’t you the queen of those, what do you call them, unboxing videos? Seems like you should be able to handle a paper bag.”

“Good point.” I opened the small bag. Even before I could see inside, the scent hit me—lavender. I pulled out a round purple bath bomb.

“Lavender’s supposed to help you sleep, if you take a bath before bed,” Cole said. “I thought it might help.”

“Thank you.” It was a kind gesture even though I didn’t currently have a bathtub.

But Cole seemed to have thought of that. “I asked the lady at the store. She says you can set it at the bottom of a shower, and as long as the water hits it, you’ll get the same effect. But my room’s got a bathtub, and you’re welcome to use it anytime. Just give me a heads-up and I’ll come in here and get some work done.”

“Thanks,” I said again. “That was really thoughtful of you.”

He nodded nonchalantly, but he looked pleased. “Save some of those thanks for after you try my pizza. I’m going to start on the dough in a few.”

“Looking forward to it.”

GIDEON

I was completely focused on the screen in front of me when an online influencer burst into the little office. “I thought you said you were starting on the dough—oh.” She sputtered to a halt when she saw it was me.

“You were expecting someone else?”

“Yes, Cole, since this is his study.” Her glare was designed to kill.

“And yet, he usually doesn’t usually make pizza in here.”

Rather than concede my point, she continued to shoot daggers at me. “Why are you here?” Her voice was accusatory, as if she wasn’t asking why I was in this office but more like why I existed in the first place.

“Just trying to balance the books.”

Her eyes fell on my laptop. “I’m surprised you don’t use an abacus.”

“It broke.” I picked up my phone. “My Blackberry did, too, so I have to use one of these new-fangled contraptions.”

“Why are you working on the books? I thought Cole did that.”

“Is it a problem if I help out a friend, Ms. James?”

She bounced on the balls of her feet, causing a fascinating jiggle in the camisole she wore. The spaghetti straps strained as she continued her impatient bouncing. “I’ve been called Ms.

James more often this week than the rest of my life put together.”

“What do your fans call you?”

“Lila.”

She was wearing yoga pants, too. What kind of woman dressed so skimpily in a house full of strange men? But then again, the things she posted online proved that she was shameless.

“Was there something you needed?”

Rather than answer, she countered with a question of her own. “Do you work in finance?”

“No.” I didn’t feel the need to tell her that I used to.

“Are you ever going to tell me what you do?”

“Not unless there’s a need for you to know.”

She rolled her eyes.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to finish this before dinner.”

“Fine.” Except she didn’t leave.

I sighed. “It’s going to be chilly out there tonight.”

She gave me a blank look.

“Out on the deck by the pizza oven. You might want to put some clothes on.”

She looked down at the light fabric clinging to her body. “I have clothes on.”

“More clothing, I meant.”

Lila stared at me. For a moment, she seemed like she was about to stick her tongue out at me. It made her look young, like the little girl she used to be. But then she sighed. “Thanks for the tip,” she said.

It was the least thankful tone I’d ever heard.

Lila might not have liked my advice, but she did follow it by putting on a hoodie and boots when we sat out on the deck, drinking beer and watching Cole use a broad wooden paddle to get the pizza in and out of the oven. But then inside, back at the dinner table, she was in her little tank top and leggings again. Did she ever wear a single stitch more than she had to?

After dinner, Penny excused herself to her room. By now, I'd heard enough to know that she had a boyfriend and that it wasn't a very smooth relationship. Likely she wanted to talk to her man.

The rest of us retired to the backyard again. Brady built a fire in the fire pit while Cole set up chairs and I poured wine. We were all moving slowly. Cole's pizza had been so damn good that I'd eaten more than I should have. So had the others.

The night sky was utterly amazing, as always. I wasn't a city dweller, like our guest, but the suburbs where my home was didn't have views like this. I drank freely as I enjoyed the night air, confident that I could sleep here for the night.

Lila was sitting close to the fire, perhaps for warmth. The flames brought out the tawny highlights in her hair. Since she seemed to be looking everywhere except my direction, I was able to observe her without being caught.

Her gaze kept returning to Cole. That wasn't too surprising, given his hideous shirt. But I didn't think that was it. It was like she was seeing him in a new light, perhaps discovering what I'd known all along, that he wasn't stuffy and formal. In fact, when he wasn't in city council mode, he could be quite the jokester. But you had to know him well to realize that. Apparently, Lila was figuring it out.

She watched Brady, too. That was a bit harder to work out, and I wondered if something had happened between them on their hikes. Though she was sitting across the fire from him, there seemed to be some kind of bond between them. Or the beginning of a bond.

Maybe I couldn't figure it out because I couldn't figure *her* out. How could someone so smart and talented be content to

film her life for others' viewing? Sure, I'd made some how-to videos, but that was about teaching.

But for Lila, her entire life was basically a brand. She herself was the product, and she marketed herself well. What I couldn't figure out was why. Didn't she ever want to have days off where she just kept to herself? Didn't she want to experience things for real instead of just making a show of it?

It baffled me that she wasted her time on something so frivolous.

As I watched, she crossed her leg, her foot bobbing in front of her. "I wish Penny would join us."

Brady nodded. "Is she talking to her boyfriend?"

"Probably."

Cole stared off into space for a few seconds before speaking up. "If she wants him to join her out here, that's fine with me."

"God, no," Lila said instantly. "I mean, it's a nice offer, but Jeff is about as reliable as her car."

We laughed at that. Since I'd been the one working on its subpar engine, I could fully appreciate the gravity of her comparison.

Silence descended for a few minutes before Lila broke it. "Do you guys have any marshmallows?"

Brady stared at her. "You can't possibly still be hungry."

She squirmed in her lawn chair. "No, but it's just with the fire, I thought maybe we could roast some."

"Sorry, I don't think we have any," Cole said, exchanging a look with Brady.

Lila nodded. I tried to keep a straight face, but I couldn't. She stared at me as I laughed.

"They hate marshmallows," I explained.

Her jaw dropped as she looked at the cousins. "How can you possibly hate marshmallows?"

“They’re sticky and gross,” Brady said, and Lila started laughing, too.

“If ever there were an inoffensive food, it seems like it would be that,” Lila said as she giggled. “They’re so cute and little.”

“Too squishy,” Cole said judgmentally. It sounded odd in his deep, solemn voice, and I couldn’t help laughing again.

“You guys are too much,” she said.

“We all have our preferences,” Brady scolded. “You didn’t seem very pleased by that first fish I pulled out of the water today.”

“Yeah, because it was sticky, squishy, and gross.” She giggled again, making her sound younger.

“We can get some from the store if it’s important to you,” Cole said.

“Thanks.” I thought that was all she was going to say, but then she spoke again, in a soft voice unlike the one she used when talking to her followers. “It’s just that when I was a little girl, my dad sometimes took me camping, and we’d roast marshmallows.”

Shit.

I gave a sigh and leaned forward in my chair. “I think there are some inside.”

Brady’s head whipped around. “There are?”

“Yeah. Remember that family from Wichita? They wanted to roast them over the fire, too.”

“Oh, yeah. But I thought they used them all up.”

“Nope.” I got to my feet. “I stashed them in the back of a cabinet so you two wouldn’t find them and throw them out.”

“Sneaky,” Brady commented.

“I’ll go get them. You guys find some sticks.”

Apparently, Brady’s hatred of sticky marshmallows didn’t prevent him from hopping up to escort Lila to the edge of the

woods. Oh, yeah, there was definitely something going on there. But if he thought Lila had completely forgiven him for his part in our deception, he was in for a nasty surprise.

Surprisingly, it wasn't Lila I was irritated with as I strode up the stairs. No, it was Cole, who remained by the fire. I'd told Lila the truth earlier when I said I was doing the books to help out a friend. But it frustrated the hell out of me that Cole only let me do so much.

Somedays, it felt like we were brothers. Other days, I was just the friend who was good with finances. What he didn't seem to realize was that this was my family home, too. The couple who had lived here for decades were pretty much the closest thing I'd had to parents. They'd loved me as much as I loved them. I understood why they'd left the house and the land to Brady and Cole, their blood kin, but I didn't understand why Cole kept me at arm's length for certain aspects of running it.

Well, there was pride. But shouldn't family trump that?

Anger made me slam the door of the cabinet too hard after I plucked the bag of marshmallows off the back of the top shelf. I froze, wondering if I'd disturbed Penny, but she didn't make an appearance.

I grabbed another bottle of wine as I headed back. As I went, I noticed the peeling wallpaper in the hallway. The way the windows in the lounge needed to be sealed. And the way the boards of the deck had too much give under my boots. I had the money to fix all those things and more—but Cole wouldn't let me. Apparently, I was only a brother in some ways, not others.

I heard a light laugh and caught a glimpse of Lila's radiant mane as she and Brady returned from the woods.

It helped a little to know that I wasn't the only one who wasn't living the life I was supposed to.

BRADY

Lila and Penny were the only ones who joined me at breakfast the next morning. Cole had to attend a meeting in town, and Gideon was working. My next shift at the diner wasn't until this evening—*if* they needed me. As I'd half expected, the management there was punishing me for requesting fewer shifts this week so I could spend time with our guests. They were giving me fewer shifts all right, but they wouldn't let me know ahead of time so that I had to basically be on call the whole damn week.

There were much better uses of my time, in my opinion.

One of them gave me a smile when I brought out a platter of pancakes. Lila looked normal enough, but her assistant seemed tired and a little out of it. Penny was scrolling on her phone, so I focused my attention on Ms. James.

“How'd you sleep?” Though she looked well-rested, I half wanted her to say that she'd slept horribly and therefore desired my special turndown service again. Not that I wanted her to have nightmares.

“I slept great,” Lila said with a quick glance at Penny. But her assistant didn't seem to be paying us any attention, so Lila added, “Thanks to Cole.”

For a moment, I thought she meant that Cole had offered her the same intimate service I had. Then, as my brain kicked in, I realized she was referring to him returning one of her toys.

“Glad to hear it.” My voice was normal enough not to alert Penny of what we were talking about—and to not let Lila know the incorrect assumption I’d made. Since when had conversations around here turned into such a minefield?

“All right, what do you need more of? Eggs? Coffee?” I asked in a louder voice, scanning the table.

“Nothing,” Lila said. “Can’t you sit down and eat with us?”

She had a point. I did so much cooking here that sometimes I forgot this was my home, too. Then again, it was different when we had paying guests—not that we got a ton of those.

