



HER
CHRISTMAS

Wish

Pearl Lake
Series

Book
8

— AQUILA THORNE —

Her Christmas Wish

a Pearl Lake Novel

Book 8

Aquila Thorne

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Her Christmas Wish

Book 8 of Pearl Lake the Series

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To all my readers who love the Pearl Lake Series as
much as I do, thank you. This one is for you...



Books by Aquila Thorne

{Pearl Lake Series}

Reading Order

Moonlit Night (Moonlit Stalker included)

Moonlit Road

Heaven in the Moonlight

The Inn at Pearl Lake

Lane's Destiny

Tim's Bar

Her Christmas Wish

[You can find the Pearl Lake Series right here!](#)



{The Blood Moon Series}

Standalone

The Summons

Heaven and Hell

[You can find here!](#)



Dear Reader

Just in case you're joining me now, I wanted to mention a few things. The Pearl Lake Series is NOT a standalone series. Books *need* to be read in order to avoid confusion and spoilers. Also, I've combined the first two books of the series into one, Moonlit Night. A couple of reasons why I did that are:

1. Money is tight for a lot of people. Don't get me wrong, I need it just as much as the next person, but I too know what it's like to want to escape from the realities of life within a good book and not always have the extra money to do so. I just write instead of reading them!

2. The title of the second book I think might have scared a few readers off, something that was never intended. As a new writer, when I wrote these books, I never wrote them like many authors do. I didn't plot or write to reader expectations or to market.

I just simply wrote them. The characters had a mind of their own and took me on a journey as well. One that I had fun writing and one that allowed me to escape the realities of life. Something that I wish for all my readers. My books will always have relatable characters and that comedy factor with a little suspense and of course romance.

A few times I've been told there are typos in my books. I want to mention that I am Canadian and as a Canadian; I write in British English. There may be a time or two that you happen upon a word that is spelt with American English and the reason for that is I've lived all my life close to the Canadian/US border. Because of that, sometimes I switch back and forth. An example would be that I use imperial instead of metric when describing feet instead of meters and miles instead of kilometers. Other words, you might think are typos if you're living in the US would be any word that ends in 'OR', like color, honor, favor, flavor, neighbor, all those words and more, over here in Canada have a 'U' added, colour, honour, favour, flavour, neighbour and so on. Also, words

ending with 'ER', theater, center, once again, here in Canada we spell them theatre, centre, etc. With that said and keeping it in mind, I welcome you to Her Christmas Wish, I do hope you enjoy it!



Cast of Characters

Luke Petersen- a video game tester and the only one of the Petersen family that doesn't live in Pearl Lake.

Brit McCoy- Came to Pearl Lake under mysterious circumstances.

Lane Petersen- Luke's brother and a private investigator, dating Destiny.

Destiny Tremblay- Desi for short. Cook for the Inn at Pearl Lake and dating Lane.

Abbi Petersen Quinn- Luke's mother, a best-selling author, married Ben.

Ben Quinn- A British actor who was once Hollywood's 'It guy' but has since retired from showbiz

Kim Petersen- Luke's aunt, co-owner of the Inn at Pearl Lake, and a nurse, engaged to Dean.

Dean Goodbody- A retired US Marshal, also co-owner of the Inn, engaged to Kim.

Ava Petersen- Luke's sister, a registered massage therapist, owner of the only spa in Pearl Lake

Mark Donovan- Best friend of Ben, also an actor, engaged to Ava.

Mackenzie Wells- Owner of the village hot spot, Mack's diner/grocery.

Tim Steel- Abbi's friend from high school and retired police officer

Evelyn Collins- An ex-Baroness who is engaged to Tim Steel



Chapter 1

“Come on, let’s dance!”



BRIT MCCOY LOOKED UP at the man next to her as he held his hand out. The man was Luke Petersen, and they were at his mom’s wedding reception.

“Hurry up, take it! Do I have to beg, because if I do, I will...” He wasn’t even looking at her, he was looking across the dance floor.

She followed his gaze and saw a woman in her late thirties barreling towards them. It was the same lady that Brit had just warned Destiny about, that was stalking Lane, Luke’s twin brother as he put on a show on the dance floor.

Brit laughed. “What? Don’t you want to be her next conquest?”

Relieved when she placed her hand in his, he said, “Hell no! She’s way too old for me. Besides, I like your face better.” He grinned then twirled her onto the dance floor before pulling her into his arms. They slow danced through three songs before Luke said, “She’s gone.”

Truth be told, the second the woman had seen Brit step into his embrace, she had whirled around and went in the other direction towards the bar. But Brit didn’t need to know that tidbit.

Wishing that wasn’t the reason he’d asked her to dance in the first place, she nodded and pulled away. “Well, thanks for that.”

“It’s me that needs to thank you.” He took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. Placing a soft kiss on the back of her hand, he murmured, “It was my pleasure, believe me.”

Brit felt the pit of her stomach flop to her feet when he looked at her with stormy eyes. A giggle spilled from her lips

as she backed away and nodded. Not trusting herself, she spun on her heel and headed to the table where Jasmine was sitting alone.

Jasmine put her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her hands. “How was it?” she asked, dreamily.

“How was what?” Brit sat down and snagged a handful of nuts from the bowl in the middle of the table and popped one in her mouth.

“You know... being held in his arms.”

Not wanting to admit that it was exhilarating, she shrugged, “Oh... it was fine.”

“That’s it?! Just, fine?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. There was no way she would admit that she found Luke attractive. She didn’t need or want that kind of attention. Leaning back in her chair, Brit stretched her arms wide and feigned a big yawn. “Oh my.” She covered her mouth, peeked at Jasmine, and said, “I think it must be past my bedtime.”

Only Jasmine wasn’t paying any heed to her because she was looking over Brit’s head with a grin on her face.

Brit sat straighter in her chair and moved to turn around, only a pair of arms that were wrapping around her stopped her from doing so. She at once froze in her seat as a face appeared beside hers. Brit was resisting the urge to claw the person in the eyes when she heard. “Thank you again for the dance.”

She turned to face him and that’s when Luke saw the fear in her eyes and her fingers curled into claws.

“Are you alright?” he asked as he saw her relax at once.

Brit put a smile on her lips. “Yeah. I’m just tired, you caught me off guard.”

Luke stood straight and moved to sit in the vacant chair between Jasmine and her. Watching Brit with lazy eyes he asked, “So, what are you two ladies up to?”

Jasmine sighed. “Nothing, just hoping someone will ask me to dance.”

Brit leaned forward and looked at Luke. Seeing how he was watching her sent a slight thrill up her spine. One that she quashed instantly by saying, “Why don’t you dance with her Luke?”

As soon as she said it, Luke perked up and stopped staring at her. “Uh sure. Jasmine, would you like to dance?”

The teen scrambled to her feet. “Would I?” Before he could respond, she made a beeline to the dance floor.

Luke raised a brow at Brit. “I’ll take that as a yes.?”

She laughed and nodded. “Don’t keep her waiting!” She sat back in her chair to watch them with a slight curve on her lips.

Despite what Jasmine’s brother did to her, the young woman felt like a sister to Brit. She sat there lost in thought for a moment before Kim plopped into the chair Luke had just vacated.

“How’s it going Brits?” she said, her words slurring.



LUKE WATCHED BRIT, the only woman that he couldn’t keep his eyes off for more than a few seconds. It had been like that ever since he caught her in his arms a few short weeks ago. He wanted her more than any woman he ever had the pleasure to lay his eyes on, but there was something that kept him from making his move. Which made absolutely no sense because they got along fabulously, well, when she wasn’t scared of him that was. Which brought him to look down at Jasmine.

“So, are you happy staying at the inn?” he asked.

She nodded. “I am. It’s much nicer than living with my brother.”

“Can I ask you a question, Jasmine?”

“Sure, you can ask me anything.”

“What happened to Brit in that house?” he asked, looking intently into her face.

“I honestly don’t know. I didn’t even know she was there until the day you all showed up.”

Luke jerked back. “How is that possible?”

“I wasn’t allowed upstairs.”

“I see...”

Luke glanced over at the table to see it empty, she was no longer there. He desperately wanted to find out what had happened to her in that house. Sadly, judging by the way she always jumped whenever he was around, it was going to take a fair amount of time. Something he didn’t have as he was leaving to head back home in less than a week.

The song ended and Luke steered her off the dance floor. “I think I’m going to call it a night Jasmine,” he said. “I have an early day tomorrow.”

“Okay, thanks for the dance. Have a goodnight,” she said, waving to him as she walked towards Ava and Mark.

“You too.” Waiting for her to join his sister, he turned on his heel and headed through the solarium into the main house.

Ducking into the hall under the stairs, he popped his head into the kitchen to see if Brit was in there. She was sitting at the table with a mug between her hands, she looked up at him with a dazzling smile.

“Want a cup of tea?” she asked.

“Sure do.” He pulled out a chair as she got up and went to the cupboard to take another mug down from within. Bringing it over, she sat it down in front of him. Luke picked up the teapot and poured the brew into his cup.

She raised her brows. “Milk and sugar?”

“I drink it black, puts hair on your chest.”

“Is that so?”

He looked at the contents of her mug and saw the lack of milk. “Um...no. At least I hope not.”

She burst out laughing. “I assure you it doesn’t.”

“Phew, I was gonna say...” He smiled at her.

When he did that, she almost wanted to forget everything and just throw herself in his arms, but she couldn’t.

She sat down across from him and said, “So, that was a lovely wedding. Abbi and Ben make the perfect couple.”

Luke nodded. “They certainly do. I haven’t seen my mother so happy in... hell, I don’t remember.”

“That’s good. It means it’s true love.” Suddenly feeling like an idiot, Brit stood and walked over to the fridge. Pulling the door open, she turned and looked at Luke. “Do you want a piece of cake?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” He watched as she went through the motions of retrieving the chocolate cake, one of the many desserts that were served at the meal. He waited until she handed him a plate and sat herself down, before saying anything.

“So, what made you decide to come to Pearl Lake?”

Brit looked at him and slowly picked up her fork. “Um, I don’t know. I just liked the area.”

“Oh, so you’ve been here before?” Luke leaned a forearm on the table and scooped up a forkful of cake. “Do tell,” he said, before popping it into his mouth.

Why the hell is he asking me this now?

“Um... my parents brought us here one year for a vacation.” Brit took a sip of her tea. Shit, she hated lying! “Ah, it was years and years ago. I was like 2 so I don’t really remember much of it.”

Luke sent her a questioning look but didn’t say anything, thinking, how could she like the area if she was only two years old...

“Cool, so was Brian your boyfriend, or...?” He realized when the mask came over her face that Brian was a touchy subject, one that he already suspected.

Brit pushed her chair back and stood.

“Did I say something wrong?” Luke asked.

Putting a hand to her head, she said, “No. Not at all. I think I’m going to go to bed now. I have a splitting headache.”

Luke also stood. With a worried look in his eyes, he said, “Are you okay? Can I get you some Tylenol, Advil... anything?”

“No. That’s okay. I’ll be fine.” Brit pushed her chair in and started collecting the dirty dishes.

“Leave it. I’ll clear this up. Go get some rest.” Luke took the cup from her, his fingers lightly brushing against hers.

Brit snatched her hand back, it felt like she stuck her fingers in a light socket. Shocked by what she just felt, she raised her eyes to Luke’s and saw that he too was just as shocked as she was.

Which did not make any sense. Not more than an hour ago he held her in his arms through three dances. And there were no sparks. Heat yes, excitement, hell yes, but not this electrifying touch that came out of nowhere.

Brit nodded rapidly. “Yes, I think I’ll do that.”

Heading to the swinging door, she stopped with her palms on it and glanced back at him. He really was a gorgeous man. Dark blonde hair, currently slicked back for the wedding but was usually in wispy waves atop his head. She knew that if she ran her fingers through it, that it would be downy soft, like a feather. And those eyes of his. Normally, baby blue, but at this moment they were darkened with wonderment.

God, how she wished she could tell him everything. But when she had agreed to take on the job here at the inn, she promised herself that she would never tell anyone how, or why she came to the lakeside village. Her past life was just that, in the past, and she wanted to keep it that way.

“Goodnight then,” she whispered softly then hurried out the door.

Luke could only stare in wonder. The signs were certainly all there. She wanted him as much as he did her... so why the hell was she hiding behind a wall?



Chapter 2

Three weeks later - November 1st



BRIT, DESI, AND JASMINE were chatting as they sat around the kitchen table, polishing silverware, getting it ready for Christmas. A monumental task as the set was original to the house and belonged to the first family to ever live in it, the Andersons.

Such a tragic story Brit thought as Kim walked into the kitchen and said, “Do you ladies want to come to Springbank with me? I’m on the hunt for Christmas decorations and I thought we could stop somewhere for lunch.”

“Where is Evelyn? Is she coming too?” Jasmine asked.

Evelyn was the cougar that was trying to cozy up to every single man at Ben and Abbi’s wedding and had never gone back to England. At first Brit thought she was a bit of a floozy but after getting to know her she realized that Evelyn was nothing like that, she had her reasons, just like Brit did. Only Brit would take her’s to the grave.

“She’s going over to the bar to help Tim get the bar organized,” Kim replied, inspecting a fork.

“I think he has a crush on her,” Jasmine laughed.

“After face planting on her crotch at the wedding, I’m sure that’s not all he has on her,” Kim cackled as the others joined in. “C’mon. Hurry up and get ready before Dean comes back, otherwise he’ll give me a spending cap,” Kim said, walking over to the coat rack.

Jasmine and Brit took the shortcut through the hidden staircase behind the bookshelf to the second floor while Desi tidied up the mess.

“Desi, I’ve been meaning to ask you something...” Kim walked over to the bookshelf, pulled it open and ducked her

head behind it.

“What are you doing?” Desi chuckled.

“I just wanted to make sure they were gone.” Kim went back to the coat rack and removed both their coats. Handing Desi hers, she said, “Has Brit confided in you at all?”

Desi took it from her and pushed her hands into the sleeves. “About what?”

Kim pulled her coat on and zipped it up. “About what happened to her at the emu farm, or how she actually came to the place in the first place.”

Desi shook her head. “No, not at all. I haven’t asked either as it really isn’t any of my business.”

“Oh no. You’re right. It’s just...”

“Just what Kim?”

“I don’t know.” Kim shrugged. As they walked down the hall to the front foyer, she glanced at the younger woman. “She seems like she’s happy here but then she doesn’t.”

Desi reached behind the front desk and took her purse. “Well maybe she just needs some time. I’m sure that’s all it is.”

The sound of Brit and Jasmine coming down the stairs had them both looking up. “Maybe... Don’t mention to her that I asked, okay?”

Desi nodded. “My lips are sealed.”

The two joined them in the foyer and Kim could tell they were excited for the day. Opening one of the two massive doors, Kim said, “Let’s go girls. My car is sitting out front.”

“Shotgun,” Jasmine yelled as she raced to the car.

“The way Kim drives,” Desi said. “You can have it!”

“And just what is wrong with my driving?” she asked, as they all piled into the car.

Desi shot back and said, “Absolutely nothing if you’re eighty years old.”

They all laughed, including Kim as she started the car and put it into gear. “I do believe that is called being cautious.”

Brit smiled. “Whatever makes you feel better.”

“It does...” Kim said as she turned on the two-lane highway that would take them right to Springbank.

They were traveling along Lake Road which followed around the lake when Brit saw the gathering clouds in the sky. “Are you sure you still want to go Kim? Those clouds look like it could snow any minute,” she said, with worried eyes.

“It’s fine. The forecast said snow is expected to start tomorrow.”

Brit heaved in a breath and sat back in her seat. She was unaware that she was clenching her purse strap in her hands, until Desi reached a hand across the backseat and took Brit’s in hers. Neither of them said a word as the two in the front sang along to Jingle Bells without a care in the world.



THE MALL WAS ALL DECKED out in Christmas splendor and despite the anxious feeling that Brit had back in the car, she was happy they made the trip. They had done a little shopping and were just taking a break for lunch, when Jasmine said, “Why don’t you hold a Christmas ball at the inn, Kim?”

“That’s a really good idea!” Kim exclaimed. “We can invite everyone from the village and have a Santa there for the kids.”

“Mack would make an excellent Santa,” Desi, remarked before taking a sip of her coffee.

“Do you think Elanor would be Mrs. Claus?” Brit asked.

“Oh yeah.” Kim chuckled, “That woman would jump at the chance to be Mack’s wife, even if it were fake.”

“What about trees?” Jasmine asked.

Kim nodded. “Lots of them. At least five, but different sizes.”

The teen looked at her with hope filled eyes. “Can we each decorate one?”

“Absolutely. The main tree in the living room will be real of course. But the rest can be artificial. Okay. This means that we are really going to have to decorate. Ladies, let’s get out of here and over to the department store.”



STANDING AT THE DOORS, Kim spread her arms wide in front of them as if shielding them from a charging bull and said, “Get a cart and grab whatever Christmas decorations tickle your fancy, we are going to need a lot.” She pulled her sleeve up and looked at her watch. “Let’s meet at the checkout in an hour. And don’t forget to pick out a tree for yourself!”

They all giggled as they ran, each getting a cart, they raced to the holiday section. Brit felt like she was a contestant on Supermarket Sweeps only it was bows and baubles she was after and felt like she needed one of everything. After twenty minutes of humming and hawing, she finally picked a garland of berries that looked like they were encrusted with snow and some silver bows for good measure. Then Brit headed straight for the trees. She found an eight-foot imitation Douglas fir that would be perfect for any room at the inn. Except the living room of course.

Stuffing it into the cart, Brit pushed along further down the aisle and spied the Christmas lights. Having no idea how many she would need for the tree; she took seven boxes off the shelf and placed them in the cart just as Desi came around the corner.

“Look what I found,” Desi said, pulling out what looked to be an elf suit.

“Cute... What are you going to do with that?”

“I ran into Kim; the Christmas Ball will be a masquerade party.”

“Ah...okay. Never heard of a masquerade party for Christmas but, I’m game. Where did you find that?” Brit

asked, nodding towards the costume.

“Believe it or not... it’s a pajama set.” Desi looked at Brit’s cart. “Have you gotten everything you need down here? If so, I’ll show you where I found it.”

“Yeah, almost. I just need to get some ornaments,” she said, as she reached for a set of 4. Stopping, she looked at Desi. “How many of these do you think I’ll need for the tree?”

Desi tilted her head to the side and scanned the sticker on the tree box. “An eight-foot tree...I’d say a lot.” She laughed and started filling the cart with the ornaments when Brit said, “I think twenty boxes is enough Desi. I have some bows and garland somewhere in here.”

“Yeah, eighty should be good. Let’s go.”

Desi turned her cart around and Brit followed her to the women’s clothing section.

Brit’s eyes zeroed in on a red velvet dress with a wispy white fringe around the neckline the same time Desi said, “You have to get that dress.”

Taking it off the peg that it was hung on, Desi held it against Brit. “This would look stunning on you. Go try it on.”

Brit looked at the price tag and frowned. At one time she wouldn’t have balked at the \$200.00 sticker that stared her in the face. But that was in her past. Shaking her head, Brit said, “No, it’s way too expensive for my budget.”

Desi remembered the time Ava, Kim’s niece had given her a gift of a satin pajama set, it was her turn to pay it forward. “My treat.” Desi could see the wanting in Brit’s eyes and so she sent her puppy dog eyes. “Please?” She held out the garment for Brit to take.

Brit grinned. “Fine, but if it doesn’t fit, I’ll find something else.”

She took it from her and hurried into the change room. Brit quickly undressed, slipped it over her head and it slid down her body, fitting to every curve as if it were hand made for her.

Turning, she looked at her reflection and agreed with Desi, it did look stunning on her.

“Let me see!!” Desi called out.

She slid the lock open and walked out to where Desi was waiting. Just as she got there Kim and Jasmine joined them and all stood in shock at the sight before them.

Kim hooted. “Luke’s gonna shit himself when he sees you in that.”

Desi turned and grinned at Kim. “Right?!”

“Why would he?” Jasmine piped up.

“You just never mind,” Kim muttered.

“You guys are mistaken, Luke and I are nothing but friends,” Brit said, smoothing the material down her hips.

“Yep, you keep telling yourself that,” Kim smiled. “Anywho, are you ladies ready to hit the road? We came looking for you two because I just got a weather advisory on my phone a few minutes ago. Looks like while we’ve been merrily shopping here, the storm has already started.”

Everyone nodded, and Brit turned to go change when Kim said, “Oh, and Brit, make sure you get that dress. I have the perfect mask to go with it.”

“Oh, she is,” Desi replied. “I already told her it’s my treat.”

“Good, because if not, I was going to pay for it.” Kim turned her cart in the opposite direction. “Meet us at the checkouts. C’mon Jasmine. Don’t forget we need to get one of those fancy advent calendars.”



Chapter 3

The car ride back to Pearl Lake was done in silence as Kim gripped the steering wheel of the car. When they had left the mall, there was already an inch of the white stuff on the ground, and it was getting worse the closer they got to home. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief as the lake came into view. Slowly the car crawled along the Lake Road as the slush under the tires hit the underside of the car. They were coming up on the bend that would lead them back into the village when they were met with a police car blocking their way.

Kim inched to a stop as Officer Vince Scott came over to the car. Rolling her window down she said, “Hey Vince, what’s going on?”

“Hi Kim.” He leaned down into the window and looked at the others in the car. His eyes came to rest on Brit for a few seconds longer than her companions, making her feel uncomfortable before he said, “Hello ladies.” Then turned his attention back to Kim.

“Up ahead, a truck went off the road and took a few trees down, blocking the roadway. Where are you coming from?”

“We spent the day in Springbank to do some shopping.”

“Unfortunately, you will need to head back the way you came, then take highway 71. It’ll take you about 20 minutes longer. Just be careful though, these roads are slick.”

“Always!” Kim flashed him a smile as she put the car into gear. Making a U-turn in the middle of the road, she headed back to the sideroad.

“Isn’t there another way to get to the village?” Brit asked, with worried eyes.

Kim chanced a glance at her in the rear-view mirror and knew why the poor girl looked so afraid. “Unfortunately, not.”

Brit took a deep breath. I’ll be fine, she thought to herself. But When Vince stared at her, she had an uneasy feeling. It

was like he could read her mind just by looking at her or was it pity in his eyes?

Whatever it was, the weather nor him had anything to do with her raising anxiety and everything to do with the road they had to travel on. The one place they would have to pass that she never wanted to see in her lifetime again. The emu farm. As they got closer to the road, she gripped the handlebar on the car door as sweat broke upon her brow. They were still miles away from the farm and she was already a wreck. If the lake had been frozen, she would have told Kim to stop the car so she could bail out and walk across it to the inn. But sadly, it wasn't.

Feeling trapped like a caged animal, she slid her hand to the power button and cracked her window open. Sucking in the cold air as the snowflakes swirled in her face, she calmed her breathing down by taking deep breaths and holding them for a count of eight. She did it so many times that she started feeling lightheaded.

Desi raised the alarm by asking, "Brit, are you okay?"

"Are you going to be sick?" Kim asked from the front seat.

Brit started rocking front to back holding her stomach. Feeling the car start to slow down, she shook her head, and said, "No. I'm fine. Keep driving Kim."

"Look," Jasmine said, pointing out the window. "There's my old place."

That innocent remark from a teenager had Brit spiraling back in time. To that fateful night...



SHE LOOKED AROUND AND saw the city was fast leaving them behind.

"Where the hell are you taking me?"

For the first time in her career, Brit McCoy knew fear. No. Not fear, terror. Working for one of the busiest escort services in Toronto, she knew that it was always a possibility to deal

with a job that went sideways but not like this. What was supposed to be only a dinner date with a high roller, Brian O'Neil, was turning into an abduction.

Everything was fine until after they ate at the fanciest restaurant the city had to offer. Then he suggested going to his penthouse for a nightcap before returning her to her apartment. There were no red flag vibes that she was feeling from him, and he was attractive, so she agreed.

"Don't worry about it. We will be there in a few hours," he said, stroking her knee as they pulled up to a red light.

She flung his hand off her leg. "A few hours?! You never said we were leaving the city."

Grabbing the door handle, she pushed the door open only to have him reach across her and slam it shut.

"I didn't want to do this, but you leave me no choice." In one fluid motion, his hand that held a rag, covered her face and before she knew it, she was seeing black.

Brit woke up lying on a bed with one hand cuffed to the post and a strip of duct tape across her mouth. When she heard someone outside of the closed door, she quickly closed her eyes and tried desperately to pace her breathing. She lay still as a stone as the door opened and the sound of shuffling feet came to stop beside the bed.

Praying that he would think she was still passed out, she let out a scream as the tape was ripped from her mouth.

"Good. I see you're awake now," Brian leered down at her. "If I uncuff you, do you promise not to leave? Not that it will do you any good..."

She nodded mutely.

He took a ring of keys from his pocket. Grabbing her wrist, he undid the cuff, and she quickly rubbed the bruises that it had caused.

"Where did you take me? And where are my belongings?" She asked, sitting up.

“None of your concern and burned.” He turned to the closet and pulled a nightgown from a drawer. Turning back, he looked at her, gauging her reaction. “We burned your stuff.”

“You burned my phone?” Brit said, expressionless. She would never give him the satisfaction, knowing just how much that hurt her. All her photos from when her mother was still alive were on that phone. Her only memories of her.

“Yup. You won’t be needing any of that.” He lowered his hand and caught a silky strand of her hair between his fingers. “Not for what I have in mind for you.”

Brit cringed at that. And she had every time he showed her any kind of attention, which was every day. She had learned to shut down after the first time because the more she protested the worse it was. She was living a hell, losing all hope, until one day she heard screaming downstairs.



“AVA! HOW’S IT GOING?” Luke asked, as he piled his groceries in the trunk of his car. He’d been home for two weeks since his mom’s wedding and had been eating out every day since his return. It had been long overdue to get some real food in his apartment.

“It’s good. When are you heading back up here for Christmas?” she asked.

“Probably mid-December. Why?”

“I wanted to see if you could do me a favour and get Mark a gift for me. I can’t find anything for him, including in Springbank.”

“Yeah, I can do that.” He slammed the lid of the trunk closed. “What is it you’re looking for?”

“He has everything that’s just it. I don’t know what to get him.”

Luke could hear the frustration in her voice. With him being an actor, he probably did have everything and if he didn’t, he would just go out and buy it.

“Does he play video games?” Luke asked as he took the shopping cart to the cart corral.

“That, he doesn’t have!”

“I’ll tell you what. The new game that I was working on before I came up for the wedding came along with a new gaming system preloaded with a ton of games. So new, it’s not even in stores yet and won’t be until two weeks before Christmas. You can give it to him.”

“No, I can’t do that!”

