



Sinful
BEATS

A SINS OF THE FATHERS CROSSOVER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ARELL RIVERS

Sinful Beats

*A Sins of the Fathers and Untamed
Coaster Crossover Novel*

Arell Rivers

SINFUL BEATS

Book 1 in the **UNTAMED COASTER** series

ARELL RIVERS

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✿ Created with Vellum

The line between secrets and sins can be *razor thin*...

Quinn

I want to make movies that *document* drama. But in my personal life? I have *zero* tolerance for it.

So, I intend to keep my gnarly family history to myself. Forever.

Besides, my dream job—making a rockumentary about Untamed Coaster—just fell into my lap and *nothing* is going to distract me.

Not even my alarmingly sexy Scottish neighbor...

Callum

Gold diggers are *everywhere*. I learned this lesson the hard way and now keep my family's fortunes hidden.

So, love and romance aren't for me. Not anymore.

My brand and upcoming launch party are what matter now. I can't let anything ruin them.

Not even my *very* inconvenient (and damn near overwhelming) attraction to the girl next door.

As our relationship intensifies and the launch approaches, I have to divulge my truths. But it's never the right time. When the beats leading up to discovery run out, our pasts collide in a shocking way.

Contents

1. [Quinn](#)
 2. [Callum](#)
 3. [Quinn](#)
 4. [Callum](#)
 5. [Quinn](#)
 6. [Quinn](#)
 7. [Callum](#)
 8. [Callum](#)
 9. [Quinn](#)
 10. [Callum](#)
 11. [Quinn](#)
 12. [Callum](#)
 13. [Quinn](#)
 14. [Callum](#)
 15. [Quinn](#)
 16. [Callum](#)
 17. [Callum](#)
 18. [Quinn](#)
 19. [Callum](#)
 20. [Callum](#)
 21. [Quinn](#)
 22. [Callum](#)
 23. [Quinn](#)
 24. [Callum](#)
 25. [Quinn](#)
 26. [Callum](#)
 27. [Quinn](#)
 28. [Callum](#)
- [Epilogue](#)
- [A Note from Arell](#)
- [Gratitude](#)
- [About the Author](#)

[Connect with Arell](#)

[Other Books by Arell](#)

[IDLE](#)

Chapter 1

Quinn

River “Río” Sullivan points his drumstick at Pierce DeLuca. “You missed your intro, 007.”

The normally reticent bassist grumbles, “I was waiting for Coop’s riff.”

“Well, the keys should’ve been playing before me.” The guitarist, whose given name is Cooper O’Shea, turns toward the newest member of the band, Tristan Lambert. The keyboardist lifts his hands as if in surrender.

I slam my eyes shut. How on earth will I ever complete my documentary in thirty days if these guys can’t get it together? This gig will make or break them. My eyes fling open. *Gig?* I’ve been hanging with Untamed Coaster for too long.

They need a reset, and I need some usable footage. Abandoning my role as director, I ask, “Why don’t you try something different?”

My question brings ten eyes to me, causing me to stand straighter. I tuck my hair behind my ear and continue, “How about pretending like you’re about to take the stage at the Moray Distillery launch party. How does that go?”

The wall of rockers standing before me are members of one of the most famous bands on earth, but they’ve lost their mojo. Rather, their keyboardist, may he rest in peace. Hence the reason for my being with them over the past five months. At least we relocated from LA to my adopted hometown for this last month in order to better prepare for the party. That’s what Luke Allen, their manager, told them. He wasn’t about to

say he hoped the change of scenery would inspire them. Or at least turn them into a functioning band again.

“I guess we could try it,” Bennett Hardy replies, the group’s lead singer and from what I’ve learned over the past months of shooting, its alpha. “Can’t be any worse than the shit we’ve been playing.”

Men. They have some way of communicating with each other. One by one, the band places their instruments onto their stands—River pockets his sticks and Tristan steps away from the keyboard, sinking his hands into his pockets. He’s the one to whom my heart reaches out the most. The newcomer. The very talented musician who was tapped to take Darren Hilliard’s place following his sudden death.