Penny put down her phone when I sat at the head of the table where Cole usually sat. However, her mind still seemed to be miles away. Luckily, Lila was in a chatting mood.

We talked about nothing in particular, but it was nice. We also made plans to hike later. Normally, I went for a run through the woods, but I liked walking with Lila. When she stopped and smelled the roses, so to speak, it made me do the same. With her, I noticed things I hadn’t in years.

By the end of the meal, we’d even coaxed Penny into the conversation.

Once we were done, Lila and Penny volunteered to do the dishes. That was the deal—either you cooked or you cleaned up. Still, it didn’t sit right with me. I was already starting to think of Lila differently than I had at the start of the week. She’d gone from enemy to reluctant guest to... something else.

I just hadn’t figured out what that was yet.

“Seriously, we’ll do them,” Lila said. “But I’d like to finish my coffee first.”

“And maybe we could talk a little business,” Penny added.

“There’s definitely no hurry. Let me know if you can’t figure out where something goes.” Of course, since Gideon had managed to hide illicit—and disgusting—marshmallows

in my cabinets, it could be that I didn't know the kitchen as well as I thought I did.

I left, feeling unexpectedly adrift. I should probably go out and work on the cottage out back. Renovating it was a slow process. I didn't mind working out there, but Cole and Gideon had a better handle on the construction side of things.

I went out to the back deck and breathed in the fresh morning air. Maybe I should take a run. But it would be more fun to hike later with Lila.

Suddenly, I realized there was one thing I could do. I could put some of the pans I'd used in the sink to soak. Not the cast iron, of course. But the others would be easier for Lila and Penny to clean if I let them soak.

I used the side door to the kitchen so that I wouldn't disturb them. Moving quietly, I gathered up the dirty pans—at least until I heard my name.

Freezing in place, I listened intently. Had one of them just called me a cutie? That's what it had sounded like, but which one was it?

I set the pan I was holding on the nearest counter and crept to the door to the lounge. It wasn't eavesdropping if it was about you, right?

Once there, I could hear Lila and Penny much more clearly, but they were no longer talking about me—if they even had been. Maybe it had been some kind of male ego auditory hallucination.

Was that even a thing?

"It's not good," I heard Penny say, and I couldn't help but want to know what she was talking about. Especially if it involved Lila.

"What about all the videos we've posted this week?" Lila asked.

"Those appealed to our established viewers, but it didn't catch the attention of many new ones."

"Are our numbers actually down?"

There was silence for a moment, and I didn't know if Penny was pulling up some data or hesitating because she didn't want to give Lila bad news.

Then I heard the soft sound of something sliding across the table and realized what was happening. Penny was probably showing Lila something on her laptop.

A moment later, Lila cursed. "That's not good."

"No, it's not." Penny said. I'd known that she did the video production, but I hadn't realized she worked with Lila on the business side of things, too. "The videos, like the one with you using the typewriter, just didn't have the reach that your stuff normally does."

"Crap. So... we need to do more of the kinds of things we normally do, I guess."

"Yeah," Penny agreed. "But I don't know how we do that from here."

There was another silence, and then Lila's voice was thoughtful. "We could do tech reviews. Real ones, not a fake review of a typewriter. What's been sent?"

I didn't quite understand that until Penny read off a list of products that various companies and sponsors had recently shipped to Lila. It was pretty impressive to hear about the companies she was involved with.

"We could do some of those things from here, if the products were actually here," Lila mused.

"Could you get your building to forward them?" It took me a moment to realize that Penny meant that those tech products companies had sent were likely being held for her at her apartment building.

"They wouldn't get here in time."

"I could drive back and get them," Penny offered.

Lila said no at the same time I was shouting it in my head. Neither woman should be spending much time in that death trap Penny called a car.

“Or drop you off at the train station,” Penny said. When Lila didn’t answer, she continued. “Or we could just go home.”

I inhaled sharply, waiting to hear what Lila would say to that.

At long last, she responded. “No. I agreed to stay for a week. I need to stick it out.”

“But why?” Penny sounded puzzled.

Apparently, Lila was, too. “I can’t really explain it, I just know I have to stay.”

“Okay,” Penny said, though she still sounded a little baffled. “So let’s change up the type of videos we make here.”

“Like what?” Lila asked.

“Well, those guys challenged you. I thought—and likely the viewers thought—that this week would be a battle of high-tech versus low-tech.”

“Or at the very least, a battle of the sexes,” Lila added.

“Yeah. There’s no doubt those guys are hot.”

I made a mental note to give Penny the biggest piece of the pie I’d made for this evening.

“Besides challenging them outright about something and recording it, what else could we do?” Lila asked. I got the feeling that she didn’t normally depend on her assistant to come up with ideas. It reminded me of how out of her element she was out here. A combination of sympathy and guilt flooded my system.

Penny sighed. “I watched some stuff online from influencers who have brands similar to ours. Their situations aren’t quite the same as the one we’re in now, but it did give me an idea. What if you played some pranks on these guys and we filmed it?”

I held my breath as I waited for Lila’s answer. Finally, she spoke. “I don’t want to do that.”

“Why not? I think our viewers would really respond to that. And besides, those guys did it to you with that fake massage thing.”

“Yeah. But I just... if we pranked them now, we could claim that they deserved it because of that day. But then they could claim that I deserved it because of the way I went after them. And it’ll never end.”

“True,” Penny said, sounding thoughtful. “I still don’t get why you did that. I’d never heard you go off on anyone like that before.”

Lila’s sigh was audible even from where I hid in the kitchen. “I know. I don’t really know why I did that, either.”

There was silence again, and I pictured Penny reaching out and patting Lila’s hand. “It might be something worth thinking about,” Penny said at last.

“Yeah, you’re right.” There was the sound of a chair pushing back from the table. “But for now, let’s get to work on those dishes.”

I slipped silently out the side door and darted downstairs to the rec room. I suspected it would be a long time before I could get the conversation I’d just overheard out of my mind.

LILA

The black dress I wore was much too small for me. My mom had gotten it for me in middle school when I'd been part of the school choir. Now it felt tight and restrictive as I entered the church.

Go back.

I looked around, trying to figure out who said that. I couldn't go back. He was my father.

This already happened. It's a dream.

Ever since I'd come home from school and found my dad in his favorite armchair, I'd hoped with all my heart that it was just a really bad dream. But it wasn't.

Mom and I sat in the front pew. I looked everywhere except at the coffin. Dad wasn't supposed to be in there. He was supposed to be at the kitchen table, eating dinner. Or at his job at the factory. Or out in the garage, working on his Ford Torino while the neighborhood boys watched in awe.

He wasn't supposed to be here.

Wake up. Don't do this to yourself.

The minister talked as if he knew my dad, but he didn't. Very few of these people did. I peeked around the room from under my bangs. There were men from the factory, and even some of the bosses he'd hated. And women from my mom's work. People from the neighborhood. And—

I froze, because I saw a face I wasn't expecting to see. A face that didn't belong here.

Or did it?

“Lila, honey, wake up. You're having a nightmare.”

The voice barely registered, but somehow, I knew it was different from the voice that had been in my head a moment ago.

Something touched my forehead. “Come on, sweetheart, wake up.”

My eyes flew open, and I strained to draw in a breath. Brady was on the bed next to me, concern in his eyes as he cupped my chin and tilted my face to his. “You're okay, Lila. You're okay. It was just a dream.”

“He—he wasn't supposed to be there,” I gasped.

“Just breathe, Lila. Take a deep breath.”

I did as Brady said, my chest rising and falling under the covers as I took in as much air as I could. Brady was still cupping my face, but when I pulled back, he let go.

“Better?” he asked when my breathing slowed.

“Yeah.” Kind of.

He touched my arm. “You scared me. I heard you crying out from halfway across the house.”

I frowned. “Didn't Penny hear me?”

“Last I saw her, she was out back taking pictures.”

Oh. That made sense. She'd said she wanted to take some in case Cole ever redid his website.

Brady was still watching me intently, as if he was afraid I'd start screaming again. “Do you want me to get her for you?”

“No, I'm okay.” Or at least I would be.

“I didn't know you got these kinds of nightmares during a nap.”

“Me either. I almost never take naps unless I’m sick.”

Wrinkles creased Brady’s forehead. “Are you sick?”

“No. Just... tired. This has been a strange week.”

“We really threw you off your game by bringing you here.”

My mind returned to the conversation Penny and I had this morning, and at first, I thought he meant that he, Cole, and Gideon had succeeded in their mission to throw me for a loop. But the concern in his blue eyes told the truth. He felt bad that my regularly scheduled life had been disrupted—and that I was hurting because of it.

“I’m okay,” I said.

He nodded but looked unconvinced. “Do you want to sleep some more?”

“God, no.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? You still look tired. If you tell me where that vibrator of yours is, I could—”

“No,” I said firmly. And despite my weariness, I couldn’t help but think of how he’d outperformed one of my favorite toys. “I think I’ll just rest for a bit longer.”

“Can I get you anything?” Brady was still clearly in mother hen mode, but I had to admit it was kind of nice to have someone take care of me. “A book? A glass of water? A spoon?”

My eyes widened at that last part. “A spoon? For a glass of water?”

He smiled. “No, to lean against. If you want to rest a bit longer, I volunteer to be the big spoon—no strings attached.”

For a moment, all I could do was to stare at him. What kind of a man offered that? Certainly not the ones I’d ever dated.

“I’d like that a lot.”

COLE

A light rain fell outside as we worked in the old smokehouse. Truth be told, it was on the cool side, but in here, we were working up a sweat, sawing two-by-fours and hanging drywall.

And drinking beer, of course.

“How come you’re not working tonight?” Gideon asked Brady.

“Because I drove all the way into town, and they said they didn’t need me. Bastards.”

“That fucking diner doesn’t deserve a chef like you,” Gideon said heatedly.

“It sure doesn’t,” I agreed.

Brady wielded a nail gun and sharp sounds like gunfire filled the room. When the echo faded away, he spoke gruffly. “Okay then, I’ll apply to work at the town’s other diner.”

Which, of course, didn’t exist. “Just wait until we get enough business here. Then you can quit this job.”

Brady pushed his safety goggles up on top of his head and looked around. “And you really think adding a honeymoon suite out here is going to do that?”

“Well, we’ve still got the other half of our plan to get Lila to drum up business for us.”