“You can. It’s something he won’t have and it’s sitting in my closet collecting dust. Besides, it’s a virtual reality system. He’ll love it,” he said walking back to his car.

“If you’re sure...”

Luke could hear she was relieved. “Of course, I’m sure.”

“I’ll get him some little things to go along with it. Thank you for the offer. So, when—”

“Hold on a second, I’m getting in my car and the Bluetooth is going to kick in,” he got behind the wheel and started the engine. “Okay. You’re welcome. What were you going to say?”

“I was going to ask when you’re coming back up,” Ava said.

Putting the car into drive, he pulled out of the parking spot and headed to the exit. “Right, you asked that before. I don’t know. Maybe in a month.”

“A month? That’s too long. You need to move up here with the rest of us,” Ava said.

“To Pearl Lake? No thanks!”

“Why not? Your whole family is here. Besides, I thought you and Brit hit it off pretty good.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure about her. She seems...”

“She seems what?”

“Distant. Unapproachable. And way out of my league,” Luke laughed.

Ava snorted. “Hardly. Yes, she’s beautiful but you’ve dated women before that were just as beautiful as her... well, almost. Anyway, I like her, and she’s so down to earth. Not like the others you’ve dated before.”

“That’s because the others thought I had money. Brit knows I don’t and she’s not just beautiful, she’s stunning,” he murmured, remembering how she looked the last time he saw her.

“Whatever. Anyway, I got to go. Elanor is here for her weekly massage. I’ll talk to you soon, thanks again!”

“Talk to you later,” Luke said, then ended the call.

He wished Ava hadn’t brought the subject of Brit up. Ever since he’d left the village behind in his rear-view mirror, he’d been thinking about her nonstop. It was so bad on the trip home, that every mile he drove, he had to convince himself to not turn around and head back.

It was clear to him that Brit wanted nothing more than a friendship from him if she even wanted that.



Chapter 4

Brit was mortified. As soon as they got home, she raced into the inn and went straight to the room she shared with Jasmine and crawled into bed. Didn't even help with unloading the car. It was one thing to have a flashback but an entirely different matter when she started blubbering like an idiot, to the point that Kim almost drove off the road.

Thankfully it was way past the emu farm because when she did, she skidded to a stop and Brit bailed out of the car, running wildly. Desi and Jasmine were in hot pursuit of her and only managed to stop her when Jasmine tackled her from behind. Kim soon came trotting up on the scene to find the three women sitting in the middle of the snow-covered road. Desi and Jasmine held Brit as she wailed into the deafening silence while fat snowflakes sashayed their way to the ground. No one said a word as they helped her to the car and continued the trip home in complete silence.

A soft knock on the bedroom door had Brit looking over her shoulder. She held her breath as the door creaked open and let it out when she saw it was Desi that stood there. "Can I come in?"

Brit sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Sure. I'm glad it's you and not Jasmine. I didn't feel like explaining to her why I acted the way I did."

"Oh, she had questions, but we just brushed them off." Desi replied, walking into the room with a bag in her hand. "I brought you the dress," she said, setting it on the end of the bed.

"Thanks," Brit mumbled. "I'm sorry I acted like that back there."

Desi waved her hand in the air. "Don't worry about it. We all have demons; some peoples are just fresher than others."

Brit released a heavy sigh. "Yeah, I guess."

"If you ever want to talk about it, I'm here."

“Thanks.” She was touched by Desi’s offer, but she would never tell anyone what happened back at that farm.

“Anyway, I’m heading home, but Kim wanted me to tell you that she’s making you a pot of soup and some deli sandwiches.”

“Some?” Brit snickered. “How many are there?”

Desi smiled. “Um, she didn’t say but she did say enough to fill your gut for a week.”

“Alright. Can you tell her I’ll be down in a few minutes please?”

“I will.” Desi started moving towards the door. “And after you eat, get some rest. It’s been a long day.”

Brit chuckled. “You got that right.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Desi said as she headed out the door.

Brit got off the bed and followed her. “Wait, are you walking home in this weather?”

“No. Lane’s waiting for me downstairs. We are heading over to Mack’s for tonight’s special.” Desi made a face. “Liver and onions.”

“Oh yum.” Brit made a gagging sound as she headed across the hall to the bathroom. “Have a good night!”

“You too,” Desi waved as she headed down the stairs.

Brit closed the bathroom door behind her and went straight to the mirror above the sink and looked at her reflection. “Geezus,” she whispered. Her mascara was smudged down her cheeks almost to her chin. Vetoing a good face scrubbing, she turned the taps on in the shower. Knowing it would take a good amount of time before the hot water reached the shower head, she went back to her room for some fresh clothes.

She looked regretfully at the bag sitting on the bed. As beautiful as it was, she should never have tried it on. Doing so was allowing herself to feel something she had no business

feeling... hope. Hope that Luke will give her a second glance. But why would he when she had to push him away?



AFTER HER SHOWER, BRIT made her way down the stairs of the old servants' quarters, then down the main staircase. She really didn't feel like facing Kim and especially Jasmine after what happened earlier, but she had little choice. Jasmine and she shared a room and eventually the teenager would be making her way up to bed. It was better to get it over with now rather than later.

Following the smell coming from the kitchen, she slowly made her way there. Quietly she entered the room to see Kim and Jasmine looking into a pot on the stove.

"That should just about do it," Kim said, stirring the contents with a wooden spoon. "Can you slice up the bread there on the counter Jasmine?"

"Sure." Jasmine took a bread knife from the magnetic strip on the wall and asked, "How thick do you want the slices?"

Kim turned around and spied Brit. "There you are! Are you ready to eat some cream of broccoli soup, with grilled ham and Swiss sandwiches?"

Brit nodded. It had been a while since they'd eaten at the mall. "Sounds like heaven," she nodded with a small smile on her face. "But only one sandwich for me."

"Good." She turned and looked back at Jasmine. "Just cut the slices normal size."

Brit went to the counter and started taking bowls and plates down to set the table. "Dean won't be eating with us; he went out to help with that truck accident."

"Oh..." Brit took the dishes and sat them on the table. "I can make the sandwiches," she offered.

Kim looked at her. "That's okay—" She stopped as the house phone started ringing. "Okay go ahead, that'll be Dean." She rushed out of the room to answer it.

Finishing the bread, Jasmine glanced at Brit shyly and said, “Kim told me not to say anything, but... I’m sorry for upsetting you earlier.”

Brit took the teenager by the arms and turned her towards her. “Oh hunny, you didn’t upset me. It was just a bad memory that did.”

“From when you were at my old house?”

Brit wrinkled her nose. “Something like that,” she said, pulling the girl into her arms for a hug. She would never tell Jasmine what had happened there. She looked at the bread sitting on the counter. Setting her at arm’s length, Brit smiled. “Come on, let’s get these sandwiches made before Kim gets back.”



AFTER DINNER, JASMINE went upstairs to have a bath while Kim and Brit cleaned up after their meal. Afterwards, they were sitting in the living room, each one in a wingback chair by the front window with a drink in their hands, waiting for Dean to come home, when out of the blue, Brit said, “I’m sorry Kim... about earlier. Making you almost go off the road...”

Kim sat her drink down on the end table and looked at her. “Well, it’s not everyday occurrence a person has a meltdown in the middle of the road in a snowstorm.”

Brit shook her head. “What the hell was I thinking?”

“Funny thing with PTSD is sometimes you don’t think, you can only react. I don’t know what happened to you back at that farm Brit, and unless you want to tell me, it’s none of my business. But you should talk to someone about it... a counselor or Doc Stevens.”

Brit took a deep breath and tucked her feet underneath her. That wasn’t going to happen. “Nothing happened back there. Nothing I can’t handle on my own at least.”

Kim leaned forward. “Can I ask you something?”

She shrugged. "Sure, I may not answer you though..."

"Fair enough. Were you and Brian an actual couple?"

Brit sat silent for a moment thinking. If she told Kim the truth that they were not, then that would raise some red flags for sure. But if she told her they were, would she believe her and drop it? The thing that Brit feared more than anything was being found. Despite what she had gone through at the hands of that vile man, she was in a way, glad that she did...

Finally, she looked at her and said, "Sorta."

"Oh..." Kim bobbed her head up and down, "...okay."

"Yeah..." Brit sneaked a glance at her to see if she bought it. From the look on Kim's face, she had... at least for now.

The flash of headlights on the window had them both turning to see Dean pulling in the laneway followed by another car.

Brit stood. "I think I'll head to bed now," she said, holding her glass in her hand.

"Alright then." Kim stood too and held out her hand. "Dean and I will be heading into the kitchen so he can eat, I'll take your glass for you."

Brit handed it to her. "Thanks. Have a goodnight," she replied as she made her way into the front foyer.

"You too," Kim said.

The front door opened and in walked Dean followed by a police officer. It was Vince, the one they had seen earlier at the accident scene.

The second Brit saw him she turned tail and made her way to the stairs, intent on getting the hell out of there.

"Brit, can you wait a minute?" Dean asked.

She froze with one foot on the bottom step.

"Vince would like to talk to you for a minute," he said.

Slowly she turned around and looked at the cop standing there. She didn't want to talk to him but not doing so would

only make her suspicious.

“Certainly,” she mumbled.

Vince looked at Kim and Dean and said, “In private...”

Kim jumped. “Oh, yes, of course!” She grabbed Dean by the arm. “Come on, you must be starving.”

“Officer, did you want anything to drink or eat?” Brit heard herself ask.

“A cup of coffee would be great.”

Nodding, she motioned towards the chairs Kim, and she had just vacated. “Have a seat, I’ll be right back.”

She made a quick exit to the kitchen, with Kim and Dean at her heels.

“Why is he here?” Kim whispered as she went directly to the fridge and started pulling the makings for Dean’s sandwich out.

Dean shook his head. “I don’t know. He said it was urgent that he talk to Brit, is all I know.”

Brit busied herself making two cups of coffee, hoping Kim wouldn’t ask her. She should have known better.

“Brit. Do you know what he wants?” she asked,

Brit turned and looked at her, shrugging her shoulders. “No clue. I’m sure it’s something about Brian though.”

“Right.” Kim could see she was done making the coffees and said, “Well, you better not keep him waiting.”

Brit sent her a tight smile as she picked up the mugs and placed them on a tray along with cream and sugar. Food, the man needed food. If his mouth was full, he wouldn’t be able to ask a lot of questions. Going to the fridge she took out a premade charcuterie board and added it to the tray.

“Wish me luck,” she forced a grin as she picked up the tray and headed to the hallway.

“Make sure to fill us in when you’re done,” Kim called after her.

“Good luck,” Dean said, but Brit also heard Dean say to Kim, “I’m sure if we needed to know Kim, Vince would be talking to us and not Brit.”



Chapter 5

Brit momentarily stopped in the hallway just before the front desk and took a deep breath. She knew this day was likely coming, she just wished it hadn't. Pasting a smile on her face, she stepped into the front foyer and saw Vince look up at her.

He got up out of his chair and met her halfway. "Here, I'll take that," he said, taking the tray out of her hands.

Brit took the coffee table in front of the couch and dragged it over to the chairs. It would have been easier to just sit on the couch, but she wanted as much distance from him that she could.

Vince set the tray on the table and sat in one of the chairs then pulled something out from inside his coat. It was a small notepad.

Flipping to a certain page, he looked up at her. "They wanted me to bring you into the station for questioning..." He saw her face go pale and hurriedly said, "Don't worry. It's just a formality. Anyway, I figured you would be more comfortable here instead."

Brit licked her suddenly dry lips and nodded and frowned. "What is this about?"

He looked at his notepad. "A couple of things really. First, what is Brian to you? Exactly."

Here we go again, Brit thought. She almost rolled her eyes but remembered he was a cop. Grabbing some meat and cheese she stuffed it into her mouth and slowly chewed. But then it occurred to her that if she took too long in answering him, that would appear suspicious.

"Sorry," she took a sip from her mug. "But I couldn't resist tasting that a minute longer."

He chuckled. "It's fine." He looked at the tray. "It does look tasty."

“Help yourself!” she almost yelled.

“Thanks, I think I will.”

She watched as he made his choice, then said, “Where were we?”

“Brian. Is he... or was he your boyfriend?”

“No. He was not.” As much as she hated to say the next thing to pop out of her mouth, she had to. “We were just friends.”

“Friends?”

Brit slowly nodded. “Uh huh.”

“Did you know what was going on there at the farm in regard to the animals?”

“What do you mean?”

“The illegal activity. The selling of stolen pets, dog fights etc.”

“No, not at all. I wasn’t there that long... Before... everything happened.”

“...And did he do anything to you that you didn’t want... done?”

She rubbed a hand over her right eye. It was such a betrayer; she could feel it start to twitch just like it did every time whenever she thought too much about what happened back at that farm. “He didn’t do anything to me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

Vince took a deep breath. “Okay then.”

“Are we done here?”

“Not quite.” He reached into his coat once again and this time pulled out a folded piece of paper. Unfolding it, he leaned across and held it out to her.

“Do you know who this is?”

Brit looked down at the paper in her hands and almost screamed. On it was a missing persons report, with a reward of \$50,000.00 for any information. But the person that was missing was herself.

She handed him the paper back and shook her head. “No, I have no clue who that is.”

He looked at her then at the photo. There was a resemblance no doubt about it. Except for the eyes. Of course, the makeup and a blonde wig could change a person’s appearance quite a bit. And the woman in the photo did have a lot on, but Vince wasn’t convinced it wasn’t her.

“So, you’re not Brianna Delacroix?”

“No?” She looked him straight in the eyes. “My last name is McCoy, I’m Irish not French. I can show you my birth certificate if you don’t believe me...”

Vince shook his head. “No, it’s fine. They say everyone has a twin somewhere in the world. Yours just happens to be in Toronto. Where did you say you were from again?”

So much for him believing her. “I didn’t. But I’m from the Niagara region, grew up on a farm twenty minutes from the falls.”

Just then a plastic sounding voice came over his walkie talkie, calling for all cars in the vicinity for another accident. Vince stood up and responded to the dispatcher. When he was done, he looked at her.

“I have to go but...” he reached into a pocket on his vest and handed her a card. “...if you need anything, don’t hesitate to contact me.”

“Are we done then?” Brit stood and walked him to the door. “Do you need me to answer anything else?”

“No, we’re done. Like I said, reach out if you need anything.” He took hold of the door handle and with a backward glance, said, “You have a goodnight.”

“You too,” she said. A swirl of snow blew in as he opened the door. “Try to stay warm out there.”

“I’ll try,” he chuckled, disappearing into the darkness.

Brit pushed the door closed against the wind just as Kim and Dean came walking up the hall.

“What did he want?” Kim asked excitedly.

Brit looked at her and sighed. “Ah nothing really. Just wanted to know if I knew what was going on at the farm.”

“That’s it?” Kim spat out. “That’s what was so important?”

Brit stuck her hands in her sweater and shrugged. “Yeah, pretty much.” Feigning a yawn, she headed towards the stairs. “I’m gonna head up to bed now. It’s been a long day. Goodnight.”

Dean said, “Night Brit,” as Kim mumbled, “Yeah, night.”

They watched her climb the steps and then disappeared as she went through the alcove where the hidden staircase to the bedroom, she shared with Jasmine led.

“Does that make any sense to you?” Kim asked, spinning around to look at Dean.

“It makes perfect sense. I think we should follow her lead and get some sleep. Brit’s right, it has been a long day.”

Brit stopped once she was on the staircase to the servants’ quarters. Leaning against the closed door, she tried desperately to catch her breath. It was bad enough when Vince wanted to talk to her but when he pulled out that picture of her she thought she was going to have another meltdown on the spot. It took everything in her power to not show her fear or anxiety.

Her old employer must be desperate to have her back if they were offering fifty grand as a reward. Considering she was the only employee to pull in that amount in less than a month’s time even after she was paid her meager cut, was exactly the reason they were searching for her. If she had her way, they would never find her.

Pushing away from the door, she made her way up the steps and headed straight for the bathroom. Going through her nightly routine of washing her face, her thoughts turned to the one man that she wished she could confide in. Luke. They had

a connection or at least she thought they did, that she'd never had with another living soul in her life. Could she tell him? Would she tell him one day?

Sighing, she turned the tap on and stuck a washcloth under the running water. She rinsed her face off then blotted it dry with a hand towel. Looking at her reflection, she mumbled to herself, "And if you do, what are you going to do when he calls you a whore..."

Rinsing the washcloth, she squeezed the water from it and hung it to dry before brushing her teeth. As she did, Brit shook her head. It was no use; he would think she was the scum of the earth, and she wouldn't blame him one bit. Despite having a very good reason for getting into the business, it would not matter. She was a shamed woman, and she always would be for the rest of her life.

She spit the toothpaste into the sink then rinsed her mouth as she placed her toothbrush into the holder beside Jasmine's. Turning off the light, she headed across the hall to their bedroom. Quietly she creeped in and saw Jasmine sound asleep, with the covers kicked around her ankles. Taking her pajamas off the peg from behind the door, Brit stripped her clothes and tossed them onto a nearby chair then quickly got into her pj's. Despite the inn having central heating, it never seemed to reach this far upstairs and there was a distinctive chill in the air. She got into the bed, and gently pulled the covers up, tucking them around Jasmine before she laid back. Her head just hit the pillow when the teenager turned to face her and hugged her around the middle.

Regardless of what happened to her at the farm, Brit had grown fond of Jasmine, like she was the little sister she never had. Turning to face the girl, she laid her arm across her and fell asleep.



Chapter 6

“**W**here do you want this, Kim?” Brit asked, as she pulled out a Nativity scene from the crate she was currently going through. They were all bundled up in their winter gear and were decorating the outside of the Inn.

Kim was standing on a step ladder hanging Christmas lights along the stone porch, turning, she looked at Brit over her shoulder. “I think in the front yard, to the left of the sidewalk. I’ll get Dean to put a spotlight on them.”

Brit nodded. “That would be the perfect spot.” She looked at Jasmine, “Can you give me a hand lifting this out?”

The teen trudged through the snow and together they lifted the baby Jesus in his manger and carried him to the front yard. Setting him down, Jasmine said, “We should get a bale of hay from the barn and scatter it around.”

“Good idea! If you want, take the ATV and go grab one, I’ll keep unpacking the rest.”

“Yes!” Jasmine fist pumped the air and Brit had to laugh at the girl’s reaction. She loved driving that thing around, and the reason why Brit suggested it.

“Where’s she going? Kim asked.

“To get a bale of hay for the manger,” she answered, pulling out a donkey next from the crate. “This is quite the nativity scene you have here.”

“Yeah, Dean made it years ago when he was living in the States,” Kim said, climbing down from the ladder. “Who would have thought he would be so handy.”

“It’s beautiful,” Brit said as she admired his handiwork.

“So.” Kim studied her face. “The house is almost decorated except for the main tree in the living room and the other girls already decorated theirs, when are you going to put yours up, Brit?”

Brit froze. How did she tell this woman that she hated Christmas? Hate was too strong of a word. More like disliked. She was fine when they had gone shopping but then the incident happened and with it brought everything she was trying desperately to forget.

“It’s the middle of November...” When she saw the look on Kim’s face she hurried on. “Umm... soon. I would just like to wait until closer to Christmas, you know. Makes it feel more like the holidays for me. Maybe Evelyn can decorate it?”

Kim wrinkled her nose. “She’s too busy with Tim over at the bar.”

The sound of the ATV returning had them both turning around.

“I got two bales,” Jasmine said, getting off the machine.

“Good, let’s get this set up. From the looks of those clouds, it’s going to start snowing any second,” Kim said, pulling one of the bales out of the wagon.

Together, all three set the nativity up and were putting the final touches on it when the snow started falling.



LUKE WAS ON HIS WAY back to Pearl Lake. Having wrapped up his last gig of testing the next biggest hit for next year’s holiday season, he was free until mid January. And what better way to pass the time than going to visit his family early.

That wasn’t the only reason why. He couldn’t get Brit off his mind no matter how hard he tried. He’d even gone on a few dates with various women. But that didn’t help. He caught himself comparing them to her, even going as far as calling one of them by her name. That didn’t end well. All it got him was a glass full of wine thrown in his face in the middle of a swanky restaurant. After that, he gave up.

He had been driving, well, more like crawling for an hour in what looked like a tunnel because the snowbanks were as high as his driver’s side window. With the trees on either side

of the road, the snowplows didn't have much of a choice but to push it off to the side as best as they could. If that wasn't bad enough, big fat snowflakes started coming down. "Great. Isn't there enough snow up here already?" he grumbled to himself looking up at the sky.

He was a five-minute drive away from the village and with any luck, he would get there before the road got too bad, he thumbed the cruise control, increasing the speed. That was his first mistake. The second was hitting black ice. Never a good thing, especially when the car decided to hydroplane into a snowbank. The car came to a jarring stop. Feeling like he'd just hit a brick wall, Luke sat there for a minute getting his bearings, thanking his lucky stars the airbag didn't go off.

Grabbing onto the door handle, he shoved his shoulder against it, but it wouldn't budge. He unbuckled his seatbelt, reached across the passenger seat, and tried that door. Relief spread through him when it opened.

Reaching for his cellphone, he snatched it up and swiped the screen intending on calling Lane. "Damn it!" There was no reception.

Stuffing it into his pocket, he crawled over the middle console to the passenger seat. Getting out on all fours he stood on the snowbank looking down at his car with hands on his hips. It was no wonder why he couldn't open his door. The snow was halfway up the driver's side. He was lucky it stopped when it did because it was teetering on top of the snowbank, with a twenty-foot drop on the other side down to the frozen lake.

Not wasting any time, he carefully opened the back door and grabbed his scarf, wrapped it around his head, and then his gloves. Putting them on, he scowled at the swirling snow while cursing at himself for not bringing a winter hat. He bent down and grabbed his duffle bag that held his clothes and took out the one thing that would be missed if someone came along and decided to help themselves to the contents, Ava's gift to Mark, the gaming system. The rest of his things and what small gifts he'd already bought would have to wait for the tow truck.

He debated on setting off across the lake. Take a shortcut, or the safe way up the road. He looked across the frozen lake, scanning its surface for any wet areas that would show open water and there were none. He could see the inn where Kim and Dean lived and further down the shore, he could see where Ava and Mark's house sat and a few hundred feet away, his mom's and Ben's house.

Pulling the collar up on his coat, he hunkered down and started the descent to the lake below, gingerly making his way down, hanging onto tree trunks for support. Once he was standing on the shoreline, he took a moment to catch his breath. If he made good time, he should be there in less than five minutes.

He stepped onto the snow-covered surface and tested it with his weight. Knowing it was more likely to fall through the closer he was to shore than further out, he tentatively made his way out. When no cracking could be heard he bent down and brushed the snow away and saw that it was clear blue; lucky for him, as it was the strongest. Standing, he set off to the closest family member's house... Kim and Dean's Inn.

He was three quarters of the way there when he heard a groaning sound coming from where his car sat. Turning around, he watched in stunned silence when he saw it slide down the embankment trampling the underbrush as it did. And then if he hadn't already had the worst luck in the world, it made a nosedive right towards the shore. With an echoing crash it hit the edge of the frozen water. All was quiet for a second and if he hadn't seen it for himself, he would never believe it could happen but then the ripple effect from the car's impact caused the ice to crack. Luke took off running in hopes he made it in time...



Chapter 7

The wind was gusting now, and the temperature was dropping fast.

Kim started to shiver. “Just leave that,” she said, gesturing to the crate of outdoor decorations that Jasmine was tying a tarp over.

“We can’t.” Brit shook her head. “If we do, it will all blow into the lake,” she said, glancing towards it. “What the...?”

Kim looked to where she was staring. “Is that a person?”

Brit nodded. “Yeah... I think it is.”

Jasmine joined them and asked, “What are they doing out on the lake?”

The three of them stood there watching the person running right towards them less than forty feet from the shoreline when suddenly, they started throwing things towards the shore.

“What the hell are they doing?” Kim asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” Brit said and started walking.

Kim grabbed her arm. “Don’t do that! They could be some crazy person. I’ll go get Dean...”

Just as she said that the person broke through the ice.

“Oh my god! Call the police!” Brit shouted and took off running.

It felt like she was running through sand. The snow was so deep in some areas, but she finally made it to the edge of the lake. Whoever it was, was lucky they made it as far as they did because their head was still above the surface, that meant that they were touching the bottom.

They were trying desperately to get hold of solid ice but the more they tried the more it broke away.

“Hang on, I’m coming,” Brit yelled as she laid on her belly.

“No! Stay there, you’ll fall through!”

“Luke?!”

“Yeah, it’s me. Stay there Brit, please.”

She shook her head. “No, I can’t do that, hang on.” She started pulling herself along the surface of the ice until she was five feet from him. “Oh my gosh, your lips are turning blue. Here, grab this.” She shoved her scarf as best she could towards him in the howling wind, but it just blew it around. “Hang on.” Turning around, she slowly backed her way towards him without getting too close to the edge. She looked over her shoulder at him. “Grab my leg.”

Luke stood there shaking his head, he couldn’t allow her to put her life in danger any more than she already had. “No. Get back to shore.”

“Luke! Please!”

“Brit get your ass back here!” Kim howled over the wind. “The cops are on their way.”

“It’s Luke!” she yelled back.

Kim looked at Jasmine as the two stood on shore watching Brit and the stranger. “What did she say?”

“She said it’s Luke.”

“Luke?! Good lord, Jasmine, get up to the house and get Dean, I’ll get out and help her.”

Brit watched as Kim dropped to her stomach and started crawling towards them, she stopped a good ten feet away and said, “Luke do you think you can break more ice?”

“I... I think s..so,” he said, his teeth chattering beyond his control.

“Why?!” Brit cried. “We are wasting time!”

“Because the closer he comes to shore the shallower it is. I know for a fact it’s waist high right where I am.”

“Okay.” Brit spun back around on her belly and looked Luke in the eyes. “We will do this together, okay?”

Luke could no longer talk; he just gave her a shaky nod.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she knew was coming. Closing her eyes, she raised her fists then smashed them against the ice. Opening them, she screamed out his name when she saw him close his eyes and sway.

Desperate, she flipped over onto her back with her feet facing him and started hitting the ice with the heel of her boot. Finally, it started to break away, but Luke wasn't moving. Without a thought to her own safety, she slipped off the ice into the bone chilling water and thanked God that her feet touched the bottom. She reached for him just as he started to slip under. "I got you," she panted. With all her might, she leaned back pulling him with her as the ice broke around them. She took a step back and then another, then suddenly, Dean and Vince were reaching for Luke. Together they lifted him into a rubber dingy. Once he was safely inside, Dean pulled her out from the water and plopped her down beside Luke.

Brit grabbed Dean's arm. "Kim, where is she?"