Poor guy. He’s super talented and is trying to fit into the band, but it’s hard given they’ve been playing together for a decade and were friends for many more years before then. *I can sympathize*. I spent my entire life longing to be part of the Hansen family and now they’ve begrudgingly acknowledged me as one of them, it’s awkward to say the least. I met everyone—except Daddy’s other wife—at Paige and Jesse’s wedding reception, yet felt like an outsider. Of course, the couple of the hour were amazing to me, like usual. The rest seemed nice enough, but I wasn’t welcomed with open arms. Or at all. Like Tristan, here with the band.

I snap myself out of my own family’s drama when the guys congregate off to one side. Ensuring the cameras are capturing this moment, I direct, “Go on. Do the pre-show ritual you do before heading out to the stage.” I have no idea what this ritual could be, but all bands have one. Or so my research indicates.

The four original members of Untamed Coaster glance among themselves. Shrugging, Bennett says, “Sure. Why not.” His tenor voice is pure gold, making women faint. Other women, that is. Not me. Although I work in the industry, I have zero desire ever to be linked with such a high-profile guy. Spent my life forced to the sidelines of the spotlight cast by my top-secret father, thank you very much.

All the guys raise their fists into the air, with Tristan last to the party. The lead singer locks his gaze with each of them. “Strapped, locked, and loaded, are you ready to roll with Untamed Coaster?” A collective whoop goes up from the four original band members. They nod at each other and walk toward their instruments. Tristan appears dumbfounded, then takes a step toward his keyboard.

I clear my throat. “Guys, that was cool.” The band stops and turns toward me. I can play this in one of two ways, either calling them out on Tristan’s behalf or pleading ignorance. I decide to go with the latter. “Where did you get the saying?”

Río taps his drumsticks on his thigh. “When we were working at the theme park, Bennett said it before every ride was sent off.”

It’s well known that the original members of the band met when they worked at an amusement park, on a rollercoaster called Untamed Coaster. Hence their name—UC for short. “And the raised fist beforehand?”

“A raised fist was our signal to Bennett that everyone was safely in their seats,” their guitarist replies.

I study Tristan, who absorbs their responses and does a mini-fist bump into the air. At least he now knows this ritual and the reason behind it. “I love it. And I bet your fans will appreciate this inside scoop. Would you mind doing it again, and this time I promise not to ruin the shot by keeping my mouth shut.” I offer a grin.

The guys return to the pretend backstage area, and I count them off. Bennett takes a deep breath and glances at every person in the group, Tristan included. One by one, their fists go into the air. With the first genuine smile I’ve seen on Bennett’s face, he yells, “Strapped, locked, and loaded, are you ready to roll with Untamed Coaster?” This time, the whoop is louder, followed by something new—clapping.

They approach their instruments, followed by the sound of strumming and pounding and hitting the keys. Bennett runs a couple of scales to warm up his voice again. 007 strums his bass and suggests, “Let’s play ‘Crushing Blow.’”

Tension fills the room as all other discordant noises cease. They haven't played this song since I've been with them. It's the band's last number one before they lost Darren who, I've learned, wrote almost all of its lyrics and melody.

Bennett's fingers tighten around the microphone to the point they turn white. I hold my breath, waiting for the group's response. After a minute, the singer pulls the microphone off its stand. "Good idea. We need to practice this one." He takes a big breath. "Let's do it."

I sag as air enters my body again. They're professionals. They know they have to get it together. Plus, I'm getting this all down on film for the rockumentary, which will provide great footage. My first film ever. I went to school to make documentaries, and I'm finally getting to do one. My time as a director over at *Renovation TV* was fun, but reality shows aren't my passion. Too much drama. Lies. Secrets. Putting together a coherent film about a slice of life jazzes me. It's what I was born to do.

The music starts and I pause from taking notes, instead enjoying how these guys play together. If I wasn't looking at them, I would swear someone was playing their song off the radio, it sounds so good. Tristan's fingers play like Darren's did. It doesn't seem to matter the band hasn't played this song in a year.