“Which she doesn’t know about and probably wouldn’t help with if she did,” Gideon said.

So, yeah, it wasn't like there weren't flaws in the plan.

"I'm worried about her," Brady said.

"We all are. But we knew it might not work out when we went into this," I said.

"No, not that." He wiped the sweat from his brow and leaned against a sawhorse. "I'm worried about her... I don't know what you'd call it. Her well-being."

Gideon snorted. "I realize she probably feels like a week in the middle of nowhere is a tragedy, but it's really not."

"Will you guys just shut up and listen?"

Gideon and I stared at Brady. He never spoke to us like that. Or to anyone.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"She's having nightmares. Bad ones."

I frowned. "I thought that that thing I gave her was supposed to solve that." That wasn't very clear, but Brady would know what I mean.

Gideon didn't, though. "What'd you give her, a sedative or something?"

"No."

My old friend just stared at me.

Finally, I shrugged. "I gave her back one of her toys. Apparently, if she comes before she goes to sleep, then she sleeps deeply and doesn't have bad dreams."

Gideon swore. "You gave her royal highness some of her tech back just so she could get herself off before bed?"

"It's not like that," Brady said. "Her nightmares are really bad. They're about her dad dying."

Gideon's head swung around sharply. "Is that what she told you?"

"It's the truth," Brady insisted. "I saw her today, thrashing around. Crying out about how her dad wasn't supposed to be there. I think she was dreaming she was at his funeral."

“Why were you in her room while she was asleep?” Gideon asked. His normally tan face was paler than usual though I couldn’t figure out why. I’d gotten the impression that he wasn’t much of a fan of our guest.

“I heard her crying out and I went in there,” Brady said. “I’m serious, it was bad.”

After a long moment, Gideon’s tense posture relaxed. “Well, if that’s the case, let her have her orgasms.”

“We already did,” I said.

“But it’s not just that,” Brady continued. “I overheard her and Penny talking. Being out here has caused them a drop in viewership.”

Okay, I was sympathetic about the nightmares, but this was a different story. “So? She makes enough to afford an assistant from her social media channels. Ours barely make enough to buy drywall.”

“We didn’t bring her out here to torture her,” Brady said.

“*Torture?*” Gideon echoed, his voice tinged with sarcasm. “We’ve given her free room and board, some truly excellent meals, and a week in a beautiful forest. How’s that torture?”

“Because being out here is upsetting her.”

I couldn’t disagree with that one. “Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know.” Brady sounded upset. “But we tricked her into coming out here, took away her tech, and took her completely out of her element.”

“All she ever would’ve had to do was to make a full, public apology,” Gideon commented. “We’ve always agreed on that.”

“But we set it up so she’d accept the challenge to save face,” Brady reminded him.

“Look, she’s here now. If that’s stressing her out, let’s figure out how to fix it,” I said.

“If only we knew why she’s stressed,” Brady said.

Stressed. A few days ago, I'd thought of her as sassy. But, yeah, stressed seemed more apt now.

Brady was still trying to figure out why. "It can't all be because we took away her sex toys."

Gideon snorted. "It's not."

Brady took offense at that. "What makes you the expert? You've spent the least time with her."

"But I've watched her online. I've seen what makes her tick."

Okay, his superior tone was getting to me, too. "Care to enlighten us?"

"Her career, hell, her whole life involves talking to people."

I said what Brady must've been thinking, too. "So? Don't we all talk to people?"

Gideon shook his head. "Not like that. We're talking to each other here. But Lila only talks to people, it's not a conversation. Perhaps I should've said she talks *at* people. As in, she's the only one talking."

"Okay, so she spends her days in podcast mode," Brady said. "But I don't get why you think that affects what's going on here."

"She lives alone. She talks at people, not to them. She never connects with anyone."

"There's Penny."

"I'm guessing that's one of the few people she has in-depth conversations with."

Brady clenched his jaw. "Are you saying she's lonely?"

"I'm saying she spends a lot of her life alone," Gideon responded. "And now she's here, staying with us, and connecting with us every day. It's a lot different than what she's used to."

This was starting to make sense. “I guess it could be a form of culture shock for her. It’s likely every bit as strange to her as it was going from a city of three million people to Donovan’s Mill.”

Everyone was silent for a moment as we thought that over.

“So that may be the problem, but I have no clue what to do about it. Does anyone?” I didn’t expect anyone to have an answer, but apparently, Brady did.

“We get rid of Penny,” he said.

Silence greeted that, and then Gideon turned to sarcasm—naturally. “Should we stash her in the storm cellar or feed her to the fish in the lake?”

Brady rolled his eyes. “Get rid of her for one night,” he clarified.

“Why?” I asked. “If the problem is that Lila’s not used to connecting with people, why take away the one person she has a strong bond with?”

“So that we can focus on Lila,” Brady said. “Get to know her better and see if we can help whatever’s bothering her.”

“That’s a lot to fit into one night,” Gideon said. “And how are we going to lure Penny away?”

“I was thinking we could send her to a movie or something,” Brady said.

“Why would she go without Lila? Or at all? She’s on the clock here. This isn’t a week’s vacation for her, she has to work,” I pointed out.

Brady paced back and forth, his boots sending sawdust flying. “She’d leave for the right reason.”

“Something to do with her boyfriend?” I ventured.

“Doubtful. What do we really know about her?” Brady asked.

“She’s smart,” I said.

“And shy,” Gideon added. “She seems pretty devoted to Lila.”

“She’s good with making and editing videos,” I said.

Brady paced a few more times. “There’s not much there we can use.”

“She has bad taste in men and in cars,” Gideon said.

“Not helping.” Brady frowned as he thought it through.

I snapped my fingers. “She knows art.”

“What?”

“She knows about art, and she likes it. She commented on the techniques used in Gran’s landscapes.”

“That might be something we can work with,” Brady said.

Gideon already had his phone out. “There’s an impressionist exhibit at the Art Institute.” He swiped and tapped on the little screen. “And there are still a few tickets for tomorrow night.”

Brady clapped his hands together. “That’s perfect. It’ll get her out of the inn, and she’ll enjoy it as well.”

I shook my head. “She’s not going to abandon Lila. If you’ve noticed that Lila’s upset, then Penny has, too.”

Gideon tilted his head to the side, like he often did when he was focused on the inn’s finances. “What if Lila encouraged her to go?”

“Why would she do that?” I asked.

Brady’s face grew animated. “All we have to do is tell her that a friend of ours has an extra ticket and needs someone to go with them. Lila will know how much Penny would like this kind of thing.”

“But what friend would take her?” Gideon asked.

“We’ll have to bribe a single buddy of ours.” I knew a couple of guys from my softball team who would subject themselves to an art exhibit if the price was right and included a case of beer.

Brady frowned. “We don’t want to get Penny in trouble with her boyfriend.”

“Plus, any single guy we sent with her would hit on her. She’s not exactly hideous to look at,” Gideon said.

He was right. The last thing Penny needed was a horny young man drooling over her while she tried to enjoy the exhibit.

Brady snapped his fingers. “Sandy will do it. Sandy from my diner.”

“She likes art?” Sandy was great, but she didn’t strike me as a lover of culture.

“She likes Chicago. She’d jump at the chance for a night in the city as long as it’s on our dime.”

Which likely meant Gideon’s dime. He was tapping away on his phone, probably already purchasing the tickets. It bothered me that we couldn’t all take turns paying for things, but the truth was, sometimes we couldn’t.

Brady didn’t seem to have the same concerns. “This is perfect. Sandy can drive, so we don’t have to worry about Penny’s car. She’ll talk Penny’s ear off, but she’ll be good company for the evening. I’ll call her right now.”

He disappeared into the other room, and Gideon was still tapping on his phone. “Think they’ll want dinner first?”

The honest answer was yes, but I wasn’t going to make that call. It was Gideon’s money, so he was the one who should decide how to spend it.

Brady came back into the room, a big smile on his face. “I take it she said yes?” I asked.

“She did.” He looked at Gideon. “All set?”

“All set.”

Good. We had a plan to spend some time alone with Lila.

Now we just had to figure out how we were going to use that time.

LILA

“I wish Brady’s coworker had two extra tickets,” Penny said while she checked her outfit in the mirror behind the door of my room.

“To be honest, I think you’ll get more out of the exhibit than me.” I gave her a gentle smile. “But please say ‘hi’ to civilization for me. I miss it.”

“I feel like I’m abandoning you.”

“It’s one night. I’ll survive.” My assistant patted her hair into place. It was still in a ponytail that hung down one shoulder, but she’d put in some braids at the top and sides. She looked amazing.

Unfortunately, she didn’t seem to realize that.

“Are you sure it’s okay to wear these leggings?” she asked my reflection in the mirror.

“With those boots, yes. And the blazer. Just keep it buttoned.” I got off the bed and went over to my dresser. “And wear these earrings.”

“Thank you.” Penny’s hands trembled while she put them on. “And for the clothes, too.” I’d brought nicer things than she had, for the simple reason that I was the one who had to appear on camera.

“Turn around.”

She did, self-consciously brushing off the front of the blazer.

“You look fantastic.” She truly did. With her long dark hair and her dark flashing eyes, she was a true beauty.

Too bad she couldn’t see it.

“Did you tell Jeff about this?”

“Yes. I wanted to let him know I was going to be in Chicago, just in case he wanted to... you know, meet us at the restaurant or something.”

“And did he?”

“No. He said he had plans tonight, too.”

I looked away, trying to hide my suspicion that Jeff’s main plan was to get up to no good.

There was a knock at the door, and then we heard Brady’s voice. “Sandy’s here, Penny.”

She gulped, and I smiled at her. “Relax, it’s not a date. It sounds like Brady’s friend just really wanted to go to the thing at the Art Institute and her sister got sick. You’re doing her a favor.”

My assistant nodded, but she still looked a bit nervous.

“Could you do *me* a favor?” I asked.

“Sure. What is it?”

“Have fun tonight.” I gave her a warm smile. “You deserve it.”

She returned my smile. “So do you. See you later.”

Ninety seconds later, I heard a car driving away. A car that didn’t sound like it was on the edge of a breakdown, fortunately.

But that meant it was just me, Brady, Cole, and Gideon for the rest of the afternoon and the evening.

I couldn’t even begin to imagine all the things that could go wrong with that setup.

LILA

Tap. Tap. Tap.

It was a half an hour after Penny left, and even though I probably could've slipped into her room and used her laptop, I was back at the typewriter again.