"Over there." Dean pointed. She was standing on the shore along with a dozen or so people that were pulling the dingy back to the shoreline.

Relief flooded along her veins until she looked at Luke. He was covered with a foil emergency blanket, but he was so pale and shivering like a leaf. Snuggling against him despite their sopping clothes, Brit whispered to him. "Don't you dare leave me like this."

He cracked an eye open and looked at her. "I'll try not to..."

They finally reached the shore where paramedics took over and put Luke on a stretcher. Strapping him down, they covered him with a blanket. Then the one that seemed to be in charge, looked at Kim as he took Luke's vitals and said, "His temp is 91.6°F. We have no choice but to take them to the clinic, all roads are closed leading to Springbank where they should be going."

Kim nodded her understanding at the grave situation Luke was in then looked at Dean. “Can you call Abbi and let her know? I’ll go with them in the ambulance.”

He had a grim look on his face. “I will. Get going.”

Brit knew nothing about hypothermia, but she knew enough that it couldn’t be good. Especially when she got into the back of the ambulance with Luke.

The first thing the medic did was take her vitals too. “Temp is 95.9° F,” he said to his partner. Then he looked at Brit and handed her a blanket. “Strip your clothes now, then wrap yourself in this.”

Brit darted questioning eyes to Kim as she climbed in. “It will start warming your blood faster. If you stay in those wet clothes, it will only get worse.”

Brit glanced at Luke who was watching her as the other medic stripped him of his clothes.

She gulped. “Everything?” she asked as the medic that handed her the blanket got behind the wheel and set the vehicle in drive.

“Ideally yes, but just leave your underwear on,” Kim said. “You can strip them off at the clinic.”

“It’s okay, Brit. I won’t look.” Luke told her, barely above a whisper.

All the same, she turned her back towards him and quickly shimmied out of her clothes.

Luke lied, he didn’t look away, he couldn’t for the simple fact that she had been the only thing on his mind for the better part of a month. He raised his brows when she slipped her shirt off. A tattoo of a Holstein cow was on her right shoulder blade with a crown of flowers upon its head. An unusual tattoo and one that he couldn’t wait to ask the significance of when they were alone.

He averted his eyes the second she wrapped the blanket around herself then turned back around, clutching it closed over her chest.

“We’re here ladies and gent,” the driver said as he pulled up to the curb. Doc was standing there waiting in his white coat along with Susan, the nurse that he’d hired to replace Kim. He opened the back doors of the ambulance and looked at Brit. “Are you okay to walk?” he asked, holding his hand out for her.

Brit nodded as she took it and stepped down. He turned to look at Susan and said, “Get her inside and put her in the first room, start warming her up.”

Susan nodded. “Come along my dear.” Susan took her inside and showed her the room. “There’s a couple of gowns on the bed, slip the first one on backwards then the other like a housecoat then get on that bed and cover up. I’ll be right back.”

Brit did as she was told, then climbed between the covers. It was then that it hit her at how cold she really was when the warm blanket covered her. Her skin started to sting, and her heart went out to Luke. As she started to shiver, Susan came back into the room carrying a cup of something steamy in one hand and a folded blanket draped over her other arm.

“Here we are,” she said, putting the cup onto the table next to the bed. “When that cools down a bit, you will need to drink it. But for now, I’ll check your temp and your vitals.” She tossed the blanket onto the foot of the bed and looked at Brit. “How are you feeling?”

Her teeth started to chatter but she managed to say, “I hurt.”

“Is it stinging?”

Brit nodded. “Everywhere.”

“That’s a normal reaction. Your temp is at 96° F. That’s good it’s coming up!” she said. Taking the blanket she had tossed on the bed, she unfolded it. “This one was in the warmer,” Susan explained as she covered Brit with it.

“How’s Luke doing?” Brit asked, noticing a frown appear on the nurse’s face when she did.

“Um, I’m not too sure.”

“Well, can you go find out for me, please?”

“Of course.” Susan picked the mug up and handed it to her. “Here drink this while I’m gone, little sips.”

Brit took the mug, noticing that it smelled like chicken broth. She looked at it and noticed that it was only half full. Which was a good thing, otherwise, she would be bathing in it from all the shivering she was doing.

As she took a sip, she noticed someone flying past the open door with Ben following at a slower pace. It was Abbi. Brit could tell by the wailing that shortly ensued.

As the tears started rolling down her cheeks, she knew that could only mean one thing... Luke didn’t make it.



Chapter 8

“**M**om, I’m fine. Just cold and everything feels like it’s on fire made from ice.”

“What?!” Abbi stopped fawning over him for a moment and looked at Doc. “Is that normal?”

Doc nodded. “Yeah, as the blood warms, it does have that effect. His temp is up to 95°F from...” Doc looked at the clipboard the medics had written on. “...91.6. He’s damn lucky Brit jumped in when she did. Otherwise, he would have needed IV treatment to warm his blood, and I can’t do that here... she saved his life.”

“How long do I have to stay here Doc?” Luke asked.

“Well, once your temperature gets to 98.6 and stays there for a good hour, you can go home.” Doc nodded at the mug in his hands. “Keep drinking that broth. I’m going to check on Brit. Kim, once that blanket gets cool, get him another, would you?”

“Sure thing.”

The second Doc left the room Abbi turned on Luke. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“Abbi...” Ben warned.

She spun to look at him. “He could have died, Ben.”

“Don’t you think he doesn’t know that?”

“It was fine mom until the car hit the ice. Speaking of which, can someone call a tow truck for me?”

“Already did,” Ben said.

Luke nodded. “Thanks man.” He then looked at his mother. “My phone had no signal, ma. That’s why I took off across the lake, it was shorter than the road.”

“But you should have known better. The lake hasn’t been frozen for more than a week...”

Ben moved to stand behind Abbi and rubbed her back. “Come on love. Luke’s fine, he needs to get some rest.”

“But...”

“No but’s, he’s in good hands with Doc,” he said, ushering her towards the door.

“Fine.” She huffed and looked at Luke. “I’ll get a bed ready for you at the house for when you’re ready to leave.”

“Great, I look forward to it,” Luke said, as she turned towards the door, he caught Ben’s eye and mouthed ‘thank you’ to him. Ben nodded and said, “Any time.”

“What was that?” Abbi said, spinning around.

“Nothing let’s go check on Brit,” Ben said, as he guided her out of the room.

“Are you getting warmer,” Kim asked, as she checked his temperature.

“A little bit.”

“Well, your temp is at 94° now.” She laid a hand on the blanket and found it cold. “I’ll get you another one of these. How’s the broth? Do you need more?”

Luke looked in his mug, nodding, he passed it to her. “Can you see how Brit’s doing for me Aunt Kim?”

She smiled. “Already planned on it. I’ll be right back.”

When she left the room Luke hunkered down in the bed. The stinging fire raging over his skin was slowly waning, he just hoped Brit wasn’t feeling it as well.

“Here you go,” Kim said, as she walked back into the room. She stopped and held onto the mug. “Can you hold onto this without spilling it everywhere?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” she said, passing it to him with a dubious look on her face. Once he took it, she pulled a blanket out from beneath her arm and whipped the other blanket off, covering him with it. She laid the cooler one on top of it. “I’ll go check

on Brit now. If you need anything, just buzz this,” she said. Taking a cord from the wall behind his bed, she handed it to him then pointed at the mug. “Make sure you drink that.”

“I will,” he said, taking a sip. He leaned back against the pillow. Glancing out the window he saw that it looked like a blizzard and thanked his lucky stars he wasn’t out in it.



BRIT WIPED HER TEARS away as Doc strode into the room with a blank look on his face.

She wondered if he would tell her about Luke or if he would leave it up to Kim to do that.

“How are you doing Brit?” he asked as he looked at her clipboard. “Are you in a lot of pain?”

Brit swallowed the lump in her throat and shook her head. “Not as much now...”

Doc looked at her over his glasses and said, “On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst, what would you rate yours at?”

She almost laughed at that. The worst pain she ever felt was when she had passed a kidney stone. She was told it was worse than childbirth. Something she vowed never to experience. She licked her lips and said, “It was at five, I guess. But now, more like two.”

“Good, good.” He came around the bed, took the thermometer and put a disposable probe cover on the end, he then stuck it in her ear. When it beeped, he said, “Even better, your temp is now at a solid 96.9°.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, we can now uncover you and get you dressed. If your temp doesn’t go down, in an hour you can go home.” Doc turned away to toss the probe cover into the garbage.

“But my clothes got soaked when I jumped in to save...” The tears started up again as she whispered, “...Luke.”

Washing his hands he said over his shoulder, “Dean stopped by and brought you some dry clothes.” Taking a fist full of paper towels, he turned drying his hands and stopped when he saw her face. “Are you okay?”

Brit nodded vigorously, not trusting herself to speak without blubbering like a fool.

The look Doc sent her said he thought otherwise. “Are you sure there isn’t something you need to tell me?”

She shook her head.

Doc nodded. “Okay then. Do you mind telling me why you’re crying?”

As Abbi’s sobs echoed in her mind, she just couldn’t bring herself to say it.

A knock on the door had both glancing at it. There stood Abbi and Ben with smiles on their faces.

“Is it okay if we come in?” Abbi asked.

Doc glanced at Brit. When she nodded, he said, “Sure, I have to do some quick paperwork.” He took the clipboard then looked at Brit. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He looked at Abbi and Ben and said, “Make it quick, she needs to get dressed soon.”

“Oh, we will be,” Ben said, stepping aside to let Doc pass by.

Abbi came into the room and stood beside the bed. She patted Brit on the leg. “I just wanted to thank you for jumping in to help Luke.”

Brit looked at her and wondered if she might be in shock. Abbi was standing there with a stupid grin on her face. She should be running up and down the hall screaming her head off instead of being this... this happy go lucky person. Maybe Doc gave her a shot of something to calm her down.

She realized then that she should say something when there was a long awkward moment of pure silence. Brit licked her lips and said, “Um... you’re welcome...”

“Kim told us how she told you not to... but Doc said that if you hadn’t, he wouldn’t have made it.”

Brit hugged her legs to her chest and buried her face in knees. “I’m so sorry Abbi, I should have jumped in sooner. I just didn’t—”

“What? Wait, what?”

Brit looked up with her face streaked with tears. “I’m sorry... he didn’t make it,” she choked out.

Ben came around Abbi and said, “Whoa, whoa wait a minute. Luke’s alive, he’s doing just fine.”

“What?! I asked Susan, my nurse, to find out and then you two came in running by my door and then I heard Abbi... sobbing with such anguish, I thought...”

“That’s just Abbi, she tends to be like that sometimes,” Ben said, grinning at his wife.

“I do not,” Abbi smiled, jabbing him with her elbow. “Well, maybe sometimes. I’m sorry I scared you Brit. But Ben is right. Luke will make a full recovery. Hopefully he’s learned his lesson.”

“It’s not his fault, the ice was thick enough for him to walk on Abbi. I checked with Vince, and he said so himself,” Ben told them. “Anyway, we should be getting out of here so Brit can change.”

“Right, of course.” Abbi leaned over and gave Brit a hug and said, “It just doesn’t seem enough but again, thank you.”

Brit hugged her back and replied, “You’re welcome. I would do it all over again if I had to.”

Abbi laughed as they made their way to the door. “Let’s hope not!”

Kim appeared at the door with a bag in her hands. “Hey you two. I thought you would be long gone by now.”

“We’re heading out now,” Ben said, wrapping his arm around Abbi’s shoulders.

“Well, I’m glad you’re still here. Doc just went in and told Luke he wanted him to stay overnight but Luke is refusing to. Doc said the only way he would allow him to leave without a fight is if he stayed the night at the inn so I can keep an eye on him.”

“Oh,” Abbi said. “Of course, but he should really stay here, right?”

“Technically yes.” Kim nodded. “But we can’t make him, he’s an adult.”

“Let me go talk to him,” Abbi said, stepping out into the hall.

“NO,” Kim all but yelled. “Can’t do that. I promised Luke, I wouldn’t tell you. So... he’s coming to my house. Don’t worry, he’ll be fine. I still have all my medical equipment handy and what I don’t have I’ll bring home.”

Abbi rolled her eyes. “Fine! But we’re staying the night too.” She looked at Ben. “Are you okay with that?”

“Of course, love, whatever you want. I’m going to go start the car.”

Abbi nodded then turned back to her sister.

“Good, I still have the crib for Annabelle, we can put it together when you come over,” Kim said, stepping into the room. “Now go home, I’ll call you when Doc gives the okay.”

“Okay we’ll see you then. Bye Brit, thanks again,” Abbi said then disappeared after Ben.

Kim let out a big sigh. “I love her but man she drives me insane sometimes...” then she snickered, “...mind you the feeling is probably mutual.”

Brit nodded. “Probably.”

“Thanks!” Kim cackled and Brit burst out laughing.

“Anywho!” Kim looked at her with a smile on her face as she plopped the bag onto the bed. Taking the thermometer from the wall, she put a cover on it and turned to Brit. “Doc wants your temperature taken again before you change.”

Kim stuck it in her ear, and both waited for it to beep. “Woo hoo! You’re at 98.2! How’re you feeling?”

“Good, happy that Luke is doing okay.”

“I meant physically.” Kim took her by the hand and examined each of her fingertips. “Any stinging or numbness?”

“Nope.”

“How about your toes, can you feel them?” Kim asked, pulling the blanket from around her feet she leaned over and inspected each one.

Brit shivered, as the cooler air hit her skin.

“Toes look good. No signs of frostbite.” Kim stood and looked at each of her ears. “I never knew you had such cute ears. You need to wear your hair up more often and show them off,” she giggled. “You can get dressed now. Doc said, once you are to get up and walk around. It will get the blood circulating better. Go stop in and say hi to Luke, he’s been asking about you.”

With that, Kim left the room. Taking a deep breath, she exhaled it slowly. Tossing the covers aside, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, then opened the bag. She hoped that it was Jasmine that packed the bag of clothes for her and not Dean. Shoving the thought out of her mind, she slipped on her bra and underwear and quickly got dressed.

Standing, she took a coat and shoes out of the bag and put them on too. The sooner she warmed up the sooner she could leave. She knew her hair was a mess and wished there was a mirror just so she could see how bad it was, but there wasn’t. Looking around for an elastic band to throw it up into a ponytail she spied a box of masks sitting on a counter next to the sink. Taking one out, she pulled one of the elastic bands off and tied the ends in a knot. Combing her fingers through her hair, she deftly pulled it into a bun and wrapped her makeshift hair tie around it. Satisfied, she made her way out into the hall and headed towards room 3, Luke’s room.



Chapter 9

She peeked in the door and saw him lying there with his head towards the window. Just in case he was sleeping, she lightly tapped on the open door.

He turned his head and looked at her.

“Hey, come on in. You’re looking good,” he said, pulling himself to sit up.

“Thanks. You’re looking much better than the last time I saw you,” she said as she took in the sight of him.

“I should be the one thanking—”

He sat up straighter when he saw tears glistening in her eyes. “What is it? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good, I...” She shook her head. “It’s not important,” she said as Doc came into the room. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

“No, it’s fine,” Luke said, stopping her in her tracks.

Doc swung his gaze to her. “What I have to say applies to both of you Brit, I don’t have a problem with you staying either.”

“Alright then.” She hurried over to sit on a chair beside the window.

Doc handed them each a piece of paper. “Seeing how Luke is insisting on leaving, those are the symptoms I want you both to be aware of, for yourself and each other.” He looked at Luke, “If anything pops up, you are to get your ass back in here immediately.”

Luke nodded but didn’t say a word.

“Okay, Brit I’ll take your temperature once more. Kim said it was at 98.2, twenty minutes ago and your vitals were all good. You’re feeling fine otherwise?”

“I am, a lot better.”

When he grabbed the thermometer from the wall and went through the motions of getting it ready, Brit got up and went to stand beside him. Everyone fell silent as he stuck it in her ear. “By George, you’re at a healthy 98.6!”

“I can leave now?”

“Absolutely. But just watch your symptoms, keep warm and do nothing for the next 24 hours. Oh, and take your temp every half hour just to make sure it stays normal.”

“Nothing for twenty-four hours?” Brit squeaked out.

“Nothing,” he repeated.

“What about me?” Luke asked.

“Kim said she would take care of you, so you’re both free to go... after I take your temperature of course.” Doc smiled.

“Of course,” Luke laughed. “You wouldn’t have it any other way would you Doc?”

“You got that right!”



DEAN PULLED AS CLOSE as he could to the solarium door to let his passengers out. They all climbed down from his truck and hurried inside while Jasmine held the door open for them.

“Brit I was so worried about you,” Jasmine said, throwing her arms around her.

“Careful there girlie,” Kim warned. “For the next 24 hours these two are to be treated like fine china.”

Luke laughed. “That’s a little unnecessary, isn’t it Aunt Kim?”

“No, not at all. I’m not sure what Doc told you but both of you could have died today. Hypothermia is no joke,” she said as she closed the door. “Come on, let’s get you too settled in front of the fireplace for now.”

With that she walked through the solarium and into the hall. “Jasmine, can you go into the kitchen and heat the pot of

soup that I put in the fridge earlier this morning, please.”

“Yup, I’ll do that,” Jasmine said and veered off into the hall that led to the kitchen.

“Come along you two,” Kim said, walking toward the front foyer, they then crossed into the living room. Kim walked over to one of the wingback chairs and started to drag it in front of the fireplace. “Once Dean comes in, I’ll get him to start a fire.”

“Aunt Kim, you really don’t have to go to all of this trouble,” Luke said as he took hold of the other chair.

“Tttt, tttt, ttt.” Kim held out a hand. “Leave that, you’re not to be doing anything, remember?”

Luke ignored her. “Dragging a chair isn’t that big a deal. Besides, other than being a little tired, I feel fine.”

“Well do that and that’s it. If something happens, not only will Doc kill me but so will your mother.”

“Fine.” Luke agreed just as Dean walked into the room.

“What are you guys doing?” he asked, looking at the chairs.

“Doc said they need to keep warm and do nothing, so that’s what they’re going to do,” Kim said, as she stood there with her hands on her hips.

Dean looked at his watch and raised his brows to her. “Kim... it’s 5:30 pm do you expect them to sit there all night?”

“Well... no. We can bring down a couple of mattresses for them to sleep on in front of the fireplace.”

Brit spoke up. “Don’t go to any trouble for me. I’ll sleep in my bed with Jasmine, otherwise she’ll be scared all alone on the third floor.”

“Don’t be silly,” Kim said. “It’s too cold up there for you. She can stay in one of the guest rooms on the second floor.”

Luke glanced at Brit and saw the look in her eyes, she was protective of the teenager. He could see her sneaking up the

stairs in the middle of the night if Kim insisted. “If you’re bringing two mattresses down for us, what’s one more? Jasmine can camp out on the floor with us.”

Brit flashed him a smile. “She’ll like that.”

“That’ll work too. Come along Dean,” Kim said as she made her way to the front staircase.

When they were out of earshot, Brit turned to him and said, “Thank you for that.”

When she looked at him that way, he resisted the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her senselessly. Instead, he reached out his hand and tucked a long strand of her hair that escaped her bun, behind her ear. “No problem. Aunt Kim can be a little pushy, sometimes you just need to push back.”

As much as she wanted to lean into his hand, Brit took a step back. Nothing could happen between them, despite her wanting it to. She was a wanted woman, not from the police but from her ruthless employers. And then he would find out what she had done for a living and want nothing to do with her. Eyes filled with regret she looked up at him and said, “I’m going to see if Jasmine needs any help in the kitchen. Do you want anything?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say ‘you’, but instead he mutely shook his head. He had a lot of planning to do and could really use some advice. The only person he could think of that had been in a similar situation was Ben when he’d met his mom. He needed to give him a call asap.

“Alright then. I’ll see you at dinner.” He watched as she walked out of the room and waited until the sound of her footsteps faded down the hall.

He reached into his back pocket and swore. His phone wasn’t there and then he remembered it was still in his coat pocket and had been when he’d fallen through the ice. It was likely a \$2500.00 paperweight now considering it had been submerged in the icy water as long as he had been. Luke exited the room, crossed the front foyer, and headed straight for the reception desk to the landline phone. Picking up the

receiver to call Ben, it dawned on him that he didn't know his number. Not wanting to ask Kim or Dean for the number, he replaced the receiver in its cradle just as Kim yelled from above. "Look out below!" The first mattress hit the stair steps, then slid down the rest of the way to the floor. "Luke, don't you dare touch that!"

He walked over to it, grabbed it by the corner. "Too late," he called up as he pulled it into the living room. Dropping the corner, he walked over to the chairs and pulled them aside then dragged it in front of the fireplace. Even though he was feeling better he was still amazed at how tired he felt.

He turned as another thud came from the stairs followed by a third. When he got to the stairs, Kim was running down them all red in the face with Dean right on her heels. "Don't you touch those!"

Luke raised his hands and backed away while laughing.

Dean picked up both mattresses by the corners and pulled and as he passed Luke, he said out of the corner of his mouth, "She's a mite bossy today."

"I heard that," Kim said, her lips drawn in a tight line as she placed her hands on her hips.

"Of course you did, my dear," Dean replied. "You were supposed to."

Luke burst out laughing. "Don't you mean everyday Dean?"

"Supper is ready," Jasmine called as she came down the hall. She joined them in the foyer and asked, "What's all the banging?"

"Didn't Brit tell you?" Luke asked as he walked into the living room.

"No," she shook her head, following him. "She just started making sandwiches and didn't tell me anything."

"That's because I wanted it to be a surprise," Brit said, as she came into the living room. "The three of us are camping out on the floor in here tonight."

“We are?” Jasmine’s eyes darted to the far corner of the room where the massive tree sat, naked. “Can we decorate the tree after we eat Kim?” She then turned to Brit and Luke. “Want to make s’mores?”

“Slow down,” Kim laughed. “Yes, to the tree. But I decided it needs to be in the front window first.” She looked at Dean and batted her eyelashes. “That is if we can convince Dean to help...”

He laughed at her. “Woman... feed me first and I’ll help you do anything.”

“Yes!” Jasmine squealed with delight. “Come on, the food is ready.”



Chapter 10

As Christmas music played softly, and the fireplace roaring, Brit realized she wasn't used to sitting around watching the antics of others. But there she was, along with Luke in the wingback chairs where the Christmas tree once stood. Together they watched in amused silence as Dean, Kim and Jasmine wrangled the 12-foot tree from the corner where they were sitting, halfway to its destination, in front of the window.

They both offered to help, Luke even going as far as taking the tree on one side while Dean grabbed the other. Only to have Kim usher him back to his chair.

He leaned towards Brit and nudged her arm. "I don't know about you but watching them is painful."

Brit smiled and nodded. "It is. If Kim was just a bit taller it might help."

"Rock it back and forth you guys," Kim yelled. "At this rate the damn thing isn't going to have any needles left."

"It was your idea to move it," Dean huffed. "I'm going to tip it, you two take the top and I'll get the bottom." They did just that, but Kim lost her grip and in a spray of pine needles the tree fell to the floor.

Luke couldn't stand it a second longer. "I'm going in, wish me luck." He then winked at her as he got up from the chair.

"Hang on, I'm coming too."

They each grabbed a section despite very loud protests from Kim. "Get your butts back in those chairs now!"

Ignoring her, Dean said, "Everyone ready? Let's go."

In one smooth motion, they all carried the tree to the window. Carefully they stood it in its stand and waited until Dean tightened it down.

Dusting his hands off, Luke looked at Kim. "There, that wasn't so bad now, was it?"

“Yes, it was. Now both of you go sit your asses down and take your temperatures.” Turning to Jasmine and Dean she said, “Let’s get this puppy decorated.”



“SO, THIS IS BORING,” Luke said around the thermometer in his mouth as it beeped.

Brit laughed as she took it from his mouth and looked at it. “We’re both normal.”

“Well, that’s questionable for me, but whatever.”

She laughed and stood up. “Do you want something to drink? I’m thinking of making some hot cocoa.”

“From scratch?”

She nodded and started crossing the room to the front foyer. “The only way to drink it,” she said.

“Only if I can help.” He got up and followed her.

“Wait.” Kim stopped what she was doing and looked at the two of them. “Where are you two going?”

“Well, if you must know my darling Aunt, I need to take a wiz and Brit is going to make everyone hot chocolates... from scratch.”

Dean, who was hanging a strand of lights, burst out laughing while Jasmine snickered.

Not missing a beat, Kim shot back. “Then do it sitting down!”

Luke rolled his eyes and laughed as he followed Brit down the hallway. When they got to the kitchen, he looked at Brit. “I love my aunt... but how the hell do you put up with her nagging all the time?” he asked, taking five mugs from the cupboard.

Brit chuckled as she took a pot from under the counter. Setting it on the stove, she went to the fridge and took out the milk pitcher. “She’s not that bad, I notice she’s only like this when she’s in nurse mode.” Emptying the milk into the pot,

she continued. “Believe me I’ve worked for worse people in the past than her.”

Heading into the pantry to get the cocoa powder, Brit froze. She shouldn’t have said anything about her past. She stood there a moment, hoping he didn’t ask about it. Grabbing the cocoa from the shelf, she headed back to the stove, and avoided looking at him.

“What else do you need?” Luke asked.

She took a deep breath. “Um... a measuring cup would be great.”

Luke went about searching for one and she was thanking her lucky stars he didn’t bring it up. She went to grab a whisk from the utensil container next to the stove and yanked a little too hard when he said, “So, what did you do before this?”

The whisk went flying and landed on the table behind her.

“Whoa! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

A nervous giggle escaped past her lips. “Umm... you didn’t. It just got tangled on something.”

Luke raised his brows. “Oh? Well, that makes perfect sense. Here’s the measuring cup.” He set it down on the counter.

“Thanks...” Brit mumbled and picked up the container of cocoa, pretending to read the directions on how to make something she knew by heart.

“Can you see if there are any marshmallows in the pantry?” she asked.

“Ah, sure.” He went to the door and stopped. Turning to look at her he said, “I bet I can guess what it was you used to do for a living.”

Alright, she would play that game.

“Feel free,” she said, giving him a small smile, turning back to the stove. She added the cocoa then started to whip the tasty brew while he ducked into the pantry. Coming out with a

bag of marshmallows in his hand, he closed the door. “Were you a model?”

Brit whipped her head around and looked at him. “What makes you think that?”

“...Because you look like you could be one? Wait.” He sat the bag on the counter and took her by the arms, turning her to face him. “Did I offend you? I’m sorry if I did, that wasn’t my intention and all... It’s just that you’re stunning.”

Brit didn’t know what to say or how to react with him staring into her eyes so intently. But she did see the shift in him. With one blink, they went from genuine concern to a fevered look. One that she was all too familiar with. When he started looking at her lips and leaning in to where he was mere inches away from her face, that was when she had to put a stop to it. The only thing in her arsenal was the whisk she was still holding onto. Not thinking about it, she placed it between their mouths just as his eyes fluttered shut.