Not that I'm an Untamed Coaster fan. But I did my homework and listened to way too many hours of their tracks so I would be familiar with my subjects. Have to admit, I've come to enjoy many of their songs, but "Crushing Blow" is my favorite.

When Barrett joins the song with his signature sound, I stop examining every single nuance. I'm transformed into a fan, honored to get a private performance of a song that's been dormant while the band found their new footing. My head bobs in time with the beat being kept by Ríó on the drums when an unusual couple of notes are added into the familiar music. On keys, Tristan's fingers introduce a quick riff, adding a special something to the song. I smile.

None of the others do.

Forward momentum ceases as the band stops playing and stares at Tristan with open hostility. Pausing for a moment, he steps back from the keyboard.

“What was that?” Coop’s question is more of an accusation.

Tristan looks down as if his keys played by themselves. I want to jump in and . . . say what? His new riff sounded good with the song, but it definitely wasn’t how Darren played it. If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the past months, it’s Untamed Coaster is having a hard time moving on from his death. “Hard time” is an understatement. As the director of their documentary, though, I’m here to record and not influence. I bite the inside of my cheeks.

Río’s sticks slam the cymbals. “Dude. That’s *not* how it goes.”

Tristan runs his palm over his five o’clock shadow, even though it’s not even two. Without meeting the gaze of his new bandmates, he says, “I know. But I’ve always thought the song was missing a little something.”

007 doesn’t let this statement hang for a half-second. “It’s missing Darren.”

My body tenses. The new keyboardist is playing with fire, but I believe he’s coming from a good place. He honestly wants to improve upon the song, even if it stayed at number one for three months straight. More pressing, though, is he’s messing with Darren’s fingerprints on their last masterpiece. And Darren’s gone.

Silence. Tension ricochets throughout the room. Without moving my head, I confirm the cameras are capturing every second. This moment belongs to Untamed Coaster. As reimagined.

The lead singer exhales with an audible sound. “This is fucking hard. Coop, Río, 007, why don’t you take a break? I want to talk with Tristan.”

The other two nicknames I understood right away. Took me longer to figure out Pierce's—he was nicknamed 007 because Pierce Brosnan was playing James Bond when he was born. Without responding, they simply abandon their instruments and stalk out of the room.

Bennett catches my eye and sighs. He shakes his head and walks over to the new keyboardist. Stopping a few feet away from Tristan, the singer begins, "Buddy. I appreciate what you're trying to do by putting your stamp on the song. Feel free to add to anything else in our playlist. But 'Crushing Blow' is sacred. It's all Darren." He pauses. "007's best friend."

I suck in my breath as the puzzle pieces fall into place. Tristan continues, albeit in a lower tone. "I wasn't trying to—"

Bennett raises his hand. "I get it. It's tough coming into an already formed band. UC's been on top of the charts for the better part of a decade. We need to get back to playing our songs the way our fans know them. You can add notes to our new stuff." He gives a sideways glance toward the camera. "Once we have new material."

Tristan's shoulders deflate. "I get it. But if you would only listen to the slight change I was making—"

"No." The leader singer's interruption is forceful and final. "'Crushing Blow' can't be changed. We haven't been able to play it until now, and we're only doing it for the fans who will expect to hear our last number one. Play it the way it was written. How Darren intended."

The keyboardist stares at the black and white keys. "I can do that."

"Good."

Tristan takes a step closer to the lead singer. Extends his hand. After a moment's pause, Bennett offers his and they shake. Then the vocalist leaves the room to retrieve the rest of the band. The keyboardist focuses his attention on sheet music.

I release my pent-up breath. Not an overwhelming truce, but a truce nonetheless. I make eye contact with the lead

cameraman, who gives me a thumbs up. This will make for a great interlude in the documentary, so long as Untamed Coaster can get it together. The jury's still out on that.

As I'm looking over my notes, the door swings open again. The original four band members re-enter the room, slapping each other on the back. Tristan plays "charge" on the keyboard, and the band laughs. Perhaps this was a turning point?