After my conversation with Penny yesterday, I'd been thinking about some new directions to take my brand. Now, for some reason, I was trying to type up my plans on this ancient machine.

Why?

I wasn't exactly sure. Maybe because it was slow going. Each key depressed much further than a laptop key. I had to type slowly and carefully, and that gave me time to think.

"Hey there."

I jumped when I heard a voice behind me and then relaxed when I realized it was Brady.

He put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a smile. "You're getting good at that. And now I know what to get you for Christmas."

I laughed and advanced the paper so that I could eventually pluck it out of the machine. "I don't know why, but I like it."

He clucked his tongue. "Lila James, going for the low-tech option voluntarily. Who would've thought?"

"It does seem rather unlikely. Anyway, what's up?"

“We thought we could shoot some video this afternoon.”

I frowned. “Penny’s not here.”

“And that would be a problem if she were the only one who knew how to use a camera phone.” I rolled my eyes for form, but he did have a point. “Besides, I thought we could mostly do some live streams.”

“We?” Usually, when I recorded live it was just me.

“If you trust us to be on our best behavior,” Brady said.

Except for the occasional cameo, the last time we’d all live streamed together was the day of the fake massage. But I did trust them, or at least I trusted Brady. I put my hand on his as I looked up at him. “My audience might be disappointed if you all behaved too well.”

He grinned. “Trust me, despite our best intentions, I doubt there’s much danger of that. Come on, the guys are waiting downstairs.”

For the rest of the afternoon, we broadcast a series of live streams based around a common theme: competition. I played pool against Cole. Darts against Gideon.

And Brady and I participated in a very bizarre and an extremely loud competition out in the old smokehouse they were fixing up. It involved seeing who could hammer a nail into a board the quickest. Spoiler alert: Brady could. But I wiped the floor with the other two in pool and in darts.

All in all, it was a surprisingly fun afternoon. I was even polite with Gideon, and he with me—either on his own accord or because Brady had told him to be.

Brady grilled steaks for dinner, and it was delicious. And while we were eating, the guys told me some of their plans for increasing the inn’s business.

To my surprise, some of those plans included me.

“What we’re really hoping will drum up business is themed weekends,” Cole began. I didn’t know what he meant, but I wanted to.

Gideon chimed in. “You know those videos we post on our channel? The how-to stuff?”

“Yes.”

“We also offer in-person workshops where we teach people hands on,” he said.

I nodded, but I couldn’t imagine who would attend them. Wouldn’t the people who lived way out here have developed basically the same skill set these guys had? Well, most people probably weren’t as good of cooks as Brady.

Cole nodded when I brought that up. “That’s one of the things we want to offer.”

“Cooking classes?”

“Yes. But also, basic home repair, auto maintenance, carpentry, outdoors skills, and so on.”

“Didn’t you say you already offer classes like that?”

Brady took over. “Yes, but this would be a whole weekend of activities. People could book a two-night stay at the inn and attend the classes for free. One weekend could be on home repair, and the next on outdoor skills, and so on.”

I still didn’t know where they’d find people willing to attend, but on the surface, it didn’t seem like a bad idea. “So where do I come into this?”

Cole smiled, and as always, it was nice to see his normally serious expression lighten up. “Well, think about it. As you’ve pointed out, our inn does have beds and serve breakfast. For couples, who’s more likely to book a weekend stay, the man or the woman?”

“The woman,” I said instantly.

“And your audience is mostly women,” Brady said.

But I still didn’t get it. “So?”

“So, your viewers can book a weekend here for themselves and their boyfriends or husbands. The men won’t sign up themselves, but their girlfriends can do it for them.”

“Yeah, but...” I trailed off. They actually had a point. A lot of times, it was the woman who organized activities for the couple. If women thought their man would have a fun time here doing guy stuff while they got a weekend away, they just might book a stay. “I guess that might work.”

“Only if you’re on board,” Brady said. “And are willing to talk this place up to your audience.”

“I... I’ll think about it.” I knew I would, but not right at this moment. Not when I was full and drowsy from another amazing meal by Brady. The bottom line was that I did want to help these guys, but there was still a lot of baggage between us.”

“Thank you,” Brady said. “That’s all we ask.”

Cole shook his head. “That’s not all I’m going to ask Lila. I’ve been looking at some websites for other small inns, and I found some that I like. Can I show you back in my office and maybe you can tell me which aspects would work best for redoing our website?”

“Now?” I’d been kind of hoping to retire early and spend some time with my vibrator before bed.

“It’ll get you out of doing dishes,” Gideon said shrewdly.

“Now sounds great,” I told Cole.

“See? Look how well their online reservation system integrates with their website. The last thing you want to do is to make your potential customers click away from your website to reserve a room.”

“I thought the last thing we wanted was to make customers actually call us to make a reservation.” Cole sounded a bit grumpy, but I knew he’d come around.

“That too,” I said with a grin. “Really, the changes I’m suggesting aren’t all that much. But once they’re done, you’re going to have a beautiful, responsive website that works for you, not against you.”

“Sounds expensive,” Cole said. “But it also sounds good.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to volunteer to do most of the work myself, but something held me back. Maybe someday we'd get to that point, however.

“Thank you for your help, Lila.”

“You're welcome. Do you want to look at more? Because I'd like to show you—”

“Hon, my head's already spinning. I do appreciate the help, but I'm just a small-town boy. I don't pivot that quickly.”

I didn't believe that for a moment. There wasn't much small town about Cole's mind. But I did understand the need to think things through before proceeding. “Fair enough,” I said. That probably should've been my cue to head off to my room, but I'd enjoyed talking to him this past hour.

It had also been really nice sitting so close to him as we peered at the computer screen. At times, I'd been close enough to feel the heat from his skin and to smell his fresh, clean scent. His was different than Brady's, more like aged and polished wood instead of a pine forest.

To my surprise, I wasn't ready to leave his company. “Want to play a game? There's a vast collection of them out in the lounge. Some of them were even made in this century.”

Cole chuckled. “I actually have a better idea.”

“What's that?”

“Why don't you put on a jacket and some warm shoes, and I'll show you.”

“We're going outside? At night? Won't I get eaten by a bear?”

Cole grinned. “Not while I'm around, you won't.”

After I changed, I found Cole in the kitchen gathering some glasses. “Here,” he said, handing me two bottles of wine.

That's when I noticed something. “They didn't do the dishes.”

Cole grinned. “They were otherwise engaged. Come on, I'll show you.”

LILA

“Oh my god,” I said softly as I stood on the deck and looked out into the yard. Cole stood next to me, his tall, warm body close enough to touch.

The clearing behind the house had completely been transformed. Strings of lights stretched between the trees and a large, dome-shaped tent that was now set up in the middle of the space. More light came from inside it. Brady and Gideon sat on lawn chairs outside the entrance to the tent, as if they were on its front porch.

“When did they do all this?”

“While we were looking at websites,” Cole said. “But we’ve been planning this out for a while, it wasn’t just the spur of the moment.”

“You planned this?” I got the sense that he didn’t just mean for tonight.

“We’re going to offer it as an extra place to stay in the future. In another few months, people will be able to book a room in the inn, the honeymoon suite in the cottage, and this tent. We figure some families will want to try out the tent with their kids. Or maybe a group of friends.”

“I think they will,” I said as I slowly made my way down the stairs. I didn’t want to fall, but my attention was drawn back to the tent. It was nice and large. It looked like something someone would want to stay in rather than have to stay in. “Glamping is in right now.”

“Glamping?” Brady repeated as I drew near.

“Glamorous camping. It’s like camping but in a luxurious way. Isn’t that what you were going for? Because I’d say you really hit the mark.” The tent was clean and new and downright inviting. “Can I go inside?”

“Be our guest.” Gideon held open one side of the canvas door, and I stooped to step into it.

Once inside, I was able to straighten up. I bet even Cole would be able to stand upright in here, at least in the center of the tent.

Turning in a slow circle, I grinned. This was perfect. There were soft fake-fur blankets and mounds of pillows on the floor of the tent. More lights hung from the ceiling. There was a little low table and a small heater in the corner that seemed remarkably effective.

I beamed at the others when they joined me inside. “You guys, this is going to get booked out so fast once we get it up on the new website.”

“We?” Gideon said, and I blushed.

“I just meant—”

“Lila’s already been a big help with my plans for the website,” Cole interrupted, and I was grateful he’d taken the attention off me.

“Shall we try it out? Have some wine and snacks?” Brady asked.

“Sounds good.” I settled on a plush blanket on the throw, and the guys sat down, too. “What are we having? Marshmallows?”

Brady threw a pillow at me while Cole groaned. Gideon actually laughed, though. Normally, it seemed like the stick lodged up his butt prevented him from doing that.

Soon, we all had wine and a shared tray of cheese and crackers. Gideon had done something so that the lights in the tent were lowered. It created an intimate, and quite frankly, romantic atmosphere. I had a feeling that in the winter, this

tent was going to give the honeymoon suite a run for its money—if it ever got done.

The men were telling me about the plans for the honeymoon suite now. It was two rooms, neither of which—they assured me—smelled like cured meat anymore. And when they were done telling me about the finishing touches they planned to add, and the cozy furniture they planned to order, talk turned to the summer they'd slept out there.

“Every night?” I asked.

“Nah,” Cole said. “Just when Gran thought we were laughing and talking too loudly late into the evening.”

“So yeah, basically every night,” Brady said, and we all laughed.

“Did you bring snacks and stuff out there?”

It was Gideon who answered. “Yep. No wine—though once we found a case of beer that had been forgotten in a shopping cart outside the grocery store. Remember how sick we were the next day?”

“It was an epic hangover,” Brady said.

“I’m pretty sure the night before was epic, too. If only I could remember it,” Cole said.

I grinned. “You guys were all in high school that first summer Gidon spent out here, right?”

“I was just about to enter my freshman year,” Brady said.

“So did you ever bring any girls out here?”

“No,” Cole said, sounding offended.

“No,” Brady said at the same time, but he sounded regretful.

We all looked at Gideon. “None that you know of.”

This time, the pillows were thrown at him. He put his hands up in self-defense. “There were plenty of girls in the town who wanted to get their hands on the new guy.”

I stared at him speculatively. I believed what he said, not because he was a particularly truthful person in general, but because he had the body to back up his words. Despite his personality flaws, he was pretty much the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome.