“What the shit?!” Luke’s eyes sprung open as he backed up and saw the metal utensil, he’d just locked lips with.

Dropping his hands, he ran them through his hair then turned and took a step away, only to spin back around.

When he looked at her with his hair all in a wild mess, she wanted nothing more than to lunge at him and kiss him senseless. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t face it when he found out she had been nothing more than a very high paid call girl.

“I’m sorry!” she said. “It was just a reaction.”

Luke rubbed the stubble on his jaw as a sly smile broke out on his lips. “It’s fine. I shouldn’t have done that.”

It wasn’t fine because she wanted to know what those lips felt like on hers. “I ah... I need some time. I’m still processing... stuff.”

And that was not a lie. After what she had gone through at the emu farm, anyone in her shoes would feel the same way.

His gaze softened as he looked at her just then remembering how they met. It was when his brother had

found her at the emu farm. Him, Desi, Ava, Tim, and Dean had all come through the trees into the yard of the house and saw Brit dangling from a broken tv tower. He had raced over and caught her just before she hit the ground.

“I’m sorry, I forgot...”

“Don’t be. It wasn’t your fault.” Turning the burner off, she moved the pot onto an oven mitt that she had placed on the counter. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for what she was about to do.

Turning, she stepped towards him and said, “I never did say thank you for catching me that night. I—”

“Ah don’t mention it. You would have done the same for me.”

She laughed at the visual his words played in her mind. “The only thing I would have been able to do is break your fall and my back.”

“True.” He smirked.

“Anyway. Thank you.” Before she lost her nerve, she stood on the tips of her toes, and kissed him softly on the cheek.

Instinctively his hand went to her waist and held her there. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he warned as his mouth captured hers.

Brit put her hands against his chest, intent on pushing him away, until the ice that had encased her heart started to melt as he deepened the kiss. Slowly her hands crept over his shoulders while he pressed against the small of her back. There was no mistaking the attraction they had for one another any longer as a wave of desire hit them both at the same time.

“Whoa!” Dean said, as he came into the kitchen.

They sprang apart, both heading in the opposite direction.

“Don’t mind me,” Dean said. “I just need to take this box into the dining room.” He looked at them as he passed by. “Don’t stop on my account.”

Brit could feel her cheeks burning as she turned and took the pot, pouring the hot chocolate into the mugs.

“We’re done here,” Luke muttered more to himself. He grabbed the bag of marshmallows and dumped some into a bowl. When Brit looked at him, he said, “For Jasmine to toast. I’ll go and find some coat hangers.” He turned and left her standing there wondering what the hell had just happened.

Shaking her head, she loaded a tray with the drink and carried it off to the living room.



Chapter 11

“What do you think?” Kim asked as Brit joined them.

“It’s beautiful.” she said, setting the tray onto the coffee table. “Isn’t Abbi and Ben coming with the baby?”

“Yeah, I think it looks good and no. She called and decided not to take Annabelle out in this weather.” Kim took a step back and tripped over some garland that was wrapped around her foot. Sitting down on the floor, she untangled it then asked, “Where did Luke go?”

Brit shifted her eyes towards the archway. “He went to look for some coat hangers to toast the marshmallows.”

Kim nodded. “Oh okay. I need to run upstairs and get the bedding for those mattresses.”

Luke and Dean came into the room, both untwisting coat hangers as they did.

Brit quickly looked at Kim and said, “I’ll go get the bedding.”

“No, you sit down, you need to rest.”

“I’m fine. It won’t take me more than a minute,” Brit said, as she rushed past Luke.

Kim’s brows shot high. “What’s up with her?”

Luke and Dean both shrugged at the same time. “No idea,” Dean shook his head. He spied the steaming mugs sitting on the coffee table and went over and took one. “What I do know is, I’m taking my hot cocoa here and going to bed.” Taking a sip, he jerked his head towards the foyer as he walked towards it. “Luke, I put your bags behind the front desk in the lobby.”

“Thanks man. Have a goodnight.”

“That sounds like a plan to me.” Kim stood up and took a mug for herself and looked at Luke. “Before I go, what were your temps?”

“Both of us were normal.”

“Good. Yell if you need me,” she said, and headed out the room.

“Will do.” He looked at Jasmine and handed her the hangers. “You can handle this right?”

“I’m sixteen not five,” she laughed. “Of course, I can.”

“Good, I’ll go give Brit a hand. Where might she be?”

“She went to get bedding. Second floor, right outside the honeymoon suite there’s a closet.”

“Perfect. Won’t be long.” He turned and left the room.

Grabbing his backpack from behind the desk, he sprinted up the stairs to the second floor. With any luck, Brit wouldn’t smack him in the face until after he had apologized.



BRIT WAS NOT ON THE second floor getting bedding, she was in her bedroom on the third floor. She’d decided to get her and Jasmine’s pajamas first. Normally, she would bundle up for bed because it was so damn cold up there but wearing flannel pj’s to sleep in front of a fireplace was out of the question. She knew if she did, she would be ripping them off in the middle of the night, which was something she really didn’t want to be doing with Luke sleeping a few feet away.

Pulling open her drawer, she pulled out the coolest thing she owned. Holding it up, she looked in the floor length mirror at her reflection. A white satin nightshirt that resembled a man’s long sleeve button up shirt, that stopped at mid-thigh. Well, at least she would be covered.

Deciding to change now rather than later, she pulled off her shirt and froze when she heard the floor creak outside her door. Holding her shirt like a shield in front of her, she called out, “Jasmine, is that you?”

She shot her gaze towards the door and watched as it slowly creaked open, then a form materialized out of thin air.

Brit had the pleasure of Fredrick Anderson's ghostly affections towards her, but she had never seen this spirit before. Whoever she was, she was scary as hell. Her long dark hair flowed wildly behind her as she shifted from transparent to human-like. Brit looked on in horrified amazement as the apparition lifted her hand and pointed a long bony finger at her.

She heard, or at least she thought she did, an Ethereal voice emanating from the apparition. At first it sounded like muttering, but then words were starting to formulate, to the point that Brit could hear, "Brit, smarten up you little tramp. Otherwise, you'll lose the best thing that is about to happen to you...just like I did."

Brit opened her mouth and out came a blood curdling scream...



LUKE SET HIS BAG DOWN at the top of the steps as he made his way to the linen closet where Jasmine said he'd find it and Brit. She wasn't there. Looking down at the hall of the west wing, he saw the doors to all rooms standing open. Odd he thought but he ended up ducking his head into every room and she still was nowhere to be found. Thinking he must have missed her, he headed towards the staircase to go back downstairs. He was stepping onto the landing when something caught his eye. The alcove that hid the passageway to the old servants' quarters stood open an inch. He'd never been up there before but knew that was where Brit and Jasmine slept.

Crossing the landing, Luke opened the door and peeked his head in and saw a set of stairs before him. Placing a foot on the bottom step he made his way up, then stopped and almost toppled back down the stairs from seeing the vision before him. It was Brit running out of her room screaming bloody murder in only her bra and underwear. And she was headed right for him.

With a crazed look in her eyes, she shouted. "Get out of my way!"

“Whoa, whoa. Hold up!” he managed to say as she tried to shove her way past him. Taking her by the shoulders, Luke held her there until she calmed down. “Wanna tell me what’s got you worked up?”

“Didn’t you see... it... her?”

Luke looked towards the top of the stairs very aware that she stood there half naked. “Who is her?”

“I don’t know her name!”

“Come on, I’ll go with you and look,” Luke said, turning her around. “Besides, you need to get some clothes on...”

Digging in her heels, she said, “I’m not going back up there!”

“Come on, it’s fine. Are there other guests up here?” Luke asked, tugging her along.

“Guests?! That was no guest, that wasn’t even human.”

As they neared the landing Luke laughed and said, “What makes you say that?”

“Because I could see through her...”

Luke looked at her and cocked a brow. “Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Brit said, then jumped behind him. “She’s still here. Don’t you feel that?”

“Feel what?” he asked, starting to get freaked out himself.

“The coldness. She’s here...” she whispered as her eyes darted around.

“You’re wearing—” Luke shook his head— “Never mind, come on,” he said, tugging her by the hand into her bedroom. “Here.” He picked up the nightshirt that she had thrown on the floor. Not trusting himself to not take her in his arms and make her forget everything she saw, he quickly stuck it over her head, and pulled it over her arms. “Bottoms?”

“What?” Brit asked, pulling her hair out from the nightshirt.

“Pajama bottoms, do you have any?”

“Oh no, I was just going to sleep in this.”

He inwardly groaned. “Of course, you are.”

As she made her way to the stairs, he adjusted the tightness in his jeans then snatched up a robe that was thrown on a chair and followed her. With every step she took the sight of her bare legs burned into the back of his skull and made his dick all the harder.

“Here put this on.” He draped the robe over her shoulders as she pushed the door open at the bottom. As she stepped out onto the landing at the top of the main staircase, she breathed a sigh of relief, and stuck her arms in the robe.

He stared at her for a second before quickly looking away. The damn robe was shorter than her nightshirt. He was in for a hell of a night he could tell. Instead of sugar plums dancing in his head all night, images of her legs wrapped around his shoulders urging him close flitted through his mind.

Walking a few steps behind her, eyes downcast, he followed her up the few steps that would take them to the second floor and to the linen closet. Brit stopped in front of the door and looked at Luke. “I think what scared me the most about seeing her is that she talked to me.”

He quickly opened the door. Trying desperately to hide the bulge in his pants, he stood behind it, looking around at her. “What do you mean, talked to you?”

Thankfully she ignored his odd behavior. The second she stepped into it, she got busy handing him sheets and quilts, which he gratefully took and held in front of his groin.

“Well... she didn’t move her mouth. But I could hear her, and she pointed right at me and even called me by name.”

Luke’s brows snapped together. “What did she say?”

“Brit, smarten up you little tramp otherwise you’ll lose’ — she immediately clamped her mouth shut, realizing what she just said.

Luke burst out laughing. “You’re shitting me, right?”

He waited for her to deny it but when she didn't say a word, he looked at her and saw her eyes glisten with tears.

“Brit? Are you okay?”

She nodded mutely as she swiped her eyes on the sleeve of her nightshirt.

“Did she say anything after ‘you will lose...’?”

Brit looked at him and took a deep breath then nodded, “...‘the best thing that ever happened to you...just like I did.’”

“What does that even mean?”

She shrugged then pushed past him out the door. If her suspicions were correct the woman who had visited her was Rosin, old man Anderson's wife. The wife that cheated on her husband with another man. A man that she would eventually kill, herself. Resulting in Roisin losing the best thing that had ever happened to her. But who was the best thing that happened to the old woman?

“Wait, hold up.” Luke snagged her by the sleeve and searched her face. “What's the best thing that ever happened to you?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, ‘you’ but she pressed her lips together in a tight line and shook her head. “Nothing, at least not yet.”

“Oh...” He dropped his hand along with his gaze. Taking in her bare legs he inwardly groaned. “We better get back to Jasmine, I'm sure she's wondering what happened to us.”

Brit nodded and without a word left him standing there as she made her way down the hall.

As they walked into the living room, Jasmine took one look at them and said, “What took you two so long?” She yawned as she got up from one of the mattresses.

Brit darted her eyes towards Luke and shook her head slightly. “We thought we heard a mouse in the attic.”

“A mouse? It was probably old man Anderson coming to pay you a visit Brit,” the girl laughed. She looked at Luke and said, “He has the hots for her.”

Luke was watching Brit as she stood in front of the fireplace. Despite the nightshirt coming to rest just above her knee, he could see right through it as the light from the fireplace played against her backside. Swallowing hard, he murmured absently, “I can see why...”

Brit swung her gaze to him. “What did you say?”

Jasmine started, “He said, I can—”

“Nothing! I said nothing.”

What the hell is wrong with me, he wondered.

Dumping the bedding onto a mattress he said, “I’m tired, let’s get these beds made up so we can all get some sleep.”

“Not me,” Jasmine remarked, as she started to make her way towards the foyer.

Brit grabbed a sheet and started to make her bed. Her hands stilled as she looked at the teen. “Wait! Where are you going?”

Jasmine looked at her and said, “When Kim came in to remind you two to take your temp, she saw how hot I was and told me to go stay in any room upstairs that I wanted to. So, I’m going to the honeymoon suite.”

“But I thought you wanted to toast marshmallows?”

“I already did that. You two took too long.”

Oh.” Brit said, “Well, have a goodnight then.”

Jasmine grinned, “Oh, I will. I’m going to watch a Christmas movie on the big screen and fill up on junk food. Which I’m going to raid the kitchen for right now. Goodnight!” she said and left the room.

“I guess it’s just you and me.” Luke plunked down on his mattress and looked up at her.

Brit felt giddy all of the sudden for some reason, like she was on her first date. “I guess it is.”

What the hell is wrong with me, she thought.

Luke sent her a sideways look, he could tell she was nervous, what for, he had no clue, but he was ready to find out. “Are you okay? You suddenly seem off.”

“Ah, no I’m fine. Just a little tired I think.” She laid down on her mattress and pulled the covers up to her chin. “Well, goodnight!”

“Goodnight?” Luke looked at the wall clock. “It’s 10 o’clock...”

“You don’t say? Well, it has been a long day.”

“It has.” He laid on his side and propped his head on his hand and looked at her. “Has anyone told you that you’re—”

Thinking he was about to say how beautiful she was, Brit nodded her head rapidly. “Yes, yes they have, too many times unfortunately.”

“People have told you that you’re odd?”

Brit sat straight up and blinked at him. “Wait. What? No! I thought you were going to say... Never mind.” She shook her head and laid back down.

Luke knew enough not to tell her that she was beautiful, he knew what her reaction would be. Rolling onto his stomach, he grabbed the tv remote off Jasmine’s mattress. “Do you mind if I watch something?”

“Not at all, after what happened earlier, it will distract my mind.”

Luke nodded and turned the tv on and he was about to turn it when he recognized what was on the screen. “Look, that’s the emu farm.”

Brit turned onto her stomach and glanced at the tv. It sure was. She frowned. “What is this?”

“I don’t know...” he turned up the volume and said, “It looks like Dateline or something.”

They sat there and watched in silence as images from the farm flashed on the screen and heard the journalist announce that they were obtained from security cameras at a remote dog napping ring.

The next image had Brit's blood freezing in her veins. It was of her, dangling from the tv tower just before Luke caught her. Which would have been fine, but they froze the image on her face... for anyone looking for her. Which now, thanks to Vince showing her the missing person's photo, she knew they were, and they would know exactly where she was last seen, Pearl Lake.

"Look at that," Luke said as the video started playing again. "They got a perfect shot of me catch..." He glanced her way and stopped. He took hold of her mattress and dragged it next to his. Gently he put his hand on her shoulder and said, "Brit, what is it?"

She turned and looked at him with tears streaming down her cheeks.

He wiped her cheek with his thumb. "What's wrong?"

She grabbed his forearm and pulled herself up then threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him tightly.

Luke was momentarily stunned but soon gathered her close to him, rubbing her back soothingly as she sobbed on his chest. When she was spent, he leaned back and wiped her cheeks with his thumbs, softly he said, "I think it's time you told me what you did for a living."



Chapter 12

Brit sat there still as a stone while Luke had gone into the kitchen and made some tea. He was now standing before her, holding out the cup for her to take.

“Thank,” she mumbled.

“It’s no problem.” He sat down on his makeshift bed and patiently waited as she took a sip from her mug.

Looking straight ahead, Brit took a deep breath. “I lived in Toronto with my mother until she passed away.”

“I’m sorry. Here, give me your cup.” She handed it to him and waited while he sat both of their cups on the hearth, then he sat back on his mattress and looked at her.

“It’s okay... you didn’t know. My first job was answering phones for a call center. The pay was alright, but when she got sick, I had to quit to take care of her. Once the bills started piling up, I had to do something that would allow me to spend my days with her while the neighbor stayed with her at night.” She paused and looked at him. “Something that paid very well...”

So many jobs ran through Luke’s mind, drug dealer, stripper, hitman, all that would fit what little she had said and not one of them was something he could see her doing.

He raised his brows, then watched her as he said, “It must have been a sweet job in order for you to do it.”

A tight smile formed on her lips. She shook her head then looked him straight in the eyes. “Luke... I was an escort...”

He burst out laughing. When she didn’t join, he stopped and looked at her. “You’re not joking, are you?”

Dropping her gaze to her hands, she mumbled, “That’s how I met Brian.”

“Oh... You didn’t come here willingly, did you?”

Tears started rolling down her cheeks as she played with her thumbnail and shook her head.

He reached out, slowly, and cradled the back of her neck in his hand. “Come here...”

He didn't have to say it twice. She willingly went into his arms. Her body shook with gut wrenching sobs as he wrapped her in his embrace.

“Not now, but when you're ready, I want to know exactly what he did to you...”

Brit sniffed and pulled back and looked him in the eyes. “Why?”

“So, I can kill him.”

“No! You can't do that. Not when I just found...”

“Found what Brit?”

Now she knew the apparition upstairs was right. Luke was the best thing to happen to her and she wasn't giving him up now.

Settling her eyes on his lips, she said, “You...”

“Don't look at me like that,” he said, feeling himself go hard.

Her eyes bounced back up to his. “Like what?”

“Like this,” he growled, claiming her mouth. For an inane moment he thought he was making a mistake, rushing too fast. But the fact was they had known each other for over a month. And when she opened her mouth under his, that was all he needed to know. She wanted him as much as he did her.

Lowering her onto the mattress, he twined his tongue with hers as he moved his hand to her stomach and stopped. Pulling back, he looked down into her eyes and murmured, “Are you sure you're ready for this?”

“No, wait...” she wiggled out from under his arm and got up to turn the lamp off. Looking over her shoulder, she asked, “Tree on or off?”

“On,” he said, grabbing the tv remote, he turned it off.

Brit hurried back to the warmth of his arms and hunkered down into the blankets.

“If you’re not ready don’t feel like we have to do this right now...”

As much as she wanted to, she needed to know how he really felt about her. “Would you mind if we just talked?”

Inwardly, Luke groaned. “Not at all. Do you want me to hold you, or would you rather be in your own bed?”

“If it’s not too much trouble, I wouldn’t mind being held.”

Again, he groaned silently.

“No trouble at all.” He would suffer with a case of blue balls from holding her, he could live with it. “So, what do you want to talk about?”

Brit told him about her life, her parents, and what happened to them, including her mother’s sickness and he asked questions as she went along. But when she also told him about her life as an escort he clammed up. But that was all he did. Intune with his body so close to hers, she could feel his fingers trailing along her arm and they never faltered.

She looked at him. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Does it bother you that I was an escort? Be honest.”

Luke brushed her hair away from her face then smoothed his hand down the side of her neck. Bringing her close, he laid soft kisses on her lips as he said, “You did what you had to do to survive, I can’t be offended by that.”

Relief flooded through her or maybe it was just the blood soaring through her veins as his lips rained kisses along her jawline. Whatever it was, she was elated. The one thing that had her worried was nothing to worry about at all.

She laid back on the mattress, her story not quite done, and he started the same rhythmic pattern on her arms the second she had begun talking. Until she started telling him about the night, she met Brian...

His breathing quickened and his fingers stilled.

“What did he do to you?”

She could feel the tension radiating through him. “Did he force himself on you?”

Brit would never feel comfortable talking about the month that she was held against her will. To anyone.

Slowly she nodded. “Aside from that, let’s just say he treated the dogs better than he did me.”

“Did you tell the cops about any of this?”

“No. And I don’t want to. Vince showed me the other day a missing persons poster. It was me.”

Luke sat up and took hold of her arms. “You?!”

“Yes. The service I worked for is looking for me.” She shook her head from side to side. “And I don’t want to be found. I don’t want to go back to that life.”

“Then don’t. They can’t make you...”

“I signed a contract, which can easily be broken. Lord knows that enough girls have done it when they realize it’s not the life they want. But...”

“But what?”

Brit couldn’t stand sitting any longer. Getting up, she made her way over to the fireplace and grabbed a poker from the stand. Squatting in front of the fireplace, she took a log off the small pile to the side and added it to the embers. She pushed it towards the middle of the hearth. “I made them a lot of money. Every time I went out, in fact.”

“How much might that be?” Luke rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Five hundred bucks?”

She stood and turned to look at him. “Well, depending on the client, anywhere from \$2000.00 to \$5000.00.”

Luke’s eyes almost popped out of his head. “In a month?!”

“Uh... no. Per night.”

Luke ran a hand through his already tousled hair. “Oh Jesus... No wonder they are looking for you. Is Brian caught up with this escort service too? I mean it wouldn’t surprise me one bit if he is part owner.”

“No. He was just a client otherwise he wouldn’t have kept me locked in that room for a month. Too much money would be lost.”

Seeing the look on his face almost made her wish she never told him a thing. Going to him, she sat on the edge of the mattress and gazed into his eyes. “The night your brother broke into the house I knew was my only chance of getting out of there alive.” Putting her hand on his forearm. “And I would do it again if I had to.”

“What! Why?”

She licked her lips. “Because I met you. For once in my life, I like the attention a man is giving me...”

He shot her a lazy smile. “Does that mean... you want me?”

She laughed. “I think it does.”

“I think we better take it slow. Don’t you?” She looked so dejected that he regretted even suggesting it. “I mean... I don’t want to rush you into anything.”

“You’re not rushing me into anything Luke.” She was worried about this. And the very reason she never reciprocated his interest. Once he found out she was a high paid call girl, he would run the other way. Giving him an out, she spoke as honestly as she could. “Unless you don’t want to be with me because of my past.”

Taking her chin in his hand he looked her deeply in the eyes. “Don’t ever think that. When you get right down to it, if you hadn’t, we never would have met,” he murmured brushing his lips against hers.

The sound of the grandfather clock striking midnight had them jumping apart. A nervous laugh slipped past her lips. “For a minute there I thought that was Kim coming to check on us.”

“I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if she comes in any second,” he said. “You better get in your own bed, otherwise she will be planning another wedding.”

Brit nodded then crawled over to her own mattress. Sliding between the covers, she laid on her back and covered up.

He lifted a strand of her hair and was amazed at how silky it was as it slipped between his fingers. “Can I ask you something?”

Sleepily, she nodded. “Yeah sure.”

“What is the escort service you worked for called?”

“They didn’t have a business name.”

His fingers running through her hair slowed down “What do you mean?”

She turned her head and looked at him. If he gave any indication of fear when she told him what she was about to, she would wait until he fell asleep and then go and pack a bag and leave Pearl Lake in the dead of night. Taking a deep breath she said, “It’s the MacGallan family. The Irish Mafia.”

Luke was stunned but he didn’t let on. “Well, that’s a bombshell if I ever heard of one. How did you get tangled up with them?”

She made a sound between a groan and a grunt.

“Tell me, I don’t care how you did, I’m just curious, is all.”

She sat up and looked at the fire. “I never knew my father; he passed away when I was six. But before that my mother left him and filed for divorce when I was just a baby; she didn’t want him to corrupt me. She told me it was an ugly divorce and that the only reason she was able to get one was because her family was influential.”

“How so?” he asked, rubbing her back.

“They were in politics, not sure in what aspect as she never shared that with me. But a deal was made, nonetheless. I never fully understood what was so bad about him that she didn’t

want him around me. Not until she got sick, and the money ran out.”

She laid back down, on her side and as Luke pulled the covers up around her shoulders, he said, “You don’t have to finish.”

“It’s fine. It feels good to finally be able to tell someone.” She ran a finger over his cheek then snatched her hand back and tucked it against her chest as if she feared to show him any affection. “When I knew I could no longer work a full-time job and take care of her is when she told me to contact the MacGallan family, that they would help.”

Luke frowned. “Did you?”

“Oh yeah.” She nodded. “I was desperate. Imagine my surprise when I was told they were expecting me to call.”

“Did your mother contact them first?”

“Nope.” She shook her head. “They knew she was sick and also knew it was only a matter of time before they heard from me.”

Luke sat up and pulled her with him. Holding her arms, he looked her straight in the eyes. “You’re a MacGallan, aren’t you?”

She let out a shaky laugh. “How did you guess?”

“It’s the only logical thing. But why? Why would they offer you a job as an escort.” His eyes turned stormy. “Why not just help you?!”

“Because my mother disgraced the family when she divorced my father. One just doesn’t divorce the boss of the Irish mafia and not reap the repercussions, deal or no deal. Doesn’t matter that my dad has been gone for over twenty years.”

“But still. *You* are still their blood.”

She saw the sincere look in his eyes and wished her family felt an ounce of caring for her like he did. “It didn’t matter Luke. They didn’t care. The only way I would agree to become an escort was if my mother never knew.” She sighed.

“They at least honored that much. After she had passed, the deal was that I could leave. My cousin, Declan, fought for me but the new boss, his father, refused. And so, when the opportunity arose to come work here at the inn and hide away from them, I took it.”

At the mention of her cousin’s name, Luke froze. That was until a bang followed by a string of curse words coming from the hallway that led to Kim and Dean’s bedroom had them both turning to look at the foyer.

Kim came shuffling into the room, yawning and rubbing her head. “What are you two still doing awake? It’s two in the morning, you’re supposed to be resting!”

Luke winked at Brit and said, “We were. You, banging around and swearing woke us up.”

“Oh, sorry. I stubbed my toe and if that wasn’t bad enough, I whacked my head on the wall. I’m going back to bed.”

Luke waited for the sound of Kim’s bedroom door closing before leaning over and brushing his lips against Brit’s.

“We should really get some sleep,” he said, pulling back. “I need to figure out where my car is and see what the damage is.”

Brit nodded and snuggled down under her blankets. “And I have work.” She lifted her blankets and looked at him. “Do you want to share my bed? No funny business though!”

He grinned and clamored over, taking her in his arms. “No funny business.”

For the first time ever, Brit felt safe in a man’s arms. She lay there with her head on his chest, the steady beat of his heart lulling her to sleep.



Chapter 13

Brit was in the dining room setting tables after the breakfast rush, when her cell phone rang. She pulled it out of her pocket to see Evelyn calling her. “Hey, Evelyn, how’s it going over at the bar?”

“Good. But I was wondering if you’re busy tonight. Tim’s very sick and is supposed to be on bedrest and I just know that he won’t stay there if I don’t find help with the bar tonight and —”

“Say no more,” Brit said. “Just let me know what time you want me there. I work the dinner shift until eight.”

“I should be good until nine, is that okay?” Evelyn asked.

“Absolutely! That gives me plenty of time to change and get over there.”

“Thank you so much! I owe you big time. See you then!”