Bennett takes his place behind the microphone. "Let's play 'Crushing Blow' again. Make Darren proud." River starts with the bass drum and soon the song is back in full force. Tristan doesn't deviate from the original this time.

When they finish the song, the music hangs in the air for a while. Their first full performance of their last number one was technically great, but something was missing. I think it was heart. How will they be able to recapture the magic? *Not my job*. I'm here to document how the band is taking strides to return to the stage following the death of one of their own. Not offer advice. Besides, what do I know about their craft anyway?

I'm wrung out and want this rehearsal to end, yet it continues. No wonder they used to be known as one of the most hard-working bands in the industry. They play 'Crushing Blow' at least two dozen more times, until the pain surrounding it isn't so, well, crushing.

At five o'clock, 007 takes off his bass and places it on the stand. "Guys. I'm done. If I have to strum another C major, I'm gonna puke."

Coop plucks the strap of his electric guitar. "I could be persuaded to go out for a beer."

Río jumps in. "Or ten." He performs a drum roll, ending with his sticks flipping around his fingers and pointing at the lead singer.

From the mic, Bennett laughs. "Sounds good." He cranes his neck toward Tristan. "You in?"

“You had me at beer.” Looking pleased to have been invited, he shuts down the electric keyboard.

With an upbeat “See you tomorrow!” the five men plus their manager leave me and the camera crew in their quest to quench their thirst.

Today was the best day of filming we’ve had. Perhaps they’ll actually be ready for the party in a month? Guess it doesn’t matter either way. We’ve been hired to capture their progress, not to pass judgment.

I collect my notes while the crew stashes their equipment in the corner. Following our goodnights, I do the one thing I’ve been avoiding all day. Turn on my phone and check my texts. Mom. Jackie. Paige. Gary. Ignoring the rest, I click on his.

Glad you’re back on this coast. Check in after you wrap today. I’ll be waiting.

Gary took me under his wing and showed me the ropes before I headed out for the West Coast. Given my body’s still on California time, I have enough energy to catch up with him tonight. I send him a quick thumbs up emoji.

Once we’re all packed up, the crew and I exit the rehearsal building. Turning away from them, I walk the ten blocks to DocuStudios’ offices. Wanting to be prepared for meeting my boss, I stop in my office and dump my notebooks onto the desk. I’m nothing but meticulous, as I’m often reminded by the crew. My notes have notes.

I review everything I’ve jotted down over the months, from our initial meeting to today’s session where they finally were able to play their biggest hit. For their fans’ sake, I hope they’re able to get it together. Not to mention for Moray Distillery, which hired them to headline their launch party. No pressure, right? No wonder they snapped today.

Ready for the meeting, I enter Gary's office and walk toward a chair facing his desk, which is covered with piles and piles of papers. He's been in the industry for longer than I've been alive. He has great insights and offers even more amazing advice.

The grey-haired man stands. "Let's sit over there." He points toward an empty round table at the windows. Off to the side, his television plays an entertainment channel. Once we've settled in, he asks, "How's it going with Untamed Coaster?"

Softball. I open a red notebook, which is reserved for his wisdom. "Today was a breakthrough of sorts. They actually managed to play their last hit, the one Darren wrote."

He rolls a Mont Blanc pen on the top of the table. "That's good. Only took them five months. Other bands might never recover." His wise blue eyes study me. "How did it sound?"

"Good." I push my hair off my face as I relate the first time they tried. "They got better the more times they practiced it. The first time, though." I shake my head. "I'm glad our cameras captured it. I think this will be a pivotal point in the documentary."

"They mess up?"

"Not really. The new keyboardist added a few extra notes that caught everyone off guard." I remember Tristan's change. "It was only a couple of additions but stopped practice dead."

Gary leans forward, abandoning his pen on the table. "Did they fight?"

"Nothing so dramatic. His riff didn't land well, but they talked it out. Rather, Bennett and Tristan did, while the rest took a walk."