It took a conscious effort to look away from him. Something about this intimate setting was making me reevaluate these men... and the tendency to forgive and forget was there, too. I'd have to be careful about that one.

We drank more wine and talked more, and eventually, my eyelids began to droop. I didn't know if it was because of the fresh night air or the wine.

"I'm getting sleepy," I said.

"There are pillows everywhere," Brady pointed out. "Pick one and rest your eyes for a moment."

It sounded like a good idea to me. I swung my legs out to the side and started to stretch out.

Instead of a soft pillow, my head encountered a hard hand instead. "Not there," Gideon said hastily.

"What?" I twisted my head to look up at him.

"You almost put your head in what's left of the cheese tray," he explained as he scooted closer. "You've got some crumbs in your hair now."

His long fingers combed through my hair as he picked bits of crackers out of it.

It felt good. It felt like a scalp massage—and I'd forgotten how damn good he was at it.

His fingers still glided through my waves even though I was pretty sure he'd gotten the crumbs out. A moan escaped my lips, and my eyes widened as my cheeks pinked and mortification set in. "I should get—" I tried to sit up, but Gideon's hypnotic hands were still in my hair, stroking softly.

Brady watched us with a frown. "Let her be," he said mildly. "After what happened, she's sensitive about all forms of massage."

But Gideon's strong fingers danced along my scalp, and I moaned again. He leaned forward, his face appearing upside down to me. "Do you want me to stop?"

I should. I did. "I... I..."

"What we did was crappy. A lot crappier than I realized at the time," Gideon said. "But couldn't tonight be a sort of time out from all of that? Just one night?"

It felt like all three of them were holding their breath, waiting for my answer.

"Okay." My voice was small, but they heard me. Gideon scooted forward, until his crossed legs were under my neck. I settled on my back as he supported my head with his hands as he stroked my scalp with his thumbs. I groaned. I'd forgotten how damn good this felt.

Warmth pressed against my side. I opened my eyes to find Brady lying next to me. Someone had dimmed the lights, but I knew it was him. I was getting used to feeling him next to me.

Cole was still sitting upright and looked over him and gave him a smile. Then I patted the free space on the other side of me.

He smiled as he lowered himself down next to me.

"Well, aren't we all cozy," Gideon observed from above me. But he could be as sarcastic as he wanted as long as he didn't stop the spectacular massage.

"Can it," Cole growled. To my surprise, he took my hand in his and started rubbing my palm and squeezing my fingers. I'd never had a hand massage before, but it felt good. A moment later, Brady copied him on the other side.

"Maybe we could include a triple massage when we rent this place out—"

This time, both Brady and Cole told Gideon to can it. Brady rolled away, and a few seconds later, soft music filled the tent.

Above my head, Gideon shook his head, but he stopped making sarcastic remarks. He continued to stroke my head

with his amazing skill, and I moaned.

Brady shifted next to me. “When you moan like that, it gives me ideas.”

Mm, I liked the sound of that. “What kind of ideas?”

“You want me to say them aloud?” He sounded surprised.

“Why not?” I said.

I could feel Cole nod from my other side. “I like ideas.”

“Me too,” Gideon said.

I nudged Brady with my elbow. “Don’t keep us in suspense.”

Brady took a deep breath. “Since you’re obviously enjoying the way Gideon’s touching you, I wondered if you might like six hands massaging you.”

My pulse rate quickened, but I couldn’t help pointing out the obvious. “I do have six hands massaging me.” It was true that Cole and Brady were only rubbing my hands, but it was still true.

Gideon tugged on a strand of hair, bringing my attention back to him. “I think you know what Brady’s trying to say.”

Yeah... I think I did, too. “Six hands and, um, less clothing?”

“Exactly,” Brady said. All three men waited for my answer.

I mulled it over for a microsecond and nodded. I bent my knee and pushed my boot off with my toe. Then I did the other. “Can I get some help?”

It turned out there were several volunteers. Brady undid the zipper on my hoodie. He eased it off one shoulder, and his cousin eased it off the shoulder. They continued to work as a team until the only thing I had on was the soft throw Brady draped over me.

Cole kissed the bare skin of my arm. “You’re so beautiful, Lila.”

“You’re not so bad yourself. The same goes for all of you.” Gideon was still rubbing my head in a way that felt amazing. I stretched my bare skin under the soft blanket, and it slipped off one breast. “Oops.”

Cole laughed. “Let me keep that warm for you.” His mouth descended on my nipple and I moaned.

“Got another one of those for me?” Brady asked. Then he zeroed in on it without waiting for an answer.”

Since Gideon was the only one without his mouth full, he chuckled. “Now you’ve got six hands and two mouths on you. It’s almost like a full house.” He glanced around. “Or a full tent.”

I wanted to respond, but it felt so damn good... especially when Brady’s hand slid down my stomach and nestled between my parted legs. “Oh god,” I moaned.

Cole closed his teeth gently around my nipple and then let it slip out of his mouth. “Want more?”

“God yes.”

He grinned and gave me a brief but scorching kiss on the lips. Then he scooted down my body and lifted the blanket.

Oh.

My.

God.

Brady reached down and grabbed one of my knees, giving his cousin access. Then he covered my mouth with his, swallowing my moan when Cole blew warm air across my slit.

His large hand dug into my soft thigh as he spread me open, his tongue darting between my folds. It felt so good that my eyes rolled back into my head. But it wasn’t just the amazing sensations. It was also the feeling of being wanted—and wanting these three men.

As Cole’s tongue danced along my heated skin, I reached a hand up and grabbed Gideon’s shirt. “Come down here.”

Heat filled his side as he laid my head down on a pillow and moved to my side. He cupped my breast as I pulled him in for a kiss.

Cole slipped one long finger and then two inside me as Brady and Gideon caressed my breasts. And as I took turns kissing one and then the other.

And when Cole worked me up into a frenzy and I cried out, I knew we had the whole night ahead of us. To please each other. To make each other moan.

And who knew... maybe even to talk about this crazy thing that was happening and figure out what it meant.

To my surprise, I found myself looking as forward to that conversation as I was to giving and receiving this amazing pleasure.

LILA

And then it was the end of our week together. I packed up my things. I headed back to the city. And before I knew it, I was unlocking the door to my apartment.

Fortunately, I wasn't alone.

Since we weren't ready to cut things off right at the one-week mark, I convinced the guys to spend a few days with me at my place before they reopened the inn.

It was wild having the guys here. For low-tech aficionados, they sure got a kick out of my gleaming, programmable coffee machine. Or the mattress of my bed that would undulate and vibrate. Or my virtual reality headset. That last one was a hit among everyone, but I especially liked watching Gidon use it to play a war game in which he mimed shooting arrows and fighting with a sword. It was such a pleasure to watch his muscles move—especially after I convinced him that he'd be too hot to play the game with his shirt on.

Then we all slept in my large bed, except it really didn't feel very large with three men in it. And we really didn't sleep very much.

In the morning, I took them to one of my favorite diners for breakfast. To my surprise, it didn't taste as good as I remembered. Perhaps I'd gotten spoiled by Brady's cooking.

And after breakfast—I looked at those three amazing men and answered a question they'd asked me many times over the weekend. "Okay," I said.

“Okay what?” Brady said automatically. Then his face lit with understanding. “You mean it?”

“Yes. I’ll come back to the inn with you. You’re right, we need more time to figure out what all this means.”

Brady hugged me, and Gideon did, too. Then Cole, of all people, whispered something extremely naughty when it was his turn to hug me. “It means lots and lots of great sex for you.”

I laughed and pinched him on the ass before letting him go.

As we walked back to my apartment from the diner, we made plans. “I’d like some time to pack some more clothes.”

“Of course,” Brady said. “Pack anything you’d like. This time, we won’t be searching your luggage.” But then he paused. “Except I have to head back soon because I have a shift at the diner. I almost forgot.”

“It’s not a problem. I can drive back with you and Gideon can bring Lila when she’s ready.”

I turned to Gideon. “Is that okay?” It was a good thing we’d brought two cars.

He nodded. “If you’re not in too much of a hurry to return to the world’s smallest shower stalls, maybe we can swing by my place so that I can pick up some clothes, too.”

“Sure. I’d like to see your place.”

“Then it’s all settled then.” Cole looked at his watch. “Should we get going?”

“Guess so,” Brady said.

I reached out and hooked my index finger through one of the belt loops on Brady’s jeans. Then I did the same to Cole. “Are you sure you can’t stay just a *little* longer?”

Cole grinned. “Maybe just a little.”

Gideon's house was a bit of a surprise. It was a nice, normal, fairly modern looking two story home. And it was in a nice, normal subdivision. It was about as different from the inn as you could get. But it wasn't quite as modern or as sleek as my place. I grinned when I realized that it was probably the perfect mid-point between my place at the inn, both in terms of distance and style.

"What are you smiling at?" Gideon asked, but he was grinning, too.

"It's just fun seeing where you live."

"If you say so." His tone was lighter than his words.

"Mind if I poke around?"

"Poke away," he said. "I've just got to grab a few things upstairs." He strode to the stairs and then stopped, looking back at me with an evil grin. "Do you need anything for your stay at the inn? I've got an impressive array of whips, chains, and ropes."

I grinned, waiving him off. "Go pack or we won't make it to the inn before dark."

While he was upstairs, I looked around, starting with the kitchen. The appliances seemed new. The gleaming stainless steel reminded me of the stuff in my kitchen. I had the feeling Brady would love this place.

I opened a door off the kitchen and found a pantry, which wasn't of interest to me. Another door led to the laundry room. The washer and dryer looked brand new, and I started envisioning ways we could get him to swap Brady and Cole for the ancient ones in the basement of the inn.

Another door led off the laundry room, and I opened it, curious about what it could be.

The smell of oil hit my nose immediately, but instead of cringing back, I stopped. There was something very familiar about that smell. I groped along the wall for a light and then I stepped into the dimly lit garage. One side of it was empty, but the other side held a car. Not the SUV Gideon had used to drive us here. This was an old car. A muscle car.

I took a few halting steps toward it and then I stopped dead.

“Lila? Lila! There you are. I’ve been looking for you for the last five minutes. What are you doing—” He trailed off when he saw what I was looking at. “Do you like it? It’s a—”

“It’s a 1973 Ford Gran Torino.”

“Yeah, how’d you know that?”

I turned to face him. “That’s my father’s car.”