“Bye.” Brit hung up and was stuffing the phone back into her pocket when she saw Luke pop his head into the dining room.

“Hey, you,” he said, smiling as he made his way over to her. “What are you doing this afternoon?”

“Decorating a tree, wanna help?” she asked.

“You know it! But only if you will go cross country skiing with me tonight in the moonlight.”

She laughed. “I’ve never had a pair of skis on in my life!”

Taking the stack of napkins, she held in her hand; he started placing them at each setting. “It’s nothing, I’ll teach you. I just need to borrow a car, mine is at the garage in town.”

She set the utensils on each napkin and asked, “How damaged is it?”

“Not sure yet. From what I could see before it took the nosedive, there wasn’t any.”

“Well hopefully it’s minimal.” She wrinkled her nose. “Why do you need a car?”

“There’s a ski lodge on the far side of the lake. Can do either downhill or cross country.”

“Huh. I never knew that.”

Jasmine walked in carrying a stack of plates. “Hi Luke,” she said as she made her way over to the buffet table. Setting them down, she turned and looked at them. “Brit, are you coming to the girl’s night at the spa tonight?”

“There’s a girl’s night at the spa?” Luke looked at her. “You go ahead if you want to.”

“I didn’t even know there was one.” She glanced at Jasmine. “Luke and I have plans; we’re going skiing after I work a shift at the bar.”

Luke swung his gaze to her. “You’re working a shift at the bar? It will be too—”

Brit dropped the silverware she was holding then looked at him with huge eyes. “How clumsy of me.”

As Luke bent down and started picking them up, she squatted beside him and whispered to him. “I don’t want to go with them.”

They both stood and she took the utensils from him then dropped them into a bucket. “As I was saying Jasmine, we have a date.”

“Ooooh a date! I don’t blame you one bit.” Jasmine grinned as she started walking towards the exit, she called over her shoulder, “I would rather go with him too.”

“She has a crush on you.” Brit grinned, taking the bucket, she placed it on a cart. “In case you hadn’t noticed.”

He smoothed a hand over his hair. The bashful gesture had her heart fluttering.

“Yeah, I kinda thought that at the wedding. So, when did you want to decorate that tree?”

She looked at her watch. “My shift is done in fifteen minutes. Meet me at the top of the staircase?”

He nodded. “I’ll be there with bells on.”



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Brit was climbing the staircase and could hear bells tinkling along with someone talking. Soundlessly she stepped on the top step and froze. Luke was there sitting on his phone talking to someone about her.

“Can you just check for me Lane? I just need to know who oversees the MacGallan family.” He looked up to see her standing there. “I gotta go, just check for me.”

He hung up and stuffed his phone in his pocket as he stood and came over to her. The Santa hat he was wearing jingled with every step.

“I see your phone survived the dip in the lake. Why did you ask Lane to look into the MacGallan’s?”

“Yeah, surprisingly it did.” He frowned. “So, you heard that, did you?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Luke, you don’t want to be messing with them, trust me. Promise me you won’t.”

He took her by the arms and rubbed his hands up and down them. “The only reason why I asked Lane to look into them for me is because we went to high school with MacGallan’s. That’s it.”

Somewhat relieved, she looked up at him. “That’s it? You promise?”

He nodded. “Yes of course. I didn’t mention it last night because Aunt Kim came and then when she left—” he took hold of her chin— “I was more than happy to accommodate the beautiful woman who just wanted to be held.”

She smiled and leaned into him. “Well, I was rather comfy. And I never did thank you for that.” She stood on her toes and brushed her lips across his.

He groaned and pulled her against him. His arousal was evident against her stomach and made her feel things she never knew she could.

The sound of someone coughing downstairs carried to them and they had sprung apart.

“We either need to let people know what’s going on or start meeting in secret,” he laughed.

She moved over to the box that was sitting in the corner. Pulling a knife from her pocket, she slit the tape. “I think for now, we will find a meeting spot.”

“Whatever you say. So, where are we setting this up?” he asked, pulling the tree out of the box while she held it.

“In front of the elevator. That way, when people board it downstairs, they’ll be able to see it.”

As Christmas music played lightly through the Inn’s sound system, they had the tree up and decorated in just under three hours and were standing back admiring their handiwork.

The colorful lights from the tree reflected softly in their eyes, casting a warm glow on their faces. Brit had chosen a classic look, with strands of white lights interwoven with garlands of red and gold.

“Looks stunning, doesn’t it?” she said, a note of pride in her voice as she stepped back to take it all in.

He nodded, his eyes on her. “You certainly are.”

She smacked him lightly on the chest and laughed. “I meant the tree. It looks perfect against the old wrought iron of the elevator cage.”

Indeed, the placement in front of the elevator was strategic; not only would guests see it the moment they stepped in from the cold at the top of the staircase, but its lights also shimmered off its polished brass door, welcoming them with a festive cheer.

They were interrupted by Kim, who came bustling up the staircase with a box in her hands. “You two did a marvelous job, I could see it perfectly from the foyer” she said, beaming

at them both. “I’ve got something to add—thought it might be a nice touch.”

From the box, she pulled a delicate angel figurine, its porcelain features painted with the utmost care. It was old-fashioned and lovely, with a gown of creamy white and wings dusted with a shimmer that caught the light.

“This was your grandmother’s Luke. Brit would you put it on top?” she asked, offering the angel to her.

She accepted it gently, her hands cradling it as if it were as fragile as a real angel might be. Too afraid to handle it for fear of dropping it, she asked, “Why me? Luke can do it.”

“Because it’s your tree,” he said. Before she knew it, his hands were at her waist, and he was hoisting her up and she placed the angel carefully at the top.

“It’s perfect,” Kim announced. “Absolutely perfect.”

Outside, the snow began to fall more heavily, the world turning into a snow globe of whirling white. Inside, the warmth of the season was tangible, wrapping around everyone like a soft, comfortable blanket.

“You know,” Kim waved a hand at the scene before them. “Those windows need some lights too. Once that is done, I think the whole scene would make the perfect picture for our Christmas card.” Turning away, she made her way downstairs yelling for Dean.

“Wanna bet she has him putting lights up on the window before the night is over?” Luke asked.

She laughed as she started cleaning up their mess, putting the ornament boxes into the Christmas tree box. “That would be a bet I’d lose!”

“Here, let me,” he said, taking it from her. “Where is she putting all of this?”

“Through here.” She went over to the bookcase and flipped a hidden lever. The door slid open to reveal a hidden room.

Flipping the light switch on she found it was never enough light and was always creeped out whenever she was in there. Brit stood in the open doorway, while he went and set the box with the rest of the decorations stored neatly on the shelves along the wall. It was an efficient use of space, one of the many secrets the old inn held within its walls, secrets that only the staff and a few inquisitive guests ever discovered.

“Hey, what’s this?” Luke called over his shoulder.

“What?” she asked. As she walked to him the door started sliding shut and with the last bit of light coming from it, she caught something out of the corner of her eye, she screamed before launching herself at him.

“What the hell?” Luke ducked as he pictured old man Anderson coming after him for being near her, but the next thing he knew she was perched on his shoulders. “How did you climb up there so fast?”

“Forget that! There’s a rat!”

Luke swung around looking at the floor. “Where?”

“On the shelf! How can you miss it, it’s looking right at you!”

He turned and looked at the shelf and started to laugh. Grabbing her by the legs, he pulled her down and set her on the floor. “It’s plastic.”

With a shaky laugh, Brit leaned her back against the wall. “I just about shit myself.”

He leaned his arm against the wall, towering over her. “Would that have been before sitting on my shoulders or during?”

“Definitely before,” she grinned looking up at him. The second the look in his eyes turned from amusement to desire she knew he was going to kiss her, and she was ready for it.

“Guess what?” he murmured, lifting her chin with his finger.

“What?”

“I think we found our secret meeting spot.”

Resting his hand along her neck, he bent low, close to her ear and inhaled deeply as if he was getting ready to devour her. “Wanna know something?” he murmured.

With his heat slamming into her like a brick wall, Brit couldn't formulate a thought; his nearness, had her melting in her underwear. Afraid she would start moaning she mutely nodded as his lips fluttered against the sensitive spot behind her ear.

“As gorgeous as you are, the scent of you is what drives me insane.”

When she had started as an escort, she had promised herself she would never let a man control her emotions, never to fall for one and she had kept that promise for four years... until now. With reckless abandonment, she wrapped her arms around his neck and turned her face towards those glorious lips of his. As he gathered her close, she pressed herself against him and the feel of his throbbing cock against her made all her inhibitions fly out the window. The second their lips melded there were no light brushes or tentative touches, it was balls to the wall, raw and carnal.

She arched against him as his hand found her breast, and she slid her hand down to the waist of his jeans. When his tongue flicked a path down her throat to the swell of it above her shirt, she undid the button on his jeans. And when he pulled her shirt and bra down, his lips seeking out her nipple, she plunged her hand inside his pants, her fingers stroking the rim of his dick.

Luke leaned his head back as her fingers worked their magic and she leaned forward, kissing throat. “Fuck.” Luke ground out between clenched teeth. “Babygirl you need to stop before I explode in your hand,” he said, planting both hands on the wall above her head.

“That's okay, just—” Brit froze as they heard a shuffling sound on the other side of the door.

“I think they went in here Kim, I’m pretty sure I saw them go in,” they heard Jasmine say.

Brit yanked her hand out of his pants then grabbed his hand. Pulling him along, she headed down a short hallway that led to a staircase. Down the stairs they went to the main floor, but instead of going through the bookcase in the kitchen, she walked to the spiral staircase that ended in the basement.

“Want to help me carry up some liquor from the wine cellar?” she asked. “The bar needs restocking in the dining room.”

“Honey, if you asked me to help you with anything, know the answer will always be yes,” he said with a grin and a quick kiss on her lips.



Chapter 14

Brit entered the bar and saw Mike, a cousin of Kim's and the bartender at Abbi and Ben's wedding standing behind the bar polishing glasses, she smiled when he looked at her. "Hey Mike, how are you?"

"I'm good, Brit, how's things with you?"

"Can't complain." She laughed. "Late as usual as you can see. Do you know where Evelyn is?"

"Ah yup, she's over in the kitchen getting the nacho cheese ready or something."

"Thanks!" She headed across the dance floor to where the pool table sat and popped her head inside of the pass-through window in the wall and said, "Hi, sorry I'm late."

"Hey!" Evelyn smiled at her. "Don't worry about it."

Brit came through the door and asked, "Is it okay if I hang my coat in here?"

"Yeah, sure, there's hooks on the other side of the fridge, but don't leave your purse in here. There's a safe behind the bar, you can stick it in there."

Brit quickly hung up her coat, then Evelyn said, "Follow me, I'll get you an apron and show you the safe."

She looked at Evelyn as they walked over to the bar and said, "How's Tim feeling?"

"Oh, you know him, he is in denial but shakes like a leaf whenever he stands." Evelyn reached around the back and grabbed two aprons from a cardboard box sitting on the floor.

"Here you go." Brit took it from her and was tying it around her waist when the door opened and in walked the band.

"We're back," Jason called out, rubbing his stomach. "Oh." He stopped and looked at Brit. "You're here now?"

She smiled and said, “Yeah, I’m giving Evelyn a hand for the night because Tim is sick.” She glanced over to where Mike was looking for a bottle of whiskey and said, “That’s Mike.”

Mike turned when he heard his name and nodded his head. “Hey how’s it going?”

“Pretty good.” Jason smiled.

“Ah Jason? Can you do me a favor?” Evelyn asked.

“Yeah, what is it?” he asked.

“Like Brit said, Tim’s sick and he’s sleeping upstairs. Is there any way to kinda keep music down?” she asked.

“Sure thing, I’ll just tell the guys,” he said, and headed off to the stage.

Evelyn glanced at the clock on the wall, it was ten minutes to opening. She turned to Brit and said, “I’m just going to go check on Tim, I won’t be long.”

Brit nodded. “Take as long as you need, I’ll just look around and familiarize myself with everything.”

She retraced her steps back to the kitchen and lifted the lid of a pot on a hot plate. It was filled with nacho cheese, giving it a stir, she inhaled the spicy goodness and vowed to get some chips smothered in it before the night was through.

Checking the fridge, she made sure that it was fully stocked, not that she knew where anything was but between her and Mike, she was sure they could find it.

Her phone started vibrating in her pocket, pulling it out, she swiped the screen to see a text message from Luke.

Hey there angel. Sorry I hope you don’t mind me calling you that. Anyway, I just thought I would let you know that Ben is letting me borrow his car. I’ll show up, say an hour before closing time. Let me know if that works for you or not.

She smiled as she texted him back. *How did you get my number? Angel is fine although I do like it when you say*

babygirl too. And an hour before closing works perfectly for me.

Thinking it would take him time to respond she started to put the phone back in her pocket when it lit up and vibrated in her hand.

A little birdie told me, aka Jasmine... and babygirl is reserved for... special moments...

A thrill shivered up her spine when she read that and was so engrossed in these new feelings this guy was creating in her that when Mike popped his head in the window, she jumped a foot in the air.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to scare you. I just thought I’d let you know that people are starting to come in.”

“Oh wow, already?” She said, stuffing her phone in her pocket for real this time and with one last look around the kitchen she went through the doorway and followed him.

“Yeah, there’s already about ten people, don’t worry, I got their first rounds,” he said as they both walked across the dance floor.

Brit went behind the bar looking for a pad of paper and a tray just as another five people entered through the door. “I think it’s going to be a packed house tonight,” she said as she found what she was looking for.

“I agree, the band is likely what’s drawing them in.”

“That and the fact that there’s nothing to do here in the village in the middle of winter,” she laughed then turned to the patrons that were standing there with a huge grin. “Hey ladies and gents, find yourself a table and I’ll take your order for you.”

She was turning to head back to place their order when she spied Evelyn exiting the door to the upstairs.

“How’s he feeling,” Brit asked, as she sat a tray down on the bar. Ripping off the paper from the pad she had written on she handed it to Mike who went straight to work on filling the order.

Evelyn sighed. “He’s not fevered anymore and seems to be resting better.”

“You’re worried about him, aren’t you?” Brit asked as she took the bottles of beer Mike had sat on the counter and placed them on her tray.

“Yeah.” Evelyn nodded. “He’s been sick for close to a month. I just hope he feels better come morning.”

Mike joined the conversation/ “If he wakes up let me know and I’ll make him a hot toddy.”

Evelyn smiled. “Thank you, that would be great.” Grabbing her own pad of paper and a tray, she looked at Brit and asked, “Did you get that table of guys over there?” She jerked her chin towards the four men that sat looking expectantly at the bar when Brit looked at her.

She shook her head as she picked up the tray. “No, not yet they all just sorta came in at the same time.”

“No problem, I’ll take care of them,” Evelyn said, as she grabbed a pen from a cup behind the bar.

Brit nodded her thanks and took off to deliver the drinks to the party of five. The rest of the night proceeded in the same fashion until Mike said he had to close the doors. She cast a worried glance at the door. All of Luke’s family was there helping except Luke as far as she could tell. The place was jam packed with bodies and Brit was sure they were violating at least one code. She took a quick glance around once more at the table and noticed a loan man sitting there. He had been there for some time, but he never called her over. It would be just like Luke to pull something like that. Dodging between people dancing she made her way over to him and smiled. “There you are, I didn’t think you were going to make it.”

The guy looked up at her and she froze. That was not Luke. “I’m so sorry, I thought you were someone else.” Without waiting for him to respond she spun around and headed in the opposite direction. Setting her tray on the counter in the kitchen she made her way to the washroom taking her phone out of her pocket as she did.

Once inside, she found an empty stall, sat down on the toilet and started to text him.

Hey there, are you inside the bar? Ben and Dean are turning people away at the door and I was just wondering...

She sat there waiting for a response and when there wasn't one, she knew she had no choice but to return to work. Washing her hands, she left the washroom, gathered her tray and headed back to the bar when she saw the guy that she had approached earlier staring at Evelyn.

She was leaning against the bar, when Brit went and stood beside her. She sat her tray on the bar and jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "You better watch that guy over there, he keeps staring at you."

Evelyn straightened and looked at Brit and pointed to see a man waving at her. "Oh, he's fine. That's Kyle, seems to be a regular as he's been here every night since we opened."

"Not him, that guy is old enough to be your father. I meant that guy." Brit took her by the shoulders and pointed her in the direction of the man who was now standing but still had the hood on his head.

"Oh, well he's new." Evelyn turned to face her.

"Yeah, so just watch it, the guy is giving me super creepy vibes." Brit shivered; he reminded her of Brian.

"I will, you can go sit with the others if you like. Everyone is too busy watching the band to want drinks."

"Are you sure?" Brit asked.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Is it okay if Tim pays you tomorrow?"

Brit took off her apron and sat it on the bar. "Absolutely, there's no rush, I know he'll come good for it."

Evelyn gave her a hug. "Do me a favor though Brit, can you track Jason down and tell him to watch for my signal to let everyone know when it's last call for the bar?"

"Absolutely," Brit said just as they heard the screech of a mic. "I better hurry before they start."

She hurried off to the stage and grabbed Jason by the pant leg, giving it a tug, she mentioned for him to bend down, when he did, she relayed Evelyn's message.

Feeling a little lost at this point, with Luke not being there she went over to where Kim and the others sat at a round table.

"Brit come sit by me," Abbi said, smiling as she patted the empty chair next to her. Brit did as she was told and slumped into the seat. Abbi looked at her and saw the tiredness on the young woman's face. "You have had a long day I bet. Did you get yourself a drink?"

Despite waiting on the edge of her seat for her phone to vibrate in her hand, Brit nodded and said, "I am tired. And no, not yet. Maybe I'll go do that. Will you excuse me?"

"Of course."

She got up and was headed to the bar when she felt it go off. Stopping in the middle of the dance floor, she swiped the screen to see it was Luke. Excitement and relief filled her when she read that he was waiting for her in the car outside. She quickly went and grabbed her coat from the kitchen and pulled it on. Not wanting to dodge between the patrons she decided she would get her purse tomorrow from the safe and exited out the doors by the pool table.

It was starting to snow; a light dusting covered the sidewalk in front of the bar as she made her way around the building to the parking lot. She headed for the only car that was sitting there idling, its exhaust curling in white curly plumes in the chilly night.

Once he saw her, he flashed the high beams at her then Luke got out and held the door open as she climbed in and buckled up. He hurried around to the other side and climbed behind the wheel.

Without a word he narrowed the distance between them by leaning over and claiming her lips with his. A soft searching kiss, as if he were trying to gauge the feelings, they had in the stairwell at the inn were still stirring or if they had just been a one-time thing.

Brit leaned into him and opened her mouth to his seeking tongue. The second they danced with one another she was spinning in a vortex of emotion. She had never wanted a man as much as she did this one.

He eased away from her and looked down at her mouth. The tip of her tongue darted out, running along her bottom lip as if she were tasting it, tasting him and his cock hardened just from the thought of it.

He looked away and settled himself behind the wheel, because if hadn't he was going to take her right then and there. And the back seat of a car is not where he envisioned making love to her their first time.

“So.” He cleared his throat, thankful that it was dark he adjusted the tightness in his jeans, then looked over at her. “I ah took the liberty of booking us a room over at the lodge for the night if you're okay with that, two beds not just one. I figured we had already spent the night in each other's arms, but I didn't want to seem presumptuous that we would have a repeat of that any time soon so that's why I—”

Brit reached over and covered his mouth with a finger. “Shhh, you're rambling.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I guess you're right.”

That was one of the things she found attractive about him, the way he could be nervous, even bashful sometimes around her and not always feeling like he had to put on the fake macho image.

“It's fine, I know you're not the type of guy that would ever think just because you rented us a room to share that I would think you did it just to get in my pants.”

He sat there for a moment, and she could tell he was running her words through his mind when he grinned. “You don't know how relieved I am right now.” He put the car in drive and steered towards the road. “Did you need anything at the inn?”

“Nope, I'm good.” She looked at the phone in her hand. “Although I should let Kim know that I won't be home

tonight.”

“It’s all good. I told my mom what I was doing and those two, tell each other everything, besides, they are going to the spa remember? Jasmine is already there, I dropped her off there on my way over to the bar.”

She nodded. “That’s right. It’s been such a long day that I completely forgot.”

“Here,” he moved his right hand from the steering wheel and reached down to the center console. “I’ll just turn the heated seat on for you, so you sit back, relax and enjoy the ride. It will take a bit longer than usual to get there...”

Fear gripped her when he said that. Did that mean he was taking the long way around past the emu farm? God, she hoped not, she didn’t want a repeat of the last time she went by there.

He glanced her way, noticing her reaction he said, “Brit I will never put you in a situation that will trigger you. It’s snowing a bit harder is all, that’s why it will take us longer.”

Relief spread through her at his words, and she sent him a shaky smile. “Thank you for that. Maybe one day I can go past there without a complete meltdown.”

He reached for her hand and laced his fingers with hers. He gently squeezed it while he said, “If the day comes that you decide to, I’ll be there for you every second of it. Now sit back and relax.”



Chapter 15

They entered the room and Brit was in awe. Not because of the room itself, although beautifully made up with a bottle of wine chilling in a stand and an array of finger foods, but the view that it offered. The ski hill was right outside of their window. The slopes were all lit up in twinkling Christmas lights and what looked like ants were people gliding down them. With the snow that was coming down now, she doubted they would be out there much longer.

“So, there is no moonlight tonight,” Luke said, coming to stand beside her at the window. “And when I checked in, they said they would be shutting down by midnight if not sooner if the snow got heavier.”

“Which it is,” she murmured. She looked at him. “So now what?”

“Well, they did say that the hot tubs out on the patio will stay open until 1 am,” he wiggled his brows at her. “But we don’t have any swimsuits. Are you brave enough to enter in your underwear?”

She laughed. “Um, would they let us?”

He stood there a moment and rubbed the stubble on his chin. “My tighty whities, although black, would pass as a speedo, what about yours?”

The sound of a hot tub beating against her sore and tired muscles sounded divine. She thought for a moment as to what she was wearing and nodded. “Yeah, sports bra and boy shorts. They will do.”

He smacked his hand together. “Then let’s get going.”

“I hope they have robes.” She giggled as she made for the bathroom and was elated to see two of them hanging side by side. Grabbing one, she popped her head around the corner intent on tossing it to him but froze to see him already stripping his shirt off. The play of his muscles moving beneath his lightly tanned skin had her mouth going suddenly dry. She

made a sound in her throat, and he looked up to see her peeking at him. Blushing profusely for getting caught staring at him, she whipped the robe in his direction and slammed the bathroom door shut.

Leaning against it, she willed the ache between her thighs to go away but that wasn't going to help the wet spot she knew was there on her gray underwear. She could claim a sudden headache and just go to bed while he went to the hot tub, but she quickly squashed the idea. She wanted to be with him. Without a further thought she stripped her clothes off and looked in the mirror.

Quickly she adjusted her breast and pulled the band on her ribcage down to fit more comfortably. Pfft she could try to tell herself that's why she did it, but the truth was she wanted her already full breast to look even fuller. She wished she had a brush to run through her hair, but she didn't. Instead, she pulled the elastic band from her hair and ran her fingers through it before deftly putting it into a bun atop her head as soft tendrils escaped it and framed her face. Without time to stuff them in place she heaved a sigh and pulled on the robe as she left the bathroom.

Luke was standing looking out the window with his back to her. His broad shoulders filled the robe, stretching the fabric tightly against his back. She wanted to run over and cling to that back as she ran her fingers through his wavy hair but dared not be so, well, daring. With him knowing her past, she didn't want to come across as a tramp.

"I'm ready," she said, softly.

"There's a pair of slippers there on the bed for you." He turned to look at her and his eyes darkened. The way he was gazing at her made her think he'd rather feign a headache along with her. She watched as his Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed hard, and she wanted to place her lips on it.

He shook himself out of his trance and walked over to the bed and picked up the slippers before handing them to her. After she slipped them on her feet, he murmured, "Let's go

then,” and swept his arm wide, bowing his head slightly as she went ahead of him.

Without exchanging words, they made their way along the hallway towards a side door that led out to the patio. A heavy snowfall greeted them, with large, fluffy snowflakes tumbling from the sky in a silent curtain. By the time they arrived at the hot tub enclosure, their hair was dusted with a layer of snow, giving them, frosted appearance. She turned to him with a chuckle. “You sure this is a good idea?”

“Absolutely.” Luke gestured to the deserted patio. “It’s just us here. Plus, the snow will just vaporize before it even reaches us once we’re in the hot tub.”

Convinced, she headed to the tub nearest to the entrance. Casually, she removed her robe and hung it on the hook provided by the privacy partition, which offered a secluded nook for the tub. Sitting on the edge, she let her toes skim the surface of the water, a sigh of bliss escaped her lips as the warmth greeted her skin. It wasn’t long before she surrendered to its comfort, submerging herself fully.

Finding a contoured seat that cradled her body, Brit reclined into its welcoming shape, settling into the tub with a contented sigh.

She absorbed the serene silence, the only sound being the gentle bubbling of the hot tub. “Do you want something to drink?” Luke asked as he took his place opposite her.

“I’m good,” she responded, her voice relaxed, her attention captured by the dance of steam and snowflakes above them.

“So, just so that you know, Lane got back to me about your cousin.” Brit sat up and looked at him. “He’s the same guy we went to school with. Funny thing is back in school he was a nerd, I never would have thought he would end up in the mob.”

Brit raised a shoulder. “That’s what happens when you’re a family member, you really don’t get the choice in the matter, it’s just expected of you.”

Luke nodded. "I suppose. I don't blame your mother for getting you out of it."

He saw the pained look cross her lovely face and immediately regretted saying anything. Moving to her side, he said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay. I know why she did it, but for what I had to go through just to make her comfortable I wish she would have stayed married to my father. At least she would have been taken care of from the beginning."

This was going south fast Luke realized, his plan for a relaxing fun night for her was spiraling into a rotten trip down memory lane for her.

"Yeah," Luke said gently, shifting his position in the tub to be closer to her, his expression softening with compassion. "I can't even imagine what that must have been like for you. But you know, tonight's about letting go, even if just for a little while. Let's focus on the here and now. We've got this beautiful snowy night, a hot bubbly tub, and wine. Let's make the most of it."

Brit managed to smile, the tension easing from her shoulders as she leaned back into the lounger. "You're right. I don't want to waste our evening dwelling on what can't be changed."

Luke saw the opening to lighten the mood again. "So, what's this I heard about Kim hosting a Christmas Ball?"

She laughed. "Yeah, a masquerade ball at that."

He leaned close to her, lowering his voice. "So do you have a date for said masquerade ball?"

The sound of his voice in her ear had her creaming on the spot. "Ah... no I don't. Are you interested in applying as a potential prospect?"