He presses back against his chair, stroking his mustache. "So Bennett is the true ringleader, as I suspected. The others fell in line once he hashed it out with Tristan, I take it?"

"Yeah."

He nods. “You’ve been working with them for months. What slant do you want to take with the rockumentary?”

This is the question I feared the most. I have no idea where I’m going with this, other than wanting to present the real Untamed Coaster. “I’m not sure yet. I certainly can show footage of them working together and getting used to the new dynamics.” Remembering how Tristan tried to put his own slant on today’s song, I wonder how long his full integration will truly take. A lot longer than the remaining month I’m filming, I fear.

“Give it a little more time, and I bet a theme will appear. Although, if things continue this way, it may be more of a crash and burn.” His fingers play over his mustache. “Might play better in theaters.”

I’ve had enough of explosions to last a lifetime. I don’t want this group to be another casualty, even if they implode from within rather than from external forces. “I’m rooting for them.”

Our conversation veers into lighting and blocking and locations as I pull up today’s dailies sent to me by the camera crew. “I see what you mean about missing a spark. The music’s there, just not the ‘it’ factor.” He rolls his pen again. “I know you’re there to document rather than direct, but what do you think about suggesting a slight change? The band’s been rehearsing alone for months. Maybe things would loosen up if they got in front of a crowd? At a small venue?”

I consider his proposal. “Perhaps. While they sound pretty good, I can tell they’re not in the same groove as before. And if I can discern that, true fans will notice too.” I shrug. “I’ll suggest it to their manager tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

I close my red notebook. “We flew in late last night and I crashed for six hours before we met up today. My bed’s calling me.” On tired feet, I stand. “I’ll keep in touch about the filming.”

He chuckles. “Welcome to the life of a documentary director. You got this.”

His faith in me settles in my bones. Never having a dependable father figure in my life, I eat up his approval. With a cheery wave, I scoot out of his office, gather my things, and hit the New York City streets. I inhale, soaking up the walking culture so anathema in LA. On my way home, I stop by my favorite Thai place and pick up some Pad Thai. Tonight, it’s me, the TV, and takeout.

After collecting my mail, I walk into my apartment. Leaving my shoes at the door, I put my bag onto the dining room table and go into my bedroom to change into some leggings and a long tunic top. Wearing my pink bunny slippers, I return to the kitchen and retrieve a plate on which I pile a mess of the noodle dish. Using the chopsticks not as utensils but rather to secure my hair in a messy bun, I walk over to the sofa and plop down. What a day. Week. Month. Months, plural.

If only I had someone here as company. Ha! When has adding a man to the mix ever worked out for me or my family? Look at Ma. She and Daddy claimed to be in love, and even appeared to be that way when I was growing up. Sort of. When he showed up. He always chose to stay with his *other* family. Never stepped up and claimed us as his own too. It’s a miracle I ever became friends with my sister Paige. Well, half-sister.

A smile plays around my lips as I remember attending her wedding before heading out to LA. I saw something between her and Jesse right from the start of “New York Views,” even before they did. The world will never know of their more intimate moments caught by the “hidden” cameras during the taping. Even when they turned us down to take over the winner’s show on *Renovation TV*, I never regretted deleting the sexy footage. It showed them happy and intimate and free, scenes not for strangers’ eyes.

Ah, to be able to live a life so open like Paige and Jesse’s, unfettered from lies surrounding me from day one. I learned from the start about the weight of misdirections, having been

hidden from Daddy's other family until recently. From the world, however, is a different story. On this I agree with Daddy—unlike Ma, who fought with him over this topic constantly—I never saw an upside in bringing my connection to the Hansens public. Daddy told me not to tell others because if they knew, they'd look at me differently. Given his incarceration, I couldn't agree more.

I shovel some Pad Thai into my mouth, my gaze skimming to my plants. Since my "plant sitter" last came a week ago, they're droopy. *I get it.* Getting to my feet, I empty the contents of my water bottle into them and toss the empty into the recycle bin. Eating another few bites of my meal, I save the rest for later. Time for some R&R. I click into my digital library and select a wonderful movie by my absolute favorite director, Alfred Hitchcock. Don't care if the movie's in black and white. His stories carry the day.