Something shifted behind his eyes. “Your dad had a car like that? Did he—”

I stepped closer, staring him right in the eyes. “That’s my father’s car. Not one like it. It’s *his* car. Mind telling me what it’s doing here?”

Gideon swallowed hard but didn’t say anything. At least he was no longer denying what I knew to be true. I stared at him, trying to make sense of something that seemed impossible.

I looked deep into his eyes as if trying to see through to the back of his head, and then suddenly I knew.

Taking a step back, I suddenly felt faint. “It was you.”

He said nothing.

“That’s why you looked familiar. And why you were in that dream. You’re that kid who was always out in our garage helping him. The kid who followed him around like a puppy. It was you.”

Still, he said nothing, but I didn’t need him to. My heart raced, but my mind was steady. It was him. I hadn’t recognized him because he’d changed so much. That teen was scrawny and skinny. He’d had an underfed look to him, and he slouched around, as if trying to go unnoticed. Except with my dad. When he was bent over the engine of the Torino, working side by side with my dad, that was the only time I’d seen him smile.

“But your name wasn’t Gidon back then, was it?”

For the first time, faint surprise flitted across his face. “No.” He cleared his throat. “Gideon was my father’s name, too, and since he’d abandoned me, I went by my middle name, John, for years.”

Obviously, he’d reclaimed his name at some point.

But none of this answered any of my real questions. I picked one at random. “How’d you get the car? We had to sell it after he died.” Times had been tough, and my mom’s salary hadn’t gone far. Nor had the meager life insurance policy my dad had had.

“I was thinking about him a couple of years ago and I decided to track down his car. It took a while, but I found it in the end.”

“But why?” I felt faint, and I wanted to lean against the car, but years of conditioning made that impossible. My dad had always taught me to protect the finish on the car at all costs.

“It’s a good car,” Gideon said.

“Not that. Why didn’t you tell me who you were? Do Brady and Cole know?”

“No.”

I took a step back. “You three planned that whole message mate deception for weeks, if not months, and you never told them that you knew me? That’s messed up.”

“Look, I—”

“You lied to them and to me. And you continued to do so. Why?”

“You were the one who came after us first. If you hadn’t, you would’ve never been on my radar.”

I barely heard him. “Why did you do this?”

“Lila, if you’ll just—”

“Why?” I repeated. “The way you touched me, and never admitted we used to know each other as kids.”

“No, we didn’t.” His voice was quiet.

“What?”

“We didn’t know each other. Not well. The only thing we had in common was that we both lov—admired your dad.”

“So that’s how you repay someone you admire? Someone who helped you? By tricking his daughter?”

“That’s not what I—”

“That’s exactly what you did. The question I’ve been asking for the last five minutes is why.”

“You know why,” he said, raising the volume of his voice for the first time. “Or you should.”

“Tell me.”

He shook his head. “When you came after us, I looked you up, of course. You looked a little familiar, but it took me a while to place you. James is a pretty common last name after all. But when I realized you were your dad’s daughter, I almost didn’t believe it at first.”

“Why not?”

“Because every single thing about your life is like a slap in the face to the good man he was.”

I took a staggering step back as if I had been slapped. My heart pounded painfully in my chest as I looked up at him. “What?”

“He was a good man. Decent. Moral. And just look how you live your life. Selling yourself, your image, your body for money. If he could see the way you lived your life, he wouldn’t even recognize it. It’s like you threw away everything he taught you.”

Gideon paused for a breath as I stared up at him in horror. My heart was no longer pounding hard against my ribcage. In fact, I couldn’t feel it at all. It was like Gideon’s cruel words had stopped it.

“I thought, if I met you, and got to know you, I could help you get back on track—for his sake. Because if he saw the way you lived now—”

I couldn't take anymore.

I whirled around, sprinting back inside. I grabbed my purse and my jacket and ran out the front door.

Behind me, I heard the garage door opening and Gideon calling my name, but I ran down the sidewalk, trying to outrun his terrible accusations.

I turned a corner at the end of the street and ran on. I could still hear him, but grief was giving me strength. Eventually, I ended up at a little park, and Gideon was nowhere to be seen.

Good. I didn't ever want to see him again.

I took out my phone and used an app to call for a call.

For too long, I'd stayed outside of my world. It was time to return to it.

LILA

“Lila, why don’t we make a video about that new ice-maker you got last week?” Penny asked. “I’ve been playing around with it, and it’s awesome. At just the touch of a button, you can make slushies or smoothies. Want me to make you one?”

“No thanks.” I barely looked up from the sofa I’d been spending a lot of time on.

“How about we go for a walk? I know how much you enjoy people-watching on Michigan Avenue.”

“No thanks.”

Penny sighed as she knelt down next to me. She picked up my wrist with two fingers and pretended to take my pulse.

“Very funny.”

She signed. “Brady and Cole keep calling and texting.”

That made me open one eye. “Are you interested? They’re great guys.” Great guys that I missed so badly it felt like a physical ache.

“They’re interested in you. And they’re worried about you. We all are.”

“I’ll be fine. It just takes time—you know that.”

“It wasn’t the same for me. Jeff was an ass.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Penny had been upset when she found out he’d been cheating on her, but not exactly surprised.

At least not blown away as I'd been when Gideon revealed how he truly felt about me.

Penny patted me on the head and then straightened up with a sigh. "At least promise me you'll consider Cole's invitation."

"I promise," I said. Otherwise, she wouldn't let me be.

But after she left, I could admit it to myself. I'd already considered his invitation to the party at the inn that would launch their "Weeks of Weekends" campaign. Each weekend had a different theme, and apparently, rooms at the inn were already filling up.

So yeah, I'd considered the invite, and the answer was no.

Then Cole started calling. In the morning. In the afternoons. Late at night. I could've easily set my phone to not even show me his calls, but somehow, I couldn't do that. Every time I saw his name on my screen, I longed for him and for Brady.

Sometimes I fantasized about going to them. About picking up where we left off. About touching them. Stroking them. Holding them. But it wouldn't work. Gideon was their best friend, and he hated me. For Brady and Cole, choosing me would mean rejecting him. And as much as I hated Gidon, I couldn't do that to them. They needed him.

And then on a Friday night, I was lounging on my couch, half asleep, when Cole called again. Without thinking about it, without even checking the screen, I answered the call.

"Lila?" He sounded stunned.

So was I. I'd been drowsy and hadn't meant to answer his call. Nightmares, the worst ones yet, kept me up at night these days. So I spent most of my day in zombie-mode.

"Lila, are you okay?"

"No. I mean hi."

"I can't believe you answered," he said. "I've been calling for weeks."

I couldn't believe I'd slipped up and answered, either. "What's up?"

"It's Brady. He's really sick, and he wants to see you."

Yeah, that sounded plausible. Brady was very ill the night before their big party. "How long has he been sick?"

"Just a few days, but he really feels bad and wants to see you."

"Yet you've been calling me for weeks."

Cole's gulp was audible. "Before, I was just calling to say hi."

I rolled my eyes. "I guess you'll have to cancel your big party since he's so sick."

"What?" Why?"

God, how had this guy ever taken part of the initial ruse about the Pleasure Institute? He sucked at lying.

"Please, Lila, I can drive out and get you myself. But please come. He'd really like to see you. We both would."

I hesitated. Now that I could hear Cole's deep voice, it was harder to ignore my feelings for him."

"Please?" he said again. "Gideon won't be there."

"Good to know. Is there anything else you'd like to lie to me about tonight?"

Silence descended. Then Cole eventually said, "We installed bathtubs in each room."

I nearly laughed. Those tiny bathrooms barely had room for the toilet, let alone tubs.

"Please, Lila?"

I shook my head. I repeated word *no* inside my mind. I opened my mouth—and I said, "All right. I'll take the train out tomorrow night."

"Thank god. Text me the schedule and I'll pick you up."

“Just you,” I said, though I wouldn’t mind if Brady climbed out of his supposed death bed and came along.

“Just me,” he repeated. “And this time, I’m not lying.”

“Good,” I said. “Because you suck at it. See you tomorrow.”

My plan was to walk directly from the train platform in Elburn to Cole’s pickup truck. But instead, I walked directly into Cole’s arms.

His hug nearly overwhelmed me. It felt so damn good to be in his arms. I blinked back tears before just giving in and burying my head against his broad chest.

He patted my back and stroked my hair as I clung to him. “It’s okay,” he said in a soft voice as he held me.

Finally, I took a step back. Cole took my bag and hoisted it into the back of the truck. Then he picked me up just as easily and set me on the seat on the passenger side.

“How’s Brady?” I asked after he climbed in on his side. “Has he recovered from his mysterious illness?”

“Oddly enough, he has. He wanted to be here, but he’s cooking up a storm. His friend Sandy and a few other people from the diner are helping.”

“How many people are you expecting?”

“Over fifty RSVP’d.” He sounded rather astonished at the fact. “And we’re already fully booked for one of the upcoming weekends. Thanks for putting in a good word for us with your audience.”

I’d put in several good words—full sentences, even. For the inn, and for him and Brady. I hadn’t mentioned Gideon to my audience since the last time I laid eyes on him.

Cole filled me in on some of the other changes as we drove toward the inn. I already knew a lot of it since I’d created and maintained their website. But I still liked hearing him talk

about everything, maybe because I'd missed him and his cousin so much.

As we passed through Donovan's Mill, Cole looked over at me and grinned. "Text Brady that you're coming."

I raised an eyebrow. "Isn't he busy cooking?"

"Yeah, but just text him. Please?"

I didn't see the point when we'd be there in minutes, but I did it anyway. There was no reply.

As we rounded one last bend, I sat up in the passenger seat, eager for my first glimpse of the inn in quite some time, but there were so many cars around it looked more like a parking lot than the little inn that could.

But Cole bypassed the mass of cars and drove over the grass, parking behind the garage. A figure stood there, one that had me scrambling for the door handle before the truck had even fully stopped.

"Brady!" I jumped out of the cab of the truck and then flew into his arms.

"There's my girl," he whispered in my ear as he held me tight.

All I wanted to do was to take these two men by the hand, lead them away, and spend the rest of the night by their sides, but I knew this was their big moment. They'd worked hard to get the inn to this point, and they were needed inside.

And so was I.

From the moment I stepped inside the familiar lounge, there was so much to do that I didn't even have time to be sad for the time apart from my guys. I served appetizers. Talked up the various packages the inn offered. Emptied trash cans and cleared away dishes. I even showed one little girl who'd come with her parents how to play MouseTrap.