"Of course." His eyes dropped to her lips. "What qualifications would I need?"

She swayed towards him. "Well, whoever it is, they would need to be able to dance."

“Of course.”

“And be tall, dark and extremely handsome. Fill out a suit nicely and have the most seductive voice I ever did hear.”

“I believe I’m qualified enough. I think. I never thought of myself as extremely handsome.”

With an impish grin she said, “You’re more than qualified, as a matter of fact, you just might be overqualified. The true test would be if he is a good kisser.”

His hands snaked around her waist and pulled her close. “Would you like me to show you my skills?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck then leaned her forehead against his. “I’d like that very much.”

He leaned his head back and kissed her on the tip of her nose before capturing her bottom lip with his teeth. She let out a moan, as he soothed the spot with his tongue before plundering her mouth.

Brit didn’t know if it was the heat from the hot tub or this man in her arms but one of them was making her feel like she was made of jelly. She barely got her legs wrapped around his waist but when she did, she felt him throbbing against her. And she never wanted a man as much as she did right now. The only problem was she’d never willingly been with one.

She pulled away and he nuzzled her neck. “Luke.”

“Yeah?” he sighed dreamily, like he was smelling a field of springtime flowers.

“I... I don’t know what to do...”

He leaned back and searched her face. “What do you mean?”

She pulled away, afraid to admit that she was inexperienced because if she did, he would know that she had been raped back at the emu farm by Brian and she feared what he would do if he found that out.

Luke could see her withdraw into herself and knew something was up. And he knew exactly what it was. Brian. A

strong desire to harm the man came over him but with him being in prison it would be a bit hard to get a hold of him.

“Brit it’s okay. We don’t have to do this. Not now, not ever if that’s what you want. It’s not going to stop me from seeing where this will go.”

She looked at him. Did he just say what she thought he did? “What do you mean not ever? You mean you wouldn’t care if I never wanted to have sex with you?”

He moved to the far side of the tub to give her space. “That’s exactly what I mean. Brit, sex is a big part in any relationship. I won’t deny that, but if that’s something you don’t want, I don’t care. Having you in my life, sharing it with you is all that really matters in the end.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. No one had ever said that to her before. She swiped it away and laughed. “And you call me the odd one.”

“Let me tell you something. I’ve been with my share of women, I won’t deny that, but I’ve never felt anything with them that I feel with you.”

She sneaked a glance at him under her eyelashes. “Were you in love with any of them?”

“One, yes.” He nodded. “I was going to propose to her until I found her with another man.”

“Well, that sucks, but you can’t possibly love me.” She looked at him. “We haven’t known each other long enough.”

“No, you’re right. But I’m falling fast. And you did save my life so there’s that.”

She splashed water at him. “That doesn’t count, anyone would have done the same thing.”

“Aunt Kim didn’t, if I remember correctly, she told you to get your ass back to the shore and wait for the cops.”

“Yeah, well that’s neither here nor there. And I’m nothing like your aunt.”

A worker came out of the side door and started going around to all the hot tubs, shutting them down.

Luke stood and held out his hand. “No, you’re not and I think it’s time we go in. We’ve been out here long enough apparently.”

She took his hand, and he pulled her up out of the water, hard against him. Her heartbeat hammered and her nipples hardened in response to every muscle of his where their bodies touched.

Shyly, she looked into his eyes. “If you’re willing to teach me what to do we can finish what we started here, back in the room.”

He rubbed his knuckles down her arm. “Are you sure?”

She nodded.



BRIT STOOD ONCE AGAIN in the bathroom mirror looking at her reflection. She was crazy for even suggesting that he teach her, he had to have suspected something, but he never let on. Should she just come out and tell him what happened to her at the farm? And why the hell didn’t she think to grab some clothes when he asked if she needed anything at the inn? With her underwear hanging over the shower curtain to dry she now had to go out there in only the robe.

Sighing, she flipped the lights off and opened the door. To walk into a dimly lit room. He was sitting in a chair by the window, waiting.

“This is awkward I know so just get into bed,” he said, moving to stand.

Without a word she scurried over to the one closest to where he was and climbed between the sheets. Once settled and the covers to her chin, she slipped the robe off and tossed it onto the other bed.

She looked at him and saw him reaching for the ties of his robe and quickly looked away, until she felt him get into bed

beside her. Once he stopped moving, she turned her head and looked at him. He was on his side with his head propped against his fist, looking at her.

“Are you sure you’re interested in doing this?” he asked with a raised brow.

She nodded then stopped. “Yes, I need to tell you something. I... I never had sex with any clients it was always platonic... until...”

“Brian?”

“Yes,” she gave a jerky nod. “He... I...”

“Brit you don’t have to say it. I know what he did to you. Well not all of it but I know he forced himself on you.”

She let out the breath she was holding and softly said, “Yeah.”

“Don’t worry about it. He’s in the past and will get what he deserves soon enough. Now, instead of having sex, because quite frankly I think you need to do it more spontaneously than this. I know at least I do. I’ll just hold you in my arms instead and we can get some sleep? How does that sound?”

She grinned at him through tears and nodded. “That sounds good.”

He grabbed the pillow under her head and said, “Lift up.”

When she did, he took it and wedged it between them covering his groin with it. “Don’t want any unexpected slippage now do we,” he said, grinning at her. “It has a mind of its own most of the time.”

She laughed as he tucked his arm under her head and pulled her as close to his as possible with the pillow there. Settling his arm across her waist above the blankets he sighed a happy contented sound. “Get some sleep, we hit the slopes at dawn.”

After working three shifts, two at the inn and one at the bar and riding a roller coaster of emotions she fell asleep in a matter of minutes comforted by the fact that she was safe in his arms.



SHE WOKE UP TO THE smell of food and no arms around her. Sitting up, Brit pushed her hair out of her face and looked around. Luke was nowhere in the room, but she could hear him singing. He was in the shower. Tossing the blankets back she jumped from the bed intent on throwing the robe on. But she spied her bra and underwear lying on the foot of the other bed along with her clothes. Turning beat red, she snatched them up and quickly put them on as she heard the shower turn off.

Feeling like a bag of shit, she made her way over to the table where a domed covered platter sat. As tempting as it was to dive into the food, she would wait for Luke to join her instead and reached for the coffee pot. Filling a mug with the dark brew she added cream and sugar because it was just that kind of morning and sat there quietly sipping it.

Pulling her cell phone from her pocket she noticed text messages. One was from Destiny and the other from Vince the cop. Frowning she started to read Destiny's message and that's the way Luke found her.

"Good morning beautiful," he said when he saw her sitting there. But then he stopped when he saw the look on her face as she stared at her cellphone. "What is it?"

"Evelyn got attacked last night after I left the bar. It was that guy that was looking at her all night, I just know it. Tim came down and ripped the guy off her and threw him out. But that's not all, the guy attacked her on the way to the spa too."

"Holy shit. Did they find him?"

"I don't know. I'll ask." She quickly sent a reply then set the phone down.

Looking at him for the first time since he got out of the shower, her blood zinged through her veins all the way to her core. The heavy feeling of lust that settled her in loins had her squirming in her seat.

“How did you sleep?” he asked, rubbing his hair with the towel.

She thanked God he was dressed because if he'd been in anything but his clothes, she would have tackled him to the floor.

“Ah... good. Great. I just feel scuzzy at the moment. I need a shower.”

He chuckled. “Oh really?”

She bit her lip, clearly, she didn't need to share that tidbit of info with him. “Yeah, and a change of clothes.”

“Well then, let's have our breakfast shall we.” He tossed the towel onto the bed and sat in the chair opposite her. Lifting the lid off the plater he continued. “And then we can take in the slopes another day, I'll take you back to the inn. If you're not working tonight maybe we can do something, then.”

Relief spread through her at his suggestion as they filled their plates. “Thank you. And actually, I have the night off.”

“Perfect.” He poured himself a cup of coffee. “Dinner it is, my mother and Ben are going to Springbank for the night, so I'll cook you something really fancy over at their place.”

Her hand stilled halfway to her mouth with a forkful of scrambled eggs. “You can cook?”

He set his cup on the table and looked at her. “Ahh, no. Can you?”

She burst out laughing. “Yes. How about I cook dinner for you?”

“Sounds good,” he grinned.

Her phone pinged and she stuffed the eggs in her mouth before picking it up. “It's Destiny. Yeah. They caught him. Tim and Dean went after him, and Vince was called in.”

When she said Vince's name it reminded him about the text he had gotten from Lane last night just before they had headed out to the hot tub. The notification had shown the cop's name. While Brit replied to Destiny, he dragged his phone

from where it was still laying on the table and tapped the screen, going to the notifications he found Lane's message and began to read it.

Smiling as Destiny had just asked how things were going with Luke, she looked at him over her phone and saw his brow knitted with a frown. "What is it?"

He half stood and shoved his phone into his pocket then sat back down. He looked at her and shook his head, a weak chuckle slipped past his lips. "Ah, it's nothing."



Chapter 16

“How can he be out?” Luke ground out as he leaned on Vince’s desk. After dropping Brit off at the Inn, he drove right over to the police station, wanting answers.

“Unfortunately, most of Brian’s charges were dropped. And what wasn’t, he made bail on.”

“What do you mean dropped?” He sat in a chair and rubbed the back of his neck. After seeing Brit smiling and no longer that guarded shy woman he first met, Luke vowed to get answers. “I thought stealing people’s animals and selling them on the black market would warrant jail time.”

“Normally yes.” Vince nodded. “But when big names, important names start showing up in his records, things get swept under the rug and charges start getting dropped.”

“That’s bullshit. What about what he did to Brit?”

Vince frowned. “What did he do to Brit?”

Evidently, she withheld information from the cops.

“Nothing.” Luke shook his head. “He did nothing to her.”

“Look, Luke.” Vince grabbed a pen off his desk, hand poised over a notebook, he said, “If you know something that she hasn’t told us, you gotta let me know. I want the scumbag behind bars just as much as you do. But if no one tells me what exactly he’s done, my hands are tied.”

Luke shrugged and stood, he had to get the hell out of there before he said something he shouldn’t. “I know nothing, she hasn’t said anything.”

“All right then.” Vince threw the pen down. “If she ever tells you anything let me know. In the meantime, he’s staying at the farm. You didn’t hear that from me.”

“Will do,” Luke nodded. Turning, he headed towards the office door, then stopped and looked back at the cop. “And thanks for the info.”

He headed outside to Ben's car and got in, starting it, he pulled out his cellphone and called Lane.

"Get that phone number for me yet?"

"Well hello to you too brother," Lane said.

"Sorry, Lane, it's been a helluva day already and it's just barely started," he apologized, easing Ben's car onto the road, the tires crunching from last night's snowfall. "I just need his number as soon as possible."

There was a pause on the other end, and then the sound of keyboard clicks echoed through the speaker. "Yeah, I've got it," Lane said, the telltale signs of multitasking present in his tone. "You know, this isn't the easiest—or the most legal—thing to pull off on a whim."

Luke's grip on the steering wheel tightened momentarily, a pang of guilt for what he was asking. "I know, and I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. Brian's out of prison."

"Ooh alright then." Lane let out a long breath, his brotherly concern evident over the air waves. "Alright, I'm sending the number to your phone now. Just... be careful, okay? I don't want you to get into trouble over this. You do realize who you're dealing with, I take it?"

"Yes. And if I remember correctly, he owes me one. Mafia or no Mafia."

"And now you owe me."

"Thanks, Lane. I would say more than one," he laughed, feeling the vibration of his phone as the information arrived.

"Don't I know it," Lane replied, a smirk in his voice. "You'll owe me a round of golf come spring."

"That's if I'm still in Pearl Lake come spring," Luke said with a smile as he drove east out of the village.

"Oh, you will be, mom and Aunt Kim are already looking for a place for you to stay."

"I'll just stay over at Ava's spa." What the hell was he thinking? He didn't want to live in Pearl Lake.

“No can do. Evelyn is staying there, and Ava said as soon as she moves on, she’s putting the place up for sale.”

He took his time as he drove down the highway. “Oh wow. News to me.”

Lane laughed. “That’s because you have Brit on your mind.”

“No denying that,” he said as he came to the bend. He could see the house from the road through the leafless trees. “Hey, I gotta let you go.”

“Okay, talk to you soon.”

Luke pulled off to the shoulder of the road and looked at Lane’s text message. He thumbed the phone number and put it to his ear. Waiting for the call to connect he never took his eyes off the house.

A deep voice said, “Who the hell is this?”

“Declan, how are you doing? This is Luke Petersen, from high school.”

“Luke! How the hell are you buddy! What do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

“I’m good. Remember that favor you owed me? I’m calling to collect on it...”



THE SECOND SHE GOT inside of the inn; Brit ran upstairs to her room and grabbed a change of clothes before she headed off to the bathroom for a quick shower. She had to hurry because after she was done, she had to get to Mack’s store and get the ingredients for the dish she planned on making for Luke. She never told him what she was making so she hoped he enjoyed pork chops and mashed potatoes smothered in mushroom soup.

Turning the taps on she waited a moment before undressing for the water to come up from the basement. If it wouldn’t make such a mess, she would just get undressed in

the shower because the frigid temperatures upstairs chilled her bones. Once the steam started rolling out above the curtain, she stripped down and stepped into the shower, welcoming the cascade of hot water that rushed over her. She reveled in the steam, letting the warmth chase away the chill from her.

As the bathroom filled with steam, she reached for her razor. Quickly she shaved her legs and decided to give her bikini line a once over; carefully she skimmed the razor over her skin to avoid nicks or razor burn. Once done, she washed and conditioned her hair, and used her favorite body wash, the one that drove Luke insane. She smiled to herself as she rinsed off, her mind already racing ahead to the meal she was planning. Hoping that the comfort food would be a hit with Luke, she decided that if it wasn't one of Mack's pies for dessert would make up for it.

She turned off the shower, and stepped onto the bathmat, wrapping herself in a fluffy towel. Brit dried off, dressed in the fresh clothes she had brought, and gave herself a once-over in the mirror. A flush of color touched her cheeks, not just from the shower's heat, but from the thought of the evening that ahead.

Time was ticking, she gathered up her dirty clothes, and headed across the hall to dump them in her bedroom. Getting her brush from atop her dresser, she ran it through her damp hair deciding to forego the hair dryer. It could air dry, knowing that it would be in its usual waves by the time she was done at Mack's store. That was if it didn't freeze on the walk over.

Tossing the brush onto the bed, Brit put her coat and boots on then closed the door to her room and hurried downstairs. She headed for the front door when she heard Kim call her name from the kitchen.

"Hey," Kim said, as Brit walked into the room. "Did you hear about Evelyn?"

"I did, Destiny texted me. What did the guy look like?" she asked, wondering if it was the one, she thought it was.

She shook her head, a frown knitting her brow. "I didn't get a good look at him as he had a hood on for the most part."

Kim pushed a bag across the table. “Cookie?”

“Sure,” Brit smiled and took one from the bag. “I’m heading to Mack’s, is there anything you need?”

“Ah no.” Kim shook her head. “I was going to ask you if you’re doing anything tonight? I know you and Luke have been hanging out, so I didn’t know if you had plans or not.”

Brit scratched her forehead. “Ah kinda, Luke was going to make me dinner—”

Kim snapped her head up, a surprised look on her face. “Luke?!” She cackled. “Luke can’t cook!”

Brit laughed. “He said that, so I offered to cook for him, I’m just not sure where. He mentioned that Ben and Abbi are going to Springbank, and he would cook dinner there, but when I offered, he didn’t clarify.” She shrugged. “I’m just going to Mack’s to get the supplies and go from there.”

Kim’s hand came down with an unexpected bang on the table, causing Brit to jump.

“I’ve got it all figured out,” she announced. “You should use this kitchen. For once there aren’t any guests, so Dean and I are going with Ben and Abbi overnight to Springbank, Christmas shopping. Jasmine isn’t going to be here cuz she’s sleeping over at a friend’s place. I was worried about leaving the inn empty, which is why I was curious about your evening. But this? It’s the perfect solution.”

“Wonderful,” Brit smiled. “I’d rather use this one to be honest. I would feel weird being at Abbi and Ben’s with them not there. Thanks Kim.” She looked at the clock on the wall. “I better get a move on. Enjoy your time in Springbank.”



Chapter 17

Brit left out the kitchen door, crossed the patio and passed the solarium/dining room to the laneway that led towards the front of the inn to the road. The lake was dotted with people ice fishing, skating and the roar of snowmobiles flying across its frozen surface, despite the chill, it was a beautiful sunny day for outdoor activities.

She was walking along the road and came to the part that either went to the right up the hill towards the village or straight, where a sign posted read 'private road'. That was where Ava and Mark's house along the lake sat, and further down, the road ended at Ben and Abbi's house. It was a short jaunt up the road to the village and in no time, she was passing Tim's bar on her way to Mack's store.

She pushed open the door and the tinkling of the bell overhead announced her arrival.

"Brit, how are you doing?" Mack called out from behind the breakfast bar that he was wiping down.

"I'm good Mack, how about yourself?" she asked with a smile as she stamped her feet on the rubber mat.

"Good, good. Beautiful sunny day out there, isn't it?" He asked.

She blinked her eyes a few times, trying to adjust her vision to the store's interior. "It sure is, a little too bright bouncing off the snow the way it is though. Do you have any fresh chops by chance?" This time of year, when the tourist season was slow, Mack would offer his usual fresh meat selection, frozen instead to keep it from spoiling.

"As a matter of fact, I do!" He shot her a smile. "I'll show you where they are." He came around the counter and with a hooked finger, called her to follow.

Brit followed him to the back of the store, where a small meat case hummed softly. The cold air wafted from the glass

doors as he slid it open and reached in, presenting a tray of four neatly trimmed chops for her inspection.

“These are some of the best cuts,” Mack said proudly. “Got them this morning from the meat packers outside of the village.”

Brit nodded. “They’re perfect, Mack. I’ll take them.” She smiled, picturing the finished dish in her mind.

“Anything else you’ll be needing?” Mack asked as he handed them over to her.

“Potatoes and mushroom soup, if you have them, oh and I’ll also be needing one of your pies and a veggie too,” Brit replied, and wondered if she should get a bottle of wine to go with it. The inn had an ample supply in the cellar, and Kim likely wouldn’t care if they helped themselves to it but Brit herself would feel better knowing she paid for the bottle.

Mack nodded and directed her back to the main aisles of the store. “Soup is in aisle three and you know where the produce section is. What kind of pie do you want? I have apple crumb, blueberry tart, chocolate dream and banana cream.”

“Hmm, how about you surprise me?” She grinned, knowing none of his pies would disappoint. “I’ll just get the rest of my groceries and meet you at the counter.” With the pork chops cradled in her arm, Brit headed to the veggie section, got a small bag of potatoes and was pleasantly surprised to spy a bin of asparagus. Snagging two bunches, she made her way to the wine rack and chose a red wine, hoping that it would go well with the chops.

As she headed to the checkout, Brit’s phone pinged out a notification. She hurried over to the counter and set everything down then pulled out her cellphone. It was from Luke.

‘Everything ok? Need help with anything?’

She quickly typed a response. ‘I’m good, meet me at the inn.’

Mack came ambling over with a box in his hands and sat it down. As he started ringing up her purchases, he said, “I

packed up the chocolate dream for you. It's the tastiest in my opinion."

She smiled. "I must agree with you on that. Anything chocolate is tasty."

As he bagged up her groceries, she dug out her debit card and paid. "Mack, are you coming to the Christmas ball at the inn?"

With a twinkle in his eye, he smiled at her. "You best believe I am and with bells on, I'm coming as an elf."

Brit chuckled. "It's a masquerade ball, you don't have to dress up in a costume."

He winked at her. "Oh, but I do." Kim wants me to come as Santa, I just need to convince Elanor to be my Mrs."

She laughed and gathered her purchases. "Well, I'm sure you won't have a problem with that. Just sweet talk her with a slice of pie and she will be eating out of your hand."

He rubbed his chin. "You know, I think that just might work."

"I know it will! You take care Mack," she said, and left the store thinking that Mack and Elanor showing up together at the ball would be the talk of the town for months to come.

She was heading down the hill towards the inn when Abbi's Land Rover pulled off the private road with Ben at the wheel and Dean in the passenger seat. Ben steered towards her, and pulled to a stop beside her as the back window rolled down and Kim popped her head out. "We are heading to Springbank now. I locked up, do you have your key?"

Brit stood and thought for a minute then shook her head. "I don't, I didn't think to bring it."

Kim tapped the seat in front of her. "Dean, give her your keys."

As Dean dug out his keys, Abbi leaned forward. "I hear you're cooking dinner for Luke?"

Brit smiled. "I am. I hope he likes pork chops?"

Ben leaned back in his seat and looked at her. “He would eat the snow off your boots if you fed him that.”

“Ben!” Abbi smacked him playfully as Kim cackled and said, “He’s right!”

Abbi knew full well that he was right. Her son was smitten with Brit and she, as his mother couldn’t be happier.

Brit on the other hand couldn’t help but blush at Ben’s remark. His teasing did have a layer of truth that made her stomach flutter with a mix of nerves and excitement. “Well, let’s hope I don’t burn the chops, or it might come to that,” she joked back, accepting the keys from Dean with a thankful nod. “You guys have fun in Springbank!” She waved them off and headed down the road that would take her to the inn.

Once inside she was a little unnerved to realize that it would be the first time she was ever alone in the old, haunted inn that for a minute she thought of calling Luke and telling him it would be better to make the meal over at Abbi’s house. But that would be worse, because she would have to return in the dark.

Heading to the kitchen, she flipped all the light switches on as she went until she was finally in the warm, comforting glow of the kitchen lights. Her favorite room of the inn, the large space came alive, casting away the shadows.

Despite it being a working kitchen, it still held its charm, from the copper pots and pans hung above the island, to the spice rack that was a palette of colors and heavenly scents. Brit inhaled deeply, the fragrant mix of herbs and spices mingling in the air like an aromatic lover.

Sitting her phone on the counter, she emptied the bags and put the pie in the fridge, then she took down a large pot, filling it with water for the potatoes. After peeling and slicing, she rinsed them, then placed them in the water and set it to simmer. Once she knew Luke was on his way, she would crank the burner.

Next, she took a frying pan, and sprayed some cooking spray on the bottom of it. Peeling the packaging off the pork

chops she was pleasantly surprised to see how lean they were. One could never tell as they always seemed to hide at least one that was full of fat and gristle under the sticker price. Placing them into the skillet, she set the temp of the burner on high as she wanted them to have a nice browning, almost scorched appearance to the outsides of them. Once she was satisfied with them, she lowered the temperature down a notch and turned on the oven.

Getting a baking dish from the pantry, she set it on the counter and pulled open the utensil drawer. Taking the can opener in hand, she quickly opened three cans of cream of mushroom soup and dumped them into the skillet with the pork chops. Taking a wooden spoon, she scraped the bits of stuck on meat from the bottom of the pan and stirred the soup, which turned it into a nice rich looking sauce. Dumping all of it into the awaiting baking dish, she scraped every bit of the soup into the pan, then popped it into the oven, for it all to blend and fully cook.

She turned the tap on and squirted dish soap into the palm of her hand and was in the middle of washing them when her cell phone started to ring. A quick glance at it and she saw that it was Luke calling. Grabbing a paper towel, she swiped the screen and put him on speaker and answered with a breathless hello.

“Hey gorgeous, how’s it going? Were you running for the phone, you sound a little breathless.”

“Ah no.” She made a face, debating if she should tell him that it was just the way he made her feel. “Just cooking up a storm, I hope you’re hungry?”

“I’m famished.”

She inwardly groaned, he didn’t just say he was famished like a normal person would, he had to lace it with a throaty growl.

“Good, when do you think you’ll be here? I left the front door open for you.”

“I’m already here...”

She spun around at the sound of his voice in her ear and without a thought, smacked him across the face so loud that it echoed through the room. Luke covered the spot where her hand had connected and for a minute both stood there frozen in shock.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed, her hands flying to her mouth, her eyes round.

He didn’t say a word. But then, the shaking began. At first Brit thought he was furious, until she heard a deep rumble in his chest growing louder until it was unmistakable—he was laughing.

Luke lowered his hand. “It’s alright,” he managed to say between chuckles. “That will teach me not to sneak up on you. Here, these are for you.” From behind his back, he produced a dozen long stemmed roses, with a sprinkling of baby’s breath to her.

The look of horror on her face turned soft and dewy when she saw the flowers. “Oh, they are beautiful, thank you.” She stood on her toes and kissed him on the spot she smacked before turning to look for a vase. “Now you have me feeling like a fool giving me these flowers. I thought you were going to rob me or something.”

Luke stepped closer, still grinning. “Don’t, it’s my own fault. So, what can I help you with?” he asked, leaning against the counter.

She found a vase under the sink and filled it with water, arranging the flowers in it, she looked at him. “Well, everything is already cooking, I was just going to clean the asparagus when you called. You can turn the burner up under the potatoes.”

As he did, she leaned forward and stuck her nose in the roses, inhaling their heady scent. “Where did you find them? Mack didn’t have any flowers today.”

“I drove to Springbank to get them.”

“You did not!” She took them to the table and sat them in the middle of it. She turned and saw that he wasn’t kidding,

and said, “Well thank you but just so you know, don’t think you ever need to go an hour out of your way just for me.”

“Come here,” Luke said after a moment, pulling her into a gentle hug. “And I want you to know that I would burn the world if it made you happy.”

She laughed and traced her finger down his chest. “That won’t be necessary, just being with you makes me happy.”

She closed her eyes and leaned into him as he dipped his head and kissed her. His hands went around and cupped her ass, pulling her hard against him. The second she felt his cock, hard and rigid against her, all thoughts of cooking flew out the window.

Brit’s heartbeat thundered in her ears, as his hands found parts of her body that she never knew could be sensual, she realized *this* was what he meant by spontaneous. This wanton, *‘I don’t give a shit that I’m in the middle of the kitchen’* feeling, that needed fulfilling. With a burning desire to feel his skin under her fingers she started peeling off his coat and soon was reaching for the hem of his shirt.

The hiss and sputter of boiling water spilling over the pot’s edge pulled Brit from the passion of the moment. She blinked at Luke, and they shared a look of frustration.

With a sigh, Brit freed herself from Luke’s embrace. “The potatoes wait for no one, not even for... this.”

Luke, his hair all askew from her fingers running through it said, “You take care of the food, I’ll set the table.”



Chapter 18

“I think that was the best meal I’ve ever had,” Luke announced, as he cleared the table.

She laughed as she scrubbed the baking dish that she had cooked the asparagus in. The potatoes had turned out reminiscent of school glue, the asparagus was half cooked and the chops were like shoe leather. It was no wonder, as the mushroom soup had nearly dried out. The only thing that had turned out was Mack’s pie that they had yet to eat.

“And I think you’re either delusional or you’re trying to get in my pants.” Brit bit her lip, that was not supposed to come out of her mouth.

He laughed. “How did you know? But really it was good, thanks for cooking for me.”

She flicked suds from her fingers in his direction, her heart dancing in her chest. “You’re either too kind or your taste buds are on vacation,” she teased, meeting his eyes.

He leaned against the door frame. “Maybe it’s both, but you put effort into it, and that’s what made it the best. Plus, getting to be here with you beats any gourmet meal.”

She felt a warm flush spread through her cheeks as she dried her hands on a dish towel and leaned back against the counter, considering him.

“Alright, I’ll take the compliment. But next time, we’re either ordering in or we keep our hands off each other until the food is done,” she grinned.

“Deal. Now that dinner’s done, what’s next on the agenda?”

The question hung in the air; she could feel the pull of desire tugging at her again but how to approach it?

“We could go watch a Christmas movie in the honeymoon suite and pig out on Mack’s pie.” He waggled his brows at her. “How does that sound?”

She burst out laughing and nodded. The dishes could wait, she decided, they were not going anywhere. “I’ll get the pie; you grab plates and forks and the wine!”

“Give me five minutes, gotta run out to my car and grab my bag,” he said, slamming out the door. Brit watched out the door as he skidded to his car. If she hadn’t been so focused on dinner earlier, she would have seen him pull around to the back of the inn.

She held the door open as he crossed the patio, once inside he shook the snow from his head. “Does it ever quit snowing up here?” he asked, stamping his feet.

She laughed at him. “Honestly, I don’t know. From the looks of it, no.”

“Well, I came prepared anyway.” He slung the bag onto his shoulder. “Got my pj’s and... snacks.”

He didn’t dare tell her that the snacks were pleasure toys for her.

Brit set the pie and utensils on a tray and held out the wine bottle. “Can you carry this? I don’t trust going up the stairs with it balancing on a tray.”

He took it from her and said, “We can take the elevator up.”

Brit suddenly had a stunned look on her face.

“What is it?” he asked, full blown concern in his voice.

“It just occurred to me that I’ve never taken the elevator up to the second story. I always use the stairs.”

“Well, you’re in for a treat. You will get to see your tree from down below.”

Luke led the way with the bottle of wine in one hand, and Brit followed, the tray in hers. He went through the swinging kitchen door out into the hall where the elevator cage sat and waited for her to step inside. Closing the wrought iron gate, he pushed the button. The Inn had kept some of its original fixtures, and the elevator was a piece of history that guests

often admired. It wasn't until Kim took a sledgehammer to a barren wall in the hall that this beauty was unearthed.

With the gate closed, the elevator began its smooth but slow ascent.

Brit moved closer to the wrought iron, her eyes widening in delight. From this vantage point, the Christmas tree they had decorated together was fully visible, its lights twinkling like stars.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, almost to herself.

He watched her, her expression one of childlike wonder, and felt a surge of contentment. "It is," he agreed, though his gaze remained on her rather than the tree.

The elevator stopped on the second floor and Luke slid the iron gate across. Together they walked up the short flight of stairs to the West wing, where at the end of it was the Honeymoon Suite. "Can you get my card there?" she nodded towards the tray where she had set the master key card down.

"Sure." He snagged it off the tray and swiped it in front of the lock. Opening the door, he held it wide, and fumbled for the light switch. Instead of the usual bedside lights coming alive, an eight-foot-tall Christmas tree lit the room with its soft twinkling lights.

"Oh," Brit said, in awe as she walked in. "Kim said she was putting a tree up in here. I didn't think she had gotten around to it yet." Setting the tray on the bed, she walked over to the French doors and shoved the curtains aside. Night had fallen but that wasn't what she was looking for, nor was it the snow, the soft flakes spiraling to the ground, making the world outside seem hushed. It was the huge tree in the backyard that she sought out. Dean had been decorating it with help from Ben the other day.

After turning the fireplace on, Luke joined her by the doors. "It looks like the inn will be ready in no time for the ball," he murmured, breathing in her scent. "Are you still taking applications for your date?"

She turned to look at him and his arms snaked around her. He lightly clasped his hands behind her waist as she looked up at him. “As a matter of fact, I am,” she smiled, entwining her arms around his neck.

He nuzzled her forehead gently. “I can demonstrate my kissing abilities again if you like?”

The corners of her mouth curled upward in a smile. “Is that so? Well, it’s a very competitive position,” she said, the warmth of his body against hers sending a delightful shiver down her spine.

He shot her a mischievous grin. His voice, low and husky, said, “I’m a very determined applicant.”

Their faces inches apart, the air charged with electricity that seemed to buzz around them, she pulled him closer. “Well, I’ll need some references,” Brit whispered, her breath mingling with his.

“Oh, I have a few,” he assured her, his gaze dropping to her lips. “But I believe in demonstrating my qualifications firsthand.”

Before she could respond, Luke closed the distance between them. His lips met hers in a kiss that started tender and questioning, but it wasn’t long before it deepened. His tongue tangled with hers as he backed his way towards the bed. He was giving her an out. At any time, she could break it off and he’d fall flat on his ass. But she didn’t; she followed his lead, straight to the king-sized bed. When the back of his legs met it, he fell to the mattress, their mouths the only thing touching. As soon as she landed on him with a soft thud, he took her in his arms and rolled her onto her back. Leaning back, he looked into her eyes. “If at any time you want this to stop, just say so.”

Brit nodded. She knew he would never force her into doing anything she didn’t want. “I’m good, but thanks for that.”

He hovered above her, their gazes locked. “Just making sure,” he murmured, a smile playing on his lips. “Consent is key.”

Brit's heart swelled; his thoughtfulness was a godsend. "Understood," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "But don't stop. Your application is under... Seriously, oHoooo."

He ground his hips against her and smiled. "How was that?"

Her tongue darted out and she licked her lips as she nodded rapidly. "That... That was good."

Luke grinned, as he undid his jeans with one hand just before he nuzzled her neck. His lips scorched a path up to her ear and she thought she was going to go insane when he ran his tongue along it before tugging the lobe between his lips.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, a natural response to wanting him nearer and tugged his shirt up as his hands went to hers and stilled them. "Easy," he murmured against her skin, his breath hot and teasing. "We've got all night," he whispered with a chuckle, breaking away just enough to pull his shirt over his head with a fluid motion, tossing it aside.

With great effort she forced herself to relax and let him set the pace as his hands became deliberate. Taking hers in his, he slid them above her head, pulling her shirt off as he did, then gently pressed them onto the pillow.

He lifted his head to meet her gaze again, the intensity of his stare had her almost going over the edge. "Tell me what you want, Brit," he said, his voice a deep timbre, rumbled against her breasts.

She took a deep breath. "You," she whispered back. "I want you, Luke, inside me."

Without a word, he bent his head, and his lips captured her nipple through the satiny material of her bra. Brit arched her back in response and begged him to take it off her. In one deft move, he slipped his hand beneath her and skillfully undid the clasp. Her breast burst forth and in one fluid move, he captured one rosy bud between his teeth. She cried out when his tongue danced across it as his fingers found her other

nipple, rolling, and teasing it between his rough fingers until it puckered with arousal.

The sensations he was creating felt like molten hot lava coursing through her veins, and despite that it sent shivers over her body, settling deep within her core.

“Luke,” she gasped, her hands finding their way into his hair, urging him closer, her hips gyrating up to meet him.

He lifted his head to look at her, his eyes dark with the same desire that was consuming her. “Are you sure?” he asked, his voice hoarse. Even now, with the heat between them almost palpable, he was giving her the chance to say no.

Brit met his gaze and reached for him; her answer was crystal clear without any words spoken. He didn’t need to ask twice. Moving off her, he reached for the waist of her jeans, pulled the button free then unzipped them, pulling them along with her underwear, over her hips and down her thighs. He sat back, looking down at her nakedness, saw her quivering with anticipation or perhaps she was cold, either way, he was bound and determined to fix it. Taking her foot in the palm of his hand, he brought it to his lips, and kissed its inner arch, before making his way up her ankle to her thigh, nipping and tasting her skin along the way. He leaned forward, his tongue darted out, tasting the nectar that was pooling at the edges of her pussy.

Brit jerked with a moan, wanting his mouth to consume her there. But when he leaned away and placed her leg upon his shoulder she lay still with bated breath, waiting for his next move. He did the same to her other leg, showing the same attention to it. His lips seared a fiery path, from her foot to her thigh, only this time he didn’t stop to taste her. Oh no. He put that leg on his other shoulder too, then laid down on his stomach and buried his face into her pussy. As he lifted her hips off the bed, he twirled his tongue around her clit, sucking it into his mouth as his fingers slipped inside her slickness.

Brit jammed her hands in his hair, holding him to her as she wrapped her legs around his neck and shoulders, urging him to drink his fill as the passion tore through her with every

stroke of his fingers and lick of his tongue. A storm like no other started to build within her and she started to feel herself shudder uncontrollably until in one blinding moment she froze, his fingers were gone, and his lips were sealed to her skin as she lost all control. She felt utterly spent but was far from done.

Reaching her hand down, she tugged on his shoulder, urging him upwards. Upwards he did come, kissing every inch of her body, his lips skimming over her belly as his hand sought out her nipple, only to replace it with his mouth. In long pulling tugs, he loved on her nipple as his hand slipped between her thighs, finding the swollen nub. Dipping a finger inside her wetness, he swirled it around her sweet spot, in slow back and forth motions, until he found what felt like a small indent. When he touched that spot just right, she bucked her hips in response, crying out his name.

He moved up, his breath hot against her throat as he kissed her there, before nuzzling her neck. "Tell me what you want again babygirl. Tell me now before I go further."

She made soft mewling sounds, unable to even speak from the sensations sparking off her clit, that's what it felt like, electric sparks, surging through her body. With one hand she reached for the waist of his jeans, and tugged them down, plunging her hand inside, she found his cock, stiff and throbbing in her hand. She thumbed the tip and felt the precum there and whispered, "This. I want this. I want you... Inside... Me... Now," she said in jerky gasps because with every swipe of his finger on her clit, when he found that spot that's exactly what it did to her. At any moment she could go off again just from those stroking fingers, but she fought it, she wanted him, needed him to fill her emptiness.

Pulling his jeans off, he kneeled between her thighs and said, "There's no backing out after this, are you sure?"

His restraint was admirable but at this point she didn't care if she regretted it tomorrow or not, all she could think of was the now and his cock, twitching, waiting patiently to enter her. As he kneeled there before her, she sat up and leaned forward, kissing the tip of his glorious dick. When it bounced against

her mouth, she opened her lips intent on sucking him dry, but he backed off. “Not tonight babygirl, tonight is for you.” His arms went around her and laid her gently back on the bed. As she spread her legs welcoming him, he laid atop her, his chest crushing her breast, and his dick laying at the entry of her vagina and yet he still hadn’t even slipped in a centimeter.

“Luke!” She bucked her hips forward. “Are you trying to drive me insane?!”

“No, just wanting this moment to last. Do you have any idea how often I thought about this moment of you, naked, laying in my arms? Since the day I first saw you.”

And with that, he slowly eased into her. The walls of her vagina contracted, almost refusing to let the size of him enter but with each small thrust, it welcomed him more and more until he was seated fully within. Taking hold of her hips, he pulled her to him as he once again kneeled on the bed, but this time, he held her to him as he pumped his hips, taking her on a wild ride of ecstasy. He felt her start to stiffen and shudder in his arms, when she cried out in delight as she saw the stars in the heavens, did he finally let himself go over the edge and follow her. Wave after wave they soared higher and higher until both saw the stars shatter like diamonds as they came floating down like they were in the hug of a fluffy white cloud.

Luke collapsed onto the bed and pulled Brit to him cradling her in his arms as he pulled the duvet to cover their naked bodies. A tinkling noise sounded as he flipped it onto them, and he looked at the far edge of the bed. “Huh.”

“What is it?” Brit asked sleepily.

“The tray is still sitting there with the pie on it. Are you hungry?”

Brit snuggled closer; her eyelids heavy with contentment. “Mm, not really,” she mumbled against his chest, “but then again that pie looked damn yummy.”

Luke chuckled, the sound vibrating warmly in his throat. “It did, didn’t it?” He stretched an arm out, snagging the tray

and pulling it to his side. He carefully lifted a piece and held it as she sat up.

She took a bite, savoring its chocolatey goodness. “Perfect end to a perfect evening,” she said around a mouthful.

Luke nodded in agreement as he too took a bite then set it back in the box on the tray and closed it. “We should probably get some actual sleep,” he suggested, tossing the cover aside.

“Where are you going?” Brit yawned. “I thought you wanted to get some sleep?”

“I do.” He took the tray and carried it over to the French doors. “But I’m setting this outside first, it’s too good to let it spoil overnight.” A blast of cold wind entered the room, even the Christmas tree shivered from it. He quickly set the tray on the balcony and closed the doors. “Holy shit it’s cold out there.” He shivered as he made his way back to the bed, where Brit was holding the covers back for him to slip in.

The second he did, he took her in his arms, and she squealed in protest. “You’re freezing!”

“Well, you know what they say, the best way to warm up a person is with skin-to-skin contact,” he laughed, pulling her more securely in his arms.



Chapter 19

They were now in the early part of December and the inn was bustling with tourists. Mostly men who wanted a nice place to stay while they ice fished or hunted throughout the day and could relax with a few beers before a fireplace at night, and Kim couldn't be happier as it was booked solid up until Christmas Eve, the night of the Ball and Brit and Jasmine were running their feet off.

"Brit, are you done your shift in the dining room? Can you clean room 7 in the east wing please?" Kim asked, as Brit came into the lobby.

"I am, but I just need to get this for my last table," she said, snatching a local attractions brochure from the carousel by the front desk.

Luke was sitting in a wingback chair, waiting for Brit to finish her shift and saw how tired she looked. Despite the crease on her forehead, she smiled at him with a lopsided apologetic smile.

"I'll give you a hand with the room Brit," he said, standing up.

"Would you?" Her shoulders slumped with relief as she held up the brochure. "I'll just drop this off to my table and meet you upstairs in the supply room."

"Take your time."

"No! Don't take your time!" Kim said, as Brit turned and made her way back to the dining area.

Luke leaned against the counter and looked at his aunt. "You know how much I love you Aunt Kim, but you need to give those girls a break."

Kim looked at him over her reading glasses, pen poised over a pad of paper and didn't say a word.

"You're running them into the ground and even though you provide lodging for them, you're not paying them their

worth. So, either start doing that, or hire more staff so they aren't run into the ground."

She threw the pen down and pointed her finger in his face. "You're right. You're free so you're hired! And I'm giving them a raise. Now after you are done helping Brit with the cleaning, the bar needs restocking."

Luke grinned. "I walked right into that didn't I?"

"Yes, you did smartass," she cackled. "Now get going! That room isn't going to clean itself!"

Shaking his head, Luke pushed away from the counter and made his way to the front staircase to meet Brit at the supply room where he found her already inside.

He snaked his arms around her from behind, one hand finding her breast as the other slid to the junction of her thighs. "God, I've missed you," he murmured as he nuzzled her neck.

Brit leaned against him, her hands covering his, urging him to cop a feel. "It's been a hectic week." She leaned back into the embrace. "I've barely had a second to breathe."

Luke's hold tightened just a fraction. "How about we take a short walk after your shift? Fresh air might do you good, and I could use the company," he suggested.

"I'd like that, I'm sorry we haven't been able to see each other as much."

"Oh, you will be seeing me more often than you will probably like," he laughed, stuffing his hands in his pockets when she turned to look at him with questioning eyes. "I told Kim you and Jasmine needed help and a raise, so she's putting me to work."

"You did not!" she laughed, running a hand down his chest.

"I did and she did," he nodded, taking hold of her hand, he brought it to his lips and kissed it. "Though I think we might want to avoid any shenanigans while she's present, don't want to get fired now do we."

She turned back to the cart she had been filling with supplies and shook her head. “No, we do not. I love it here.”

Luke frowned. He wondered if she loved it so much that she would never want to leave Pearl Lake, because if that were the case, he would have no choice but to relocate.

Moving around to the front of the cart, Brit looked at him and said, “What’s wrong?”

“Ah nothing.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “We should probably get that room cleaned.”

She laughed, raising her hands off the cart handle. “That’s the plan, but you need to move out of the way.”

“Oh! Right.” He walked out into the hallway and let her pass by before closing the door.

As they made their way to the east wing, Brit looked at him, with a grin. “You do know how to clean right?”

“Of course! How hard can it be?”



LUKE FOUND OUT EXACTLY how hard it could be, he never thought he would have to climb in the shower and scrub every inch of the stall until it was gleaming. And the bed! His back was still protesting about that one.

“I don’t know how you can do this day in and day out,” he said, shaking his head as they walked along the snow-covered road towards Ava’s house.

Brit laughed, the sound light and carefree in the crisp evening air. “It’s all about practice and a bit of elbow grease,” she joked, nudging him with her shoulder. “Plus, you get used to it after a while.”

The snow underfoot crunched satisfyingly with each step as they walked in silence for a few moments, their breath forming little clouds in the cold.

As they approached Mark and Ava’s house, they could see the windows aglow with the twinkling of Christmas lights, and

the scent of something cooking filled the air.

“You’re in for a treat,” he said, steering her into the yard.

“What? We can’t just show up unannounced!”

“We aren’t, they are expecting us, I just didn’t tell you. Ava’s cooking is phenomenal. I hope you brought an appetite.”

Brit shot him an impish grin, her eyes sparkling as she playfully punched him on the arm. “Hey, I thought mine was and yes after a day of cleaning and waiting on tables? I could eat a horse.”

He leaned into her and kissed her on the lips as they reached the doorstep. Ringing the doorbell, he murmured close to her ear, “Your everything is phenomenal.”

The door flung open, and Mark stood there. “I see you two are getting along fabulously.” Holding the door wide, he yelled over his shoulder. “Ava! Luke and Brit are here!”

They stepped inside and Luke helped Brit out of her coat then hung it on the coat rack as Ava came squealing into the room.

“I’m so glad you guys came; I’m making a new dish! You’re my guinea pigs,” she said, leading them further into the house. “Mark, can you get them something to drink?”

Mark looked at them with a raised brow. “Do you want a beer or something fancier?”

“A beer sounds good to me,” Luke said, as he held the stool at the island for her to hop onto. “Brit? What would you like?”

“Hmm.” She settled onto the stool and looked at Mark. “Can you make anything with peppermint in it? Your home is so beautifully decorated I feel the need to drink something to match it,” she chuckled.

Mark nodded. “Candy Cane Cocktail it is! Ava, do you want one too?” he asked, as he headed towards the living room and the bar.

“Please!” she smiled, then ducked down to behind the counter, looking through the glass of the oven. She popped up and looked at her brother and Brit. “So, I heard now that the ball at the inn is a costume ball?”

Brit nodded. “Costume slash masquerade ball. Basically, come as you want just hide your face kinda deal.”

“Well, between you guys and us, Mom is coming over shortly because she has a gift for you Brit. But don’t tell her I said anything!!”

“What?! A gift for me?”

“Please don’t tell her I told you!” Ava looked at Mark as he came back holding a drink out to each of them. “Thanks,” she took a sip as if to give her courage. “Mom found something for you when they went to Springbank last week and she had to buy it. Said it would be perfect for you.”

“What is it?” Luke asked, taking a swig from his bottle.

Ava shook her head. “I ain’t saying. I’ve said enough!”

“Why would she buy me something? She hardly knows me.” Brit wondered aloud, more to herself than to the others.

Ava’s phone vibrated on the counter. She looked at the screen and picked it up. “It’s her, they’re on their way over.” She quickly typed a reply and looked at the couple staring at her. “Act surprised!”

Act surprised, Brit wasn’t sure she could. Depending on what it was she might just be appalled. The timer on the oven started dinging and Brit spoke up. “Ava, can I give you a hand?”

“That would be great!” Ava said as she slipped on a pair of oven mitts. “You can set the table for me; the plates are in the cabinet beside the fridge.” She pointed across the room with a mitted hand.

Brit slid off the stool and walked over to the cupboard and looked over her shoulder at Ava. “Is your mom staying for dinner too?”

“Yeah, her and Ben are. His parents are visiting from England and are watching Annabelle.”

Brit counted out six plates while Mark grabbed the silverware. “Here you go,” he said, holding them out to Luke with a smile.

“Thanks,” Luke laughed, taking them from him. He got up and was headed to the table where Brit was already laying the plates when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” he said, heading to the door.

Opening the door, he looked at the large square box held in his mom’s hands. “Hey what’s that mom?” he asked, looking at his sister as he stepped back for them to come in. Swinging his gaze back to them, he went to take the box from her. “Get me an early Christmas gift, did you?”

“No,” she laughed, pulling it away. “It’s not for you.”

He walked over to the table and began placing the utensils at each place setting. “Well, if it’s not for me, your favorite child, then who is it for?”

“Excuse me?” Ava said, as she sat the glass dish atop the dish towel in the middle of the table. “Oldest child, but everyone knows I’m the favorite.”

Ben laughed. “She has a point, you are the oldest.”

“I don’t have a favorite child! I love all my kids the same.” Abbi said. “I was going to wait until after dinner, but I can’t wait! Brit.” She moved to stand in front of her. “The second Kim and I saw this we knew it was made for you.”

Brit turned just as she was setting the last plate in place. Still holding it, she looked at Abbi. “Me? You bought something for me?”

Ava nudged her brother in the ribs, despite knowing ahead of time, the look on Brit’s face had been genuinely shocked. They silently nodded to one another as they watched the touching scene unfold.

“Yes... I know I can never repay you, but I wanted you to have it for saving Luke that day in the lake.” She held the box

out to her and sniffed. “You saved our family from a huge heartache that day.”

“Abbi, you don’t have to repay me,”— Brit’s eyes briefly dropped to the box, — “I mean Luke and I...” She saw Abbi’s eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Brit took the box from her and handed it to Luke. Turning, she gathered Abbi in her arms and hugged Luke’s mom as if she were her own. “Thank you so much,” she whispered.

Abbi pulled back, still holding her in her arms and looked at her. “Thank you. Now, hurry and open it before the food gets cold!” Abbi smiled.

Luke held the box as she opened it and her breath stilled in her throat. It was a dress and nothing like one she’d ever worn before. She took the velvety material in her hands and pulled it from the box. “Oh my...” she said in a hushed whisper as her eyes met Luke’s.

It was a stunning, ruby red, velvety gown with intricate beading that dazzled over the bodice and ended at the narrow waistline. The gentle flare of the skirt pooled to the floor and Brit imagined the feel of it against her legs with every step she would take.

She looked at Abbi, stunned. “Abbi, this must have cost a fortune! I can’t accept this!”

Everyone started laughing around her as Ava’s cell phone started to ring on the counter.

“What?!” Brit looked at them like they were all insane.

“Brit, just go with it. Mom won’t take no for an answer,” Ava said, walking over to retrieve her phone.

Abbi put her hand on Brit’s. “You will look fabulous at the ball.” She smiled, and left Brit standing there as she, and Ben went with Mark to get some drinks.

Brit raised questioning eyes to Luke. “My mother is very generous with her money, don’t feel bad and Ava’s right, she won’t take no for an answer. When she has something set in her mind, you’re better off to just go with the flow.” He leaned

close to her ear, his voice deep and raspy, he said, “Besides, I can’t wait to strip it off of you.”

A light blush bloomed on Brit’s cheeks as she smiled at him. “Fine, I’ll accept it,” she said, tucking it back into the box.

Mark, Ben and Abbi came back into the kitchen with their drinks in hand, laughing, when Ava said, “Oh my God!”

“What is it?” Mark asked, rushing to her side. “Who was that on the phone?”

She put a hand to her forehead and looked up at him. “That was Vince. My spa is on fire!”



Chapter 20

It had been a week since the fire at the spa, yet the smell of smoke still lingered in the air. Luckily no one was injured other than Tim, with minor burns and getting cut by broken glass when he jumped into the burning building. After he and Evelyn had got into a fight, he told her to go home and within the hour after she had left his place the spa was ablaze. Brit could only imagine the guilt and terror ripping through them; Tim when he had raced out into the wintry night barefoot, thinking the woman he loved was trapped and Evelyn standing on the ground seeing him with his head out the window as the flames licked his back. Brit shivered at the thought of it as she balled the bed sheets that she had stripped from the bed she was making.

“You know, I’m kinda getting used to this,” Luke said, popping his head out of the adjoining bathroom. “I’m almost done in here. Just need to rinse the shower stall.” He pulled his cellphone from his back pocket as he came into the room and put it on the dresser, something he did in every room because he was afraid of getting it wet.

“Oh, so you’re getting used to contorting your body just to clean a shower?” She laughed, as she tossed the sheets to the floor.

He sidled up to her and curled a finger under her chin. “Yeah,” He nodded as his gaze dropped to her lips. “It’s giving me ideas on what moves I can make on you.” He brushed his mouth over hers and murmured, “Wanna try some out? I’ll lock the door.”

She burst out laughing. “Kim will have your ass in a sling if you do that! We still have four more rooms to clean, and I work the dinner shift tonight.”

“Then I guess I better get a move on!” With one last kiss he headed back into the bathroom and Brit headed over to the cart to snag the feather duster from it. She had made a thorough sweep of the room and was headed towards the dresser when Luke’s phone lit up.

Normally she wouldn't be one to snoop at another's phone, but this wasn't a normal notification. Her heart pounded in her throat as she set the feather duster down as she picked up his phone. It was a text message with two simple words, "*I'm here.*"

But it wasn't the words but whom they were from; Declan MacGallan...

"Hey,"— Luke called out from the bathroom— "how about after we are done in this room, we head on down to the dining room and get a bite to eat?"

Carefully she returned his phone to where it was and took a breath. "I...Ah Hum." She stopped to swallow the lump in her throat and hoped it would steady her shaky voice. "Kim just texted me; she needs me downstairs asap."

He appeared at the door. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "She just needs me to try something on... for the ball."

"Oh. Well, I'll come with you. I'd love to see whatever it is."

"No, no you stay here and finish up. She specifically said not to tell you as it's a surprise so don't mention it to her." She made her way to the door and clenched the handle. "I'll meet you in the dining room in a half hour?"

He nodded. "Okay sounds good, I'll make the bed and finish up here. Wait a minute." He set the cleaner on the dresser beside his phone and made his way over to her and pulled her in his arms. "C'mere, did you really think I would let you leave without a kiss?"

Brit felt the tears burn her throat as his lips captured hers. Despite his betrayal and lies, she clung to him like he was her lifeline, knowing that this was the last kiss they would ever share.