And in all that time, I never saw Gideon. Sandy mentioned that he was downstairs serving drinks at the bar, which was news that suited me just fine. I could stay upstairs, and he could stay downstairs.

Until Brady came up to me with worry on his face. “We’re almost out of red wine.”

I grinned at the concern on his earnest face. “People can have white even if doesn’t go with the food you made.”

“We’re almost out of all wine, I should have said. Can you please go down in the basement and get some?”

“To the bar?” I asked, horrified.

“No, the actual basement. The unfinished part on the other side of the laundry room. That’s where we keep the extra bottles.” He obviously sensed my hesitation. “Please, Lila, you won’t have to go anywhere near the bar. There’s such a crowd down there he won’t even notice you.”

I shook my head, but I couldn’t say no to Brady. “What kind of red?”

“Any kind. Two or three bottles if you can carry them.”

“All right.”

“Thank you,” He said fervently. Then he leaned down and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

I couldn’t help grinning as I made my way down the stairs.

Brady hadn’t been lying. It was very crowded down in the rec room. People were playing pool and dancing to the very loud music. I saw a crowd around the bar out of the corner of my eye but I didn’t even glance that way.

Instead, I slipped through the dancers until I got to the door to the laundry room. It was a relief to close the door behind me and shut out some of the noise. To my surprise, both the washer and dryer were on, and I couldn’t imagine why the guys would be doing laundry during a party. Then again, maybe a drunk partygoer had spilled a drink on themselves.

I strode to the end of the little hallway that housed the washer and dryer and opened the door to the unfinished part of the basement. I’d never been here before, but luckily, there was a light on, so I didn’t have to grope for a switch in the dark.

I stepped inside and looked around as the door swung shut behind me. There was a jumble of old furniture including several tables stacked on top of each other and an old leather couch. There were so many boxes stacked to towering heights that I didn't know how I was going to find the extra wine.

And then a figure stepped out from behind a stack of boxes. "What are you doing here?" I asked at almost the same time that Gideon did.

Since Gideon made no move to answer, I did. "Brady sent me down here to get some wine, but he can get it himself." I whirled to the door.

"He sent you to get wine?"

"Why is that so hard to believe," I asked with my hand on the door. "Is it because I'm such a disappointment I shouldn't be trusted with that task?"

Gideon's voice was closer, but I didn't look back. "No, I just meant that Cole sent me down here for wine, too." Suddenly, he cursed. "Try the door."

"With pleasure." I turned the knob and nothing happened. Surprised, I yanked on the door knob, pulling hard. When that yielded no results, I banged on the door.

I rapped my knuckles against the hard wood until it hurt. Then a voice from behind me said, "Don't bother."

"What?" Irritation made me whirl around.

Gideon looked the same as always, except perhaps for the dark circles under his eyes. "That's why the washer and dryer were on. Though it's probably overkill with how loud the music is."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Don't you get it? Cole and Brady set this up. They tricked us into coming down here and then locked us in."

Holy shit.

He was right.

LILA

I gasped, turning to bang on the door again, but Gideon was right. No one was going to hear us. When my knuckles hurt enough to bring tears to my eyes, I admitted defeat. Gideon was the last person I wanted to talk to, but I had to ask him one question. “Do you have your phone with you?”

“It’s at the bar.” He brushed some dust off the cushion of an ancient leather sofa and sat down. “Do you have yours?”

“It’s upstairs.” Anger grew inside me as he made himself comfortable. “So you’re just going to sit there until we starve to death?”

“It’s better than banging on the door until my hands bleed.”

Just to spite him, I pounded on the door again, this time yelling for help. But the music and the laundry were just too loud. Ignoring Gideon, I marched past the sofa he was on, grabbed a wooden chair from a pile and carried it over to the door. I set it a few feet away and sat down, my arms crossed.

“That looks comfy.” Gideon observed while I alternated glaring at him and trying unsuccessfully to ignore him.

I vowed never to speak to him again, but I only managed to make that last five minutes. “Why would they do this to us?”

Gideon snorted scornfully. “Isn’t it obvious? They want us to talk.”

“Oh good.” I shot him a glare. “Were there any incredibly hurtful things you forgot to say last time? Because now’s your chance.”

He returned my glare and then looked off in a different direction.

This was going to be a long night. If I ever got out of here, I was going to channel my aggression toward Gideon and use it to punch their stupid heads in.

After at least twenty minutes of stony silence, Gideon got up and wove through the towers of boxes to the back of the basement. I wondered if he needed to find a corner to pee in. I also wondered if a stack of boxes would topple over and bury him for good.

A girl could hope.

But I heard him rummaging around out of sight for a few minutes. Then he returned a few minutes later with a bottle of wine, a canteen, and a pencil. The assortment was odd enough to make me more curious than pissed.

He sat back on the couch and set the canteen aside. Then he fumbled around with the pencil and the bottle of wine for a while. It looked like he was trying to draw on the cork. Yeah, that was a good use of his time.

“What the hell are you doing?” I finally snapped.

“Someone showed me a party trick in college—how to open a bottle of wine with a pencil.”

“Not possible.” I scoffed as I folded my arms and crossed my legs, staring in the opposite direction. But five minutes later, I heard him make a triumphant noise. I tried to ignore it, but eventually I had to look over there. He’d worked the cork off and was pouring red liquid into the canteen.

I looked away, refusing to glance in his direction until I heard his footsteps. “Do you want the canteen or the bottle?” He held both out.

I didn’t want anything from him. Except... hell, maybe if I got drunk, I could forget who I was trapped here with.

I grabbed the bottle which was the slightly less dusty of the two.

“You’re welcome,” Gideon muttered as he walked back to the couch with the canteen.

I took a long swig of wine and nearly choked. It seemed stronger than the stuff Brady had served upstairs. “What the hell’s your problem?”

Gideon sank down on the couch, took his own drink of wine, and glared right back at me. “My problem? Neither of us would be here right now if you hadn’t randomly decided to be a total bitch toward us all those months ago. Seriously, who does that? Who lashes out at strangers with the sole purpose of bringing them down?”

Me.

I did that. I couldn’t deny it, and I couldn’t defend it, but I’d given it a lot of thought in the last few weeks and I’d come to at least a partial explanation of why I’d acted the way I had.

I kept drinking while I contemplated if I wanted to tell him about it. I didn’t owe him anything, at least not now that he’d hurt me far more than I’d ever hurt him.

Taking another swig of wine, I stared at him. So much pain from such a handsome man.

“What?” he growled as I kept staring at him.

I couldn’t tell him. I just couldn’t. But then I did. “I think I recognized you.”

“What?” He glared at me. “I can’t hear a word you’re saying with all the racket from the rec room.

“I recognized you in those *Down to Earth* videos.”

Gideon must’ve heard me, because he scoffed. “You’re rewriting history.”

“No, I’m not.”

Instead of looking angry, he looked puzzled and I realized he hadn’t heard me.

Crap.

Though it was the last thing I wanted to do, I got to my feet and went over to sit on the opposite side of the sofa. If we were going to do this, we might as well be able to hear each other. After all, we couldn't tear each other apart if we kept having to say 'what?' all the time.

I didn't look at him when I spoke again. "I didn't consciously recognize you, but subconsciously I did. Every time I saw your face, I got pissed off."

"Gee, thanks." His voice was full of sarcasm, but it wasn't like he hadn't said far worse things to me.

"I'm serious. When I looked at you, I got this sense of resentment. And a sense of unfairness. I got angry every time I looked at you, and I didn't question it. I just went with it."

He tilted his head back as he drank from the canteen. "What'd I ever do to you?" he said. A moment later, he augmented this question. "Back then, I mean. We barely even spoke."

"I know. But my dad was always out in the garage working on that car with you. And after he died, I began to resent all the time he spent with you. Maybe if he'd known those were his last few years, he would've spent more time with you."

Gideon was silent for a moment. "He loved you."

"I know. But he spent long hours working, and then he'd come home, have dinner, and then hang out with you instead of me."

"He was spending time with the car. I was just along for the ride so to speak."

"Don't do that. You know he thought highly of you." I stopped to gather my thoughts. "I know he didn't know how little time he had left. None of us do. But after he died, I grew resentful."

Gideon didn't say anything, but I saw it in his eyes. He understood, at least that much of it.

“I even grew resentful of the Torino. I was glad when mom said we had to sell it.” I shook my head. “Before he died, I loved that car, too. I braided a little key chain, and he used it for the keys to it. But he rarely told me anything about what he was doing to fix it up. I guess he thought it was a guy thing.”

“No, he didn’t.” Gideon’s quiet response was unexpected. “It was more of an age thing. He thought you were too young, not that you were the wrong gender.”

Part of me wanted to believe that... but another part of me didn’t want to dare to hope—and then have those hopes dashed. “Now who’s rewriting history?”

He shrugged. “It’s still just you.” Then he let out a long breath. “But I guess I can kind of see how it happened. The sight of me filled you with resentment, so you decided to lash out first and ask questions never.”

“Something like that.”

“It still sucked, what you did. The inn’s already struggling, and Cole won’t let me invest any real money in it. Those videos were the only things we had going for us back then.”

Now he was definitely the one rewriting history. “My attack put you guys on the radar. Your viewership increased after that.”

Gideon gave a bitter laugh. “Which was incidental, and not at all what you wanted to happen. You wanted to tear us a new one. Me especially, and the other two by association.”

“Yeah. But don’t act all innocent. That trick at the fake Pleasure Institute humiliated me in front of thousands of people.”

He met my eyes briefly. “It wasn’t finest moment. I’m sorry.”

“Sure, you’re sorry for *that*,” I spat out as my anger grew. “But you’re not sorry for saying my father would be completely disappointed in me?”

He just stared at me, not taking it back.

“It was like losing him all over again when you said that. To say I’m a disappointment to him. To disparage my entire lifestyle. To slut shame me. To—”

Gideon sat up straighter. “Wait, what?”

“Trust me, I was there. I remember all your accusations quite well.”

He looked honestly puzzled. “I never slut shamed you. I wouldn’t do that.”

His face had never looked more punchable. “I heard you. You said my father would be disappointed by everything I do. Sure, most dads probably wouldn’t be really happy to have their daughters review sex toys online, but it’s my life. I chose it, and I’m not ashamed of it.”

Gideon’s forehead was full of creases as he stared at me. “I didn’t say that or mean it. I wasn’t think of the sex toys you review at all. As far as I’m concerned, that’s no one’s business but your own.”

I stared at him, trying to decide if I believed him. “Then what did you mean?”

He still looked so astonished that it took him a moment to answer. “I meant all the technology. How you’re always trying to discard the old in favor of the new. How you don’t actually live your life, you just record it for others.”

I stared at him in disbelief for a long moment. I didn’t even realize the wine bottle was starting to slip until I felt a few drops on my thigh. “You think he would’ve disapproved of my love of *tech*?”

“He was a simple man. He had simple needs. He didn’t constantly yearn for something newer and fancier the way you do.”

Gideon’s assessment of my dad almost made me laugh in spite of myself. “No he wasn’t. He wasn’t like that at all.”

It was obvious Gideon didn’t believe me. “Lila, I spent years helping him with that car. He liked engines. Listening to

the Beatles on the radio. He was a simple guy with simple tastes.”

Maybe it was the wine, but I couldn't help snorting. “When I was eight or nine, a family with kids around my age moved in across the street. The Thompsons. Mr. Thompson got along well with my dad, and they invited our whole family over for barbecue every couple of weeks. And do you know where my dad was while Mr. Thompson was grilling hotdogs and hamburgers?”

Gideon frowned. “Talking to him?”

“No, he was down in the basement with me and their two kids. And you want to know why?”

He nodded in spite of himself.

“Because they had a newfangled video game system called a Nintendo Wii. I loved playing games on it nearly as much as my dad did. He thought it was so damn clever how you could wave the remote around to play tennis. Or bowling. Or to drive a racecar. He thought it was the most amazing thing ever.”

Gideon's jaw had dropped.

“You only saw one side of him, but I knew about his hopes and dreams,” I continued. “He wanted to travel everywhere he could. He was interested in everything. He wanted to know how things worked. Sometimes over dinner at night, he'd speculate about where things were headed. What needed to be invented. What he'd invent if he could. And let me tell you something.” I scooted closer to Gideon to make sure he heard me. “If my dad knew that I'd invented a career for myself that I loved and that I made a living from that career instead of being locked into a dead-end factory job as he was, he'd be *thrilled*.”

Gideon looked almost comically shocked by my speech. Finally, he nodded faintly. “I guess he would've.” He stared past me, as nothing in particular. “Maybe I didn't know him as well as I thought.”

“You knew a part of him. I knew a different part.”

Gideon was as pale as a ghost. “I thought that your whole lifestyle was an affront to him. A rejection of his values.” His mouth drew to a close. Just when I thought he wasn’t going to say anything else, he looked directly at me. “I’m sorry. I was wrong about you.”

Tears pricked at my lower lashes as I nodded. “And I was wrong about you.”

He patted the seat next to him, and almost against my will, I slid over. His arm went around my shoulders.

For a long time, neither of us said anything.

Then at last, he huffed out a breath. “You know who was right, though?”

“Hmm?”

“Thing One and Thing Two.” He jerked his head in the direction of the ceiling. “They went through a hell of a lot of effort to get us locked in here, but... they were right to do it.”

“I guess so.”

I didn’t have much else to say. The hurt was too raw. Maybe Gideon’s was, too. But I stayed where I was, nestled against his side as I sipped my wine. And he kept his arm around me as he sipped his.

LILA

I awoke with my face pressed against rough, uncomfortable fabric. My mouth was dry, and my head ached. I lifted my head, and the fabric moved.

With a yelp, I jumped back. But that made my head hurt, and I had to take a moment to make the room stop spinning.

When it did, I realized I'd somehow been using Gideon's hip as a pillow and that Brady and Cole were sitting opposite the sofa, looking amused.

"What's going on?" Gideon said. His voice sounded hoarse.

"We figured you two had either made up or killed each other by now."

"Is the party over?" I asked.

Cole raised his eyebrow and grinned as he looked at me. "Do you hear music?"

Brady elbowed him. "Yes, it's over. It's about four a.m. Oh, here's your phone back." He tossed it my way but it bounced off my leg and onto the couch. My reflexes apparently weren't operational yet.

Cole tossed Gideon his phone, and he managed to catch it.

"We're pissed at you two," I said.

Brady shrugged. "So, we'll wait a week and then lock ourselves in the basement and yell at each other until we kiss and make up."

“Which I’m assuming is what happened?” Cole asked.

“We didn’t get to the kissing part,” Gideon said stiffly. Or maybe I interpreted it that way because every muscle in my body felt stiff.

The cousins looked at me. “It’s going to take some time,” I said. “But yeah, we kind of... cleared the air.” I looked over at Gideon, and he nodded.

“Maybe sometime you can fill us in,” Cole said.

“How is it your business?” Gideon said, apparently still mad at being locked in. I put my hand on his arm and stroked softly, wanting to calm him down.

“It kind of is our business if the four of us are going to be in a relationship together,” Brady said. “If that’s what you still want.”

I thought it over even though I was already nodding. “Yeah. I do.”

“Me too,” Brady said, and Cole nodded. Then we all looked at Gideon.

“Me too,” he said, and I wrapped my arm around his and squeezed.

“Then it looks like we have some things to work out,” Cole said.

“Now?” I said with a gulp.

“Yes,” Brady insisted. “Because Cole and I have been working on a solution while the two of you were off nursing your wounds.”

“Which is?” Gideon asked.

Nerves hit me, and I spoke before anyone could answer. “Can I just say something?”

Cole grinned. “Of course. You’re a rather pivotal part of this dynamic.”

What I had to say was too important to me to laugh. “The thing is... I like you guys. A lot. I think I’m even falling in

love with you.” I held my breath, not meeting anyone’s eye.

“You’re not the only one feeling that,” Brady said at last.

“What the problem, then?” Cole asked, correctly reading my tone.

“As I said, I have feelings for you...”

“You actually used the L word, but who’s keeping score,” Brady quipped.

“Let her talk,” Gideon scolded.

I nodded at him before continuing. “The thing is... as much as I like you, and as much as I want to be with you, I can’t do that whole Hallmark movie thing where the big city girl falls in love with the small-town boy and gives up her apartment and her career for him. For them.” Tears threatened to spill again as I stared down at the floor, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

Then a hand touched my knee. “No one’s asking you to,” Brady said gently, and the others nodded.

“But... it’s such a long drive. Or train trip. Or—”

“There are four of us,” Cole said. “A couple usually lives in one house. Why shouldn’t four people maintain two?”

Gideon straightened next to me. “So I should give up my place? I’m not saying no, but—”

“We’re saying we’ll work it out,” Cole said in a calm voice. “All four of us, together.”

A tear did slip down my face, but it was a tear of happiness that we were on the same page. And that they didn’t automatically demand that I give up a part of myself to be with them. “I don’t want anyone to give up anything they really want,” I whispered.

Maybe they hadn’t followed my hangover-induced logic exactly, but no one argued with me.

“When you think about it, it’s the inn that’s the problem,” Gideon said. Then he held up his hands in defense as Cole and Brady frowned. “I mean, I’m glad it’s doing better. But here’s

the only place where there's not room for the four of us to live together. No offense, but the rooms are so tiny. Plus, now that you've got a lot more reservations, people might notice one woman and three men constantly entering the same bedroom."

"So?" I said. "I don't care."

Gideon squeezed my hand. "But I don't want anyone questioning your honor ever again. Not me or anyone else. And besides, the big guy here's probably going to run for mayor someday, so he needs to keep his nose clean."

"Wait, I am?" Cole asked, looking puzzled.

"Probably," I said, giving him a quick smile.

"It doesn't matter, though—"Brady began.

"Of course it does," Gideon said sharply.

Brady rolled his eyes. "As I was saying, it doesn't matter because we already thought of that and came up with a solution."

"You did?" Surprise filled my voice.

"If you two hadn't been off sulking, you might have noticed that we've been working day and night on the cottage out back," Cole said.

"I noticed," I said. "I put the pictures you sent of your progress up on your website, after all."

"Well, you can take them back down again," Brady said. "The cottage is no longer going to be rented out."

It took a minute for his meaning to sink in. "You mean... it's for us?"

"Yep," Cole said, his smile smug.

"But people will still see us going in and out of there," Gideon said, but he sounded thoughtful.

Cole grinned. "Remember where we parked behind the barn? We built a back entrance to the cottage. We should have no trouble slipping in and out."

“Really?” Excitement bubbled inside me as the cousins nodded, but then I looked up at Gideon to see what he thought.

He stared at his old friends for a long time. Then he actually smiled. “Sounds like you’ve thought this through.”

“Yep, we did,” Brady said.

But Gideon was still looking at Cole. “You won’t get the income from renting the cottage out.”

Cole shrugged. “I know. But we’ve got more reservations than ever before, and depending on the time of year, we can rent out the tent. Plus... well... I’ve got an old friend who can help out in a pinch.” He looked Gideon in the eye.

“Yes, you do.”

Happiness bubbled up inside me. “Can we go see the smokehouse—I mean the cottage now? Or can we go upstairs so I can get some water?” When no one made a move, I grew exasperated. “We’ve got our whole lives ahead of us... can we at least get out of this damn basement?”

Brady grinned and seemed to snap out of it. “Sounds like a reasonable plan to me.” He got up and held a hand out to me. “And as for what happens next, we’ll figure it out as we go along.”

That worked for me. I took his hand and got to my feet. As long as these men would be by my side, my future looked pretty damn bright.

* * *

Want to read more from *Battery Operated*? Sign up for my newsletter [HERE](#) and you’ll receive a link for more about Lila, Cole, Brady, and Gideon.

The next book is called *Power Drilled* and will feature Penny from this story.

ALSO BY STEPHANIE BROTHER

Have you read the other books in the **Reverse Harem Roommates** series? If not, check them out below!

[Strip Teased](#)

[Jock Blocked](#)

[Stunt Doubled](#)

[Room Mated](#)

[Wood Worked](#)

[Snow Balled](#)

Power Drilled

(March 2022)

You can find all of Stephanie's books at [Amazon](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author Stephanie Brother writes high heat love stories with a hint of the forbidden. Since 2015, she's been bringing to life handsome, flawed heroes who know how to treat their women. If you enjoy stories involving multiple lovers, including twins, triplets, stepbrothers, and their friends, you're in the right place. When it comes to books and men, Stephanie truly believes it's the more, the merrier.

Keep up to date with new releases:

[Mailing list](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Facebook Group](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Email](#)