As he leaned back and gazed into her eyes, Brit noticed the unanswered question in his. As if he knew something was wrong but what, he had no clue. She was on the edge of unleashing her anguish on him, she wanted to scream and

pound her fists against his chest, and demand to know why Declan was letting him know that he was here and for what purpose. But before she could utter a word, he simply murmured, "You should head out."

Without a last word, she nodded and opened the door. She stood a moment until it closed softly behind her with a click. Knowing Luke, he was probably watching her from the peep hole, so she made her way down the hall at a normal pace, despite her mind screaming for her to run. The second she turned down the adjoining hall, she took off running as if the hounds of hell were snapping at her feet.

Racing up the stairs to her room, she quickly grabbed a duffel bag and started by shoving her clothes inside from her dresser drawers. Crossing to the closet to get her winter coat and boots she stopped a moment as regret washed over her. The dress that Abbi had given her was hanging there. She would never get to wear it and she would never get to feel like a princess, with her prince charming by her side. Dashing the tears aside, she left it hanging along with the other dress that Destiny bought for her and gathered her winter gear. Closing the closet door to what might have been the start to a wonderful chapter in her life, she donned her coat and boots and quietly left the room. Knowing that the inn was a flurry of activity downstairs she gathered her hair up into a bun and stuffed it under her winter cap then pulled the hood of her coat on making her way downstairs to the elevator in hopes of passing off as a guest.

As she entered the cage of the elevator, an elderly couple joined her, and Brit recognized them from the night before. The sweetest couple she had ever met, and as she got to know them over the course of the night, she imagined what it would be like for her and Luke when they were that age. She sighed and looked up as the elevator made its descent. Big mistake, as her eyes zeroed in on her Christmas tree and the memory of that day and what had taken place in the hidden storage area flashed through her mind.

She couldn't do this; she couldn't just leave her job and most especially Luke without finding out his reasons for

contacting Declan. As the elevator came to a soft landing, she decided she would meet him in the dining room, and over lunch ask him to explain himself. Opening the gate, she waited for the couple to disembark before she did and followed them to the hall that led to the dining room.

The couple waited as a man stood there in winter gear, coming from the front lobby apparently also on his way to the dining room.

“After you two, please.”

Brit’s heart fell to her stomach, she knew that voice, a smooth timber sounding voice of a man who knew exactly what he wanted and got it. It was her cousin, Declan.

“Miss?” she heard him say.

She dared not look at him for fear he’d recognize her and instead, ducked around him towards the lobby.

Don’t run, walk slow, she kept repeating in her head until she reached the front doors. The second she was out in the fresh air; she made a beeline to the road and started running towards the only place that no one would think to look for her. The emu farm.



Chapter 21

Luke stood up the second he saw his old friend from high school step into the room and motioned for him to join him.

“Declan, it’s been a few years, hasn’t it?” he grinned, and gestured to the seat across the table from him.

“It certainly has. What happened to the skinny ass nerd that played video games all day?”

Luke laughed. “Well, I still play video games but now I do it for a living and I just blossomed into the magnificent physique that’s before you. You’re not too shabby looking yourself Declan, what happened to you?”

A dark look crossed Declan’s face before it disappeared and was replaced by the carefree, friendly grin Luke remembered. “The family business, speaking of which”— Declan looked around— “where is that dear cousin of mine?”

Luke leaned back in his chair as Jasmine came over to the table and set a glass of water in front of them. He looked up at her and said, “We will need one more, Jasmine, Brit will be joining us shortly.”

“Alright, will you guys be having the buffet, or do you want menus?” She asked.

“Buffet,” they said in unison.

“Okay help yourself whenever you’re ready, I’ll be back with more water.”

Declan looked at Luke. “So how long is Brit going to be because my stomach is about to eat itself.”

“Mine too. And who knows, Kim needed her to try something on and you know how women are when it comes to clothes.” He stood up. “C’mon, let’s grab a plate before it’s all gone.”

They made their way over to the table and each took a plate and started piling it high with food. Taking a scoop of

scalloped potatoes, Declan plopped in on his plate. “So, have you told her why I’m here?”

Luke made a face. “She doesn’t know you’re here at all.”

“What?” Declan asked in disbelief. “How could you not tell her? If she sees me before knowing the reason I’m here, she’s going to run.”

He chuckled. “And that’s why you’re sitting with your back to the door.”

After the two men had filled their stomachs and reminisced of days gone by Luke concluded that Brit was a no show. Kim must have put her to work doing something else.

“I couldn’t believe the traffic on the way up here,” Declan said, yawning as he scratched his belly. “I think I’m going to head on up to my room and take a nap. Maybe once you talk to Brit we can meet over drinks and discuss her future.” Luke looked up as Declan stood and pushed in his chair.

“Yeah, that sounds good. I have work to do anyway.” As Declan walked away, Luke pulled his cell phone out and sent a quick text to Brit asking where she was. Without another thought, he too left the dining room, and headed to the next room on their list to be cleaned.



BRIT WAS LOOKING AT her cell phone trying to figure out where the hell she was on Google maps when she got Luke’s text. Ignoring him, she turned around in the middle of the snow filled forest trying to figure out which direction to head. She never should have taken to the forest in the first place and had stuck to the road, until Dean’s truck was heading straight for her. She told herself that she would only stay in the woods for a little bit, but that little bit had turned into an hour and a half.

Stumbling forward she came to a hill and stared up at it. With a deep breath, she started the trek up, slipping along as she did until she came to the crest. A coldness took hold of her that had nothing to do with the weather and everything to do

with the farm that laid ahead. Head bowed, she forged on until she stepped into the clearing of the yard. The place looked run down and Brit had a dizzying moment that threatened to send her into a tailspin. With no other place to go, and even if she had one, she had no way to get there. She climbed the steps to the back porch and tried the handle. It was locked. Remembering that Jasmine had once mentioned that there was a key hidden behind a loose brick in the wall, Brit started scanning its surface. Sure enough, close to the floor of the porch there was a brick with the mortar missing around it. Bending down, she pulled off her glove and tugged on the brick. Sighing in relief she snatched up the key and went back to the door, fitting it in the lock. The door creaked loudly on its hinges as it swung inward. As Brit stepped inside her eyes went to the fireplace where a crackling fire was dancing in the hearth casting a welcoming glow.

What the hell did you just step into Brit?

Was her last thought before her world went black from a blow to the back of her head.



LUKE WAS CLOSING THE door to the last room on the cleaning list when Kim was coming at him from down the hall.

“Luke. Why are you closing the door on Brit?” she asked, stopping in front of him.

“She’s not in there.” He frowned. “She’s with you.’

“Does it *look* like she’s with me? She never showed up for the dinner hour shift, and I can’t find her anywhere.”

He rested his hand on the cleaning cart and stared at her. “She told me before lunch that you needed her to try something on. You didn’t ask her that, did you?”

Kim shook her head. “No, why would I ask her to try something on when I knew she was busy. When was the last time you saw her?”

Luke steered the cart down the hall, heading towards the supply closet as Kim followed behind. “It was just before lunch; we were cleaning and she” — He swung his gaze to his aunt— “Did you check her room?”

Kim held the closet door open. “Not yet.”

Luke shoved the cart inside, not waiting for his aunt, he turned down the hall and stalked to the hidden staircase. Taking the steps two at a time with Kim hot on his heels, he flung the bedroom door open. He went right to the dresser and started yanking open the drawers, finding them all empty. He went to the closet door, flipped on the light and flung it open to see the dress his mother had given her hanging from a hanger. “Sonofabitch she’s gone.”

“What?! What do you mean she’s gone? Where? Why?”

“I don’t know Kim! But as you can see her clothes are all gone, except the dress.” He stood there for a moment, his mind racing to the last conversation they had, the kiss they shared, the tears in her eyes. She was fine until he had mentioned having lunch. But what had happened before that? He had sat his phone down on the dresser... A sweat broke on his brow. She knew about Declan and just like he predicted, she ran.

“Call the cops Kim,” Luke called over his shoulder as he flew down the steps.

“What?!”

He stopped his downward flight and she crashed into him “I said, call the cops. No, don’t do that.”

“What?! Make up your damn mind!!”

“Never mind, I’ll find her and bring her back here.” He pushed open the door and stepped onto the landing. Crossing over it, he went straight across to the bookcase and thumbed the lever. It pained him to step in there, but it was the quickest way to the kitchen and his coat.

Kim followed him every step of the way demanding to know what the hell was going on. Once in the kitchen, he grabbed his coat off the hook behind the door and turned to his aunt.

“Listen to me carefully Kim and don’t interrupt with a hundred questions.” When she nodded mutely, he continued. “I need you to go down the east wing to the room in the corner where the two hallways meet.”

“Why.”

“I need you to go there and knock on the door. A man is going to answer it, Declan, probably looking like he could bite your head off. If you ask him too many questions he will. Just tell him she ran and to meet me at the farm.”

“The emu farm?”

Luke thought a minute, the less she knew the better. “No, another farm. Don’t worry about it, he knows which farm it is. Now go!”

Kim took off running as fast as her chubby legs would allow and Luke slipped out the kitchen door, racing to Ben’s car as he tried Brit’s number. When she didn’t pick up, he tossed it to the passenger seat and started the engine before tearing out of the parking lot and down the laneway.

He wasn’t entirely sure that was where she went, but she had no other place to go on foot. And in her mind, the only place no one would think to look for her.



Chapter 22

Luke cut the engine at the bend in the road after he had pulled it to the shoulder. Like before he could see the buildings from where he sat, only this time there were lights glowing from the windows. Downstairs was lit up like a Christmas tree but the most concerning light to Luke was the one that shone in the upstairs window, right next to the bent tv tower. The window that Brit had been held captive in.

Getting out of the car, he went around to the back and opened the trunk. There sat a tire iron like it had been placed there just for him. Grabbing it up, he gently lowered the trunk lid with a soft thud and made his way through the trees towards the house, a car pulling up behind him halted him momentarily. Declan and three other men got out of the car and joined him on the side of the road.

“Would it kill you to offer clearer directions next time?” Declan asked, then gestured toward the residence. “Seen any signs of life yet?”

“Nothing so far,” Luke replied, his breath misting in the cold air. “No shadows or movement from inside.”

“Alright, my crew will take the outbuildings,” Declan decided, studying Luke with a hint of concern. “You sure you’re up to going in the house alone, or do you want company?”

“With this, I’ll be fine,” Luke answered, waving the tire iron.

Declan clucked his tongue. “Seriously? Planning to hurl that at him, are you? Roger,” he called out, and a man promptly handed him a handgun. “Here, better to be armed than sorry.”

Luke flinched slightly. “I’m not sure about using that.”

“Just take it,” Declan persisted, pressing the gun into Luke’s hand. “Safety’s off. Just remember, finger away from

the trigger unless you're ready to fire. You've shot a gun before, haven't you?"

"A BB gun," Luke declared with a nod.

Declan let out a laugh. "Ever hit your mark?"

"Every time." He just failed to tell him it was the side of a barn.

"That'll do then," Declan said. He spun around to address his men. "Chris, you're on watch. Eyes peeled on the house and out for any police — wouldn't put it past your aunt to have them on speed dial. Let's move," he motioned to the others.

They stealthily made their way through the trees and into the yard. Declan and his men dispersed like they were a SWAT team as Luke made his way up the back steps. Trying the handle, he was relieved to find it unlocked, carefully he pushed the door open and snuck inside.



BRIT LIFTED HER HEAD and groaned as pain seared through her skull, she moved her hand to touch it and heard the jangling of a chain. Her eyes snapped open; all she saw was her wrist cuffed to the four-poster bed. She went to reach it with her other hand only to encounter the same.

"There you are. I didn't think you'd ever wake up."

She looked to the foot of the bed to where a chair sat in the corner and saw that her legs were spread eagle, thankfully free.

Brian stared at her with a glint in his eyes. "I'm happy that you decided to come visit me again." He stood up and reached for his belt. "It's been a long time since I tasted you. I can't wait to rip the clothes off that delectable body of yours."

Brit started to shake her head. "No! Don't you dare come near me!"

He shot her a lascivious smile. “Are you kidding me? You broke into my home, and the way I see it I can do whatever I want to you before I toss you out and leave you for dead,” he said, kneeling between her outstretched legs.

Brit brought her legs up close to her chest as he said, “I know you never said anything to the cops about us, so I want to thank you properly for that,” he said leaning forward.

She saw she had only one opportunity and it was now. With as much force as the day out on the lake when she had smashed the ice saving Luke, she struck out with her booted heel, hitting him squarely on the jaw.

He flew back in a spray of blood, ass over teakettle right off the bed, howling in pain.

“I told you not to fucking come near me!” She screamed at him.

Brian pounced off the floor and launched himself at her, wrapping his hands around her neck he started to squeeze.

Fighting for air, all Brit could think about were the moments she had shared with Luke, tears sprang to her eyes. Not because Brian was slowly squeezing the life out of her but because a life with Luke was slipping away.

So wrapped up in the moment, neither of them heard the pounding of footsteps coming up the stairs.

Bursting into the room Luke put Brian in a chokehold. Only when he heard Brit taking in a lungful of air, did he pull Brian off the bed, tossing him to the floor. Searching for the keys to the handcuffs, Luke dug out one from the back pocket of Brian’s jeans.

Fearing that Brit would be too traumatized to even speak he knelt beside the bed and removed the cuffs. The second they were off she flung herself into his arms sobbing.

“So, you didn’t have to use the gun after all?” Declan laughed from the doorway.

Luke looked up at him and grinned. “Didn’t even use the tire iron.”

“Wow, I’m impressed,” Declan said, moving to stand by the bed. “Boys, clean this mess up,” he ordered, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Remembering what Luke had done by betraying her trust, she pulled away from him and got up to stand by the window. She looked at the two of them sitting there. Giving Luke the evil eye, she decided she would deal with him later, but for now she had to deal with Declan. Raising her chin, she looked her cousin in the eyes. “So, you found me huh? Now what, I suppose you’re planning on taking me back to Toronto?”—she folded her arms across her chest— “I’m letting you know I’m not going.”

Declan looked at Luke and sighed. “I told you; you should have told her.”

“Yeah, I know you did. You saw the look she sent me,”— Luke shot a hand in her direction— “if I had she would have done way worse if I did.”

Brit couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The two of them were bickering back and forth like two old ladies.

She stamped her foot to get their attention. “I am here you know!”

Declan gave her a bored look while Luke grinned at her.

“So you are,” Declan yawned and stood up and moved towards her. “My dear cousin. If you hadn’t taken off running and had dined with us at lunch, you would have discovered that I was searching for you, not my dad.”

“What?! There were missing persons posters looking for me. I saw it with my own eyes... with a reward!”

Declan put an arm around her shoulders and waved his hand about in the air. “Yeah, well that was just for show. I would never have paid it.”

Luke laughed like he was on the intel of an inside joke. “I would pay it Brit,” he said with a wink.

“Yeah, well that’s cuz you’re an idiot,” Declan laughed. “No woman is worth fifty grand.”

Luke stood and went to her side. “Yes, she is,” he said, taking her hand. “I’m sorry Brit, I should have told you I contacted Declan. My intention was to buy out your contract with your family. Can you forgive me?”

“I don’t know yet. You should have told me. You know I have trust issues where men are concerned.” She shot Declan a sour look.

“Hey, I tried to get dad to break your contract the day your mother passed away, God rest her soul. But as far as he was concerned a contract is a contract, blood or no blood.”

“Boss,” the man called Chris, said from the doorway. “The car is loaded, where do you want us to make the drop?”

“The usual,” Declan said, dismissively.

Chris nodded and left the room.

“I’m going to follow him,”— Brit pointed towards the door— “You too can stay here and chat but I’m leaving.”

“We’re coming,” Luke said as he followed her close behind. He was not letting her out of his sight ever again.

She stopped at the top of the stairs and looked at Declan. “If Uncle Pete wasn’t looking for me, why were you?”

“How long has your mom been gone, Brit?” Declan asked.

“Five years,” she mumbled.

Her cousin nodded. “You worked as an escort four years more than you had to. Your contract was for one year.”

“What?” She spat out. “You made me work for four more years than I had to?”

“I didn’t, my dad did, and he didn’t make you, he just didn’t tell you it was done. You were making a shit ton of money every night he wasn’t about to say anything to stop that flow from coming in. And when you went missing, he just figured you found out and left you on your merry way. I, on the other hand, figured you had a right to know that your services were no longer needed and to give you this.” He

pulled an envelope from the inside pocket of his coat and handed it to her.

“What is it?” she asked with wide eyes.

“Open it.”

She looked at Luke and saw his encouraging nod. Sliding her finger under the sealed flap, she pulled out a check for a hundred thousand dollars made out to her.

“What is this?” she asked, wide eyed.

“Your pay for working for the family for four years.”

“I can’t take this,” she shook her head, holding it out to him. “I was paid the whole time I worked.”

“You were paid under a contractual agreement. That’s money owed after the contract ended. It’s yours, do what you want with it, rip it up for all I care.”

Going around her, Luke snagged her by the hand. “Come on Brit lets’ just get you back to the inn,” he said, giving her hand a tug as he started down the stairs. “Figure it out tomorrow.”

In silence they all walked out of the house to find Ben’s car sitting in the driveway, idling.

Stopping on the porch Luke pointed at it. “How did that get there?”

Declan raised his hand. “Oh, that would be my guys, they jimmed the lock and bypassed the ignition. No big deal. Just get in and drive it.”

“It’s not my car!” Luke yelled, looking at him.

“Oh.” Declan wiped a hand down his face. “Well, that money you were going to pay to free Brit with. Use it to fix it.” He looked around and frowned. “Can I hitch a ride with you guys, I seem to be stranded.”

“Shotgun!” Brit yelled as she raced to the car. She turned to find both men standing on the porch ducking. “What are you two doing?”

Declan came down the steps and said, “I don’t know what he’s doing but in my line of work when someone yells shotgun you kiss the ground.”

“Me?” Luke said, strolling to the driver’s door. “I’ve been around you too long my friend, too long.”

For the first time since her ordeal with her family had started so long ago, Brit finally felt free.



IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE and Brit was leaning over the vanity applying her makeup for the night’s festivities, standing in her bra and underwear. As a token of all their hard work they had done in the weeks leading up to the big night, Kim and Dean had told Jasmine and her each to pick out their choice of room to stay in throughout the holiday season. Jasmine had picked the room right beside Brit’s choice of the Honeymoon Suite. She was regretting it of course. The memories that she and Luke had shared within the walls of the room haunted her the second she had walked in, and she missed him.

Since the second he brought her back from the emu farm, Luke had kept his distance from her. The only time he paid attention was to scowl at her whenever he cast his glance her way. At first, she thought it was to give her space and time to think, but after the second week of being treated as if she was a distant friend, she knew that wasn’t the case. She had fallen in love with a man that had only wanted a side fling, it seemed.

Sighing, she stood straight and looked at herself in the mirror, as she pulled her hair up into a messy bun, and desperately tried to capture the soft tendrils that escaped it. Finally, she gave up and decided it was good enough. Jasmine had offered to French braid her hair, but Brit declined, she just wasn’t in the mood for a party, especially one that was going to be as grand as the ball.

With one last look, she flicked the light off and went into the bedroom area. The dress that Abbi had gifted her laid

across the foot of the bed waiting for her. Wearing it tonight was going to be the only highlight of her night, she was sure. Picking it up, she stepped into the gown pulling it up to settle on her shoulders.

She was unsuccessfully zipping it up when a knock sounded on the door, “Come in!” she called knowing it would be Jasmine. With Destiny’s approval, Brit had given the teenager the dress that Destiny had bought for her.

“Oh, my goodness you look gorgeous!” Jasmine exclaimed, the second she walked into the room.

“Thanks,” Brit mumbled. “I won’t be looking so gorgeous if I don’t get this zipper up.”

“Here let me.” Jasmine came over to the bed and set two masks on the mattress.

“Where did you get those?” Brit asked, looking at the feathered masks, one that matched her dress perfectly right down to the dazzling beads.

Jasmine pulled the edges of the dress together and quickly zipped it up. “I made them, one for the both of us.”

“Well thank you!” Brit pulled the teen into her arms, giving her a tight squeeze, she said, “That was sweet of you. That dress looks gorgeous on you by the way.”

“You think so?” Jasmine asked, looking down at it.

“Absolutely.”

“Maybe Luke will dance with me,” she gushed. But when she saw the look on Brit’s face, she hurried to apologize. “I’m so sorry Brit!”

“Pfft.” Brit waved a dismissive hand. “It’s no big deal.” Oh, but it was a big deal she thought as soon as she felt the sting of tears hit the back of her throat. Blinking her eyes for fear of ruining her makeup she snatched up the masks.

“Come on.” She hooked her arm through Jasmine’s, handed her a mask and said, “Let’s not be fashionably late, alright?”



LUKE WAS STANDING BY the fireplace, a good place as any he figured, waiting for Brit to walk in the room, when someone tapped him on the shoulder. Kim looked at him. “What are you hanging out by the fireplace for?” She grabbed his hand and pulled him to the middle of the room.

“Hit the music she yelled!”

More people joined them on the makeshift dance floor as the sounds of Jingle Bell Rock started playing on the sound system.

And that’s how Brit saw him as she walked into the room. She wasn’t there for more than a minute and Mack in his Santa suit was tugging her to the dance floor to cut a rug, as he claimed.

After three rounds of dancing and stolen glances towards Luke with a woman she had never laid eyes on in her life, hanging on to him, Brit had had enough. She walked over to the refreshment table, snagged a bottle of wine and headed outside onto the stone veranda. The outdoor heaters hanging from the ceiling of the porch did nothing as she shivered in the moonlight while it bathed Pearl Lake in its wintry glow, but she didn’t care, as a tear ran down her cheek. Anywhere was better than standing there watching Luke and that... woman tangle on the dancefloor. She wished more than anything to be that woman, but she knew that dream was over, and he was clearly moving on.

Looking to the heavens, as tears streamed down her face, a falling star shot across the sky in a dazzling display, reflecting off the frozen lake. Never one to believe in the old legend that a wish would come true when seeing one, Brit held her breath and made it anyway.



LUKE UNTANGLED HIMSELF from the woman who wrangled him for a dance, one had turned into four. When Brit

left the dancefloor, he politely declined another, but the woman wasn't having it. Not to make a scene, he agreed one more. Now against her protests, he turned and walked away.

Pulling Jasmine aside, he had to nearly shout in the poor girl's ear over the music when he asked, "Where's Brit?"

Jasmine shrugged and shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe she went to bed."

"Hmm maybe," he said absently scanning the room. He highly doubted it as he'd been watching for her to sneak off out of the room and do just that. "Thanks Jasmine. Save a dance for me," he said, heading over to his mom.

"Luke, you're looking handsome tonight!" Abbi said. "Where's Brit?"

He looked down at the floor and shook his head. Looking back up at his mom, he said, "I don't know. I thought maybe you saw her."

Drink in hand, Ben pointed to the sliding doors at the back of the room. "After she snagged a bottle of wine, she went out those doors."

Luke felt like grabbing Ben by the shoulders and giving him a kiss but instead grinned and said, "Thanks buddy!"

"You still need to fix my car!!" Ben yelled as he made his way through the maze of people.



SLIDING OPEN THE DOOR, he didn't see her anywhere in the near vicinity. Following the wraparound porch, he made his way to the front of the inn and stilled as he came around the corner. At first, he didn't see her standing there, the tree in the front window messing with his vision but as he went further, he saw her standing there, the bottle of wine tipped up as she took a swallow.

Quietly he went up behind her, his hands settled at her waist as he murmured against her ear, "Don't smack me."

Brit didn't smack him. She lowered the bottle and leaned her head against his shoulder as his hands snaked around her waist, drawing her against him. His body hugged hers as if he was created just for her, surrounding her in a comforting warmth against the chill of the evening.

"I saw that woman all over you..."

"I have no clue who she is, and she doesn't matter because she's not you."

The faint scent of his cologne mixed with the crisp winter air had her senses reeling.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you how beautiful you look tonight."

"Thank you," Brit whispered, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest, those words coming from his lips was all that mattered.

She set the wine bottle on the railing as she focused on the feel of him behind her, his breath tickling her ear. She turned within his arms, facing him, their breaths mingling in the space between them. She searched his eyes, looking for a sign in them that he loved her as much as she did him.

His hands rested at the small of her back, fingers splayed as if he feared she might slip away if he didn't hold on just right. "I wanted to give you space," he finally said. "So that you could work out in your mind if I was worthy of your forgiveness. But not so much that you'd doubt how much I care."

Brit's eyes softened. "It's hard to doubt when you chase me out into the cold on Christmas Eve," she teased with a quiver in her voice.

Luke chuckled softly, pulling her closer. "I'd chase you into a blizzard if I had to. But let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"It won't if you never lie to me again. I'll admit I was hurt when I found out you contacted Declan behind my back after you told me you just wanted to see if he was the same guy from high school."

“Yeah. I know I was wrong, and your cousin gave me proper shit for that too.”

“As he should! But *why* did you contact him.” She looked him in the eyes and hurried on. “I know you said you wanted to buy out my contract from my family,”— she shook her head — “but you never said why.”

Luke licked his suddenly dry lips and took a deep breath. “Because I wanted to make you, my family... because I’m in love with you.”

She jerked back, her eyes roaming over his face. “What? What did you say?”

He laughed. “You heard me. I know we haven’t known one another for long.” He looked up at the ceiling in thought. “What has it been... three months? But I don’t care, I’ve never met a woman that I fell so hard for in my life... until you. What do you say? Will you marry me?”

“But you don’t even like Pearl Lake! I’m not moving.”

“No, you’re right I don’t.” His hands reaching for her bottom he pulled her tightly against him and Brit could see his eyes darkened as he said, “But you do, and I love you. Now, are you going to put me out of my misery, or do I have to apply for that position as well?”

She burst out laughing as she hugged him to her then leaning back, she traced her thumb across his lower lip. “I got my Christmas wish. Yes,” she breathed out, as she slipped her other hand into his jacket, seeking out the beat of his heart. “Yes, I will marry you. But no application is necessary, you’ve already got the job for life... because I love you too.”



AND IN THAT MOMENT when Luke pressed his lips against hers with the promise of many more to come, his family had gathered around the Christmas tree with their noses stuck to the glass pane of the window like the true creepers they were!

I hope you have enjoyed the Pearl Lake Series; with a saddened heart this is where the Petersen family story ends. I will miss them because for me they are like family, and I hope they are for you too! If you hadn't guessed it, with the introduction to Brit's cousin Declan MacGallan I will be writing his story next with a new series. No idea where it will take me or when, but please feel free to follow me on Amazon for updates of new releases. In the meantime, if you haven't checked out my short Paranormal romance series, that are standalone books, you can find them on my Amazon page as well.



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