Before I turn it on, I pour myself a glass of red zinfandel and take a sip, allowing the tingles to soothe my soul. In the living room, I hit play and *Rear Window* fills the screen. Soon I'm absorbed in Grace Kelly's performance. Before she became a princess, she was a fantastic actor.

All of a sudden, my sofa shakes. Bounces is more like it. As if a hurricane pulsates through its springs. Assuming sofas have springs. And I know exactly what is playing since I heard it over a dozen times today—"Crushing Blow." What the hell?

I stare at the floor, from where the offending noise emanates. Pausing the movie, I go into the closet and pick up a broom and bang it with three satisfying thuds. The music continues as loud as ever. In frustration, I groan and stomp. Considering I'm in my slippers, this makes no difference either.

Oblivious to my torment, Untamed Coaster continues wailing their massive hit. In my ear, I hear Tristan's added flourish, thinking he's right and it does add to the song. But whatever. Not my fight. However, this music madness *is*.

Not bothering to put on my shoes, I march down the stairs and stop outside the apartment below mine. Never been here

before, but I don't care so long as the band at the center of my work life continues to blare.

I curl my hand into a fist and bang on the offending door—which I, myself, can barely hear over Bennett's voice, dammit.

I pound again and receive the same no response. Should I go down and buzz the intercom? If steam could billow out my ears, it would.

Deciding to give it one final try, I beat on the door for all my worth. I wait a minute and am rewarded when the door handle turns. Finally.

The music intensifies as the door opens. Standing before me is a ginger-headed man with a trimmed beard, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. Water droplets run from his wet head down his chiseled chest. Bright blue eyes skim me from head to toe. With a deep Scottish accent, he holds up his wallet. "Where's my pizza?"

Great. Not only do I have to deal with Untamed Coaster literally moving me off my sofa, now I have a wet Jamie Frasier living beneath me. Where's my stone to time travel out of here?

Chapter 2

Callum

A vaguely familiar lassie, who's about four inches shorter than me and appears about my age, stomps her pink slippered foot. "I don't know anything about your stupid pizza. I live right above you. All I'm trying to do is decompress following long months at work, but can't due to your loud, booming music. Turn it down." Before I can form a response, she's stormed into the stairwell.

What. The. Fuck?

I look around the empty hallway to ensure my pizza delivery person isn't cowering around the corner. Confirmed I'm still pizzaless, I return into my apartment, dump my wallet on the kitchen island, and do what the crazy woman said—turn down the volume on my favorite band.

The lass needs a stern talking-to. My music wasn't even blaring. Plus, it's Untamed Coaster, who deserves to be played loud and proud. I re-enter the bathroom and dump my towel on the toilet seat. Within seconds I shunt the unplanned visit into the far recesses of my mind as the water flows over my body again. Streams swirl down the drain giving me an unwanted reminder of the unending problems at Moray Distillery.

First, the United States government is still wrangling with us over the label copyright.

Second, the contractors are taking their sweet time finishing the building.

Third, invitations to the launch are supposed to go out this week and we're still waiting for the printer.

Fourth, the guest list has to be finalized.

Fifth, menu selections are due to the caterer.

All this has to be accomplished within a month. *No pressure.*

I was in secondary school when my father expanded the distillery across Europe, but he didn't have any of these problems. I remember him mentioning a couple of tiny hurdles when he started in Paris, but soon he had the Parisians drinking Moray like fish. How many hiccups did he encounter? If only these issues could be considered hiccups.

The one article I've been trying to squelch all day decides now's the time to reassert itself. *Because why not?* My school "chum" Ewan Ferguson's recent big win at a rival whisky distributor made front-page headlines in the industry magazine. He came over to America a couple weeks after I arrived here five months ago, and is making a splash with Michael's Malt's newest blend. Doesn't matter that he's working for a well-established United States brand or he's touting a blend. He still scored a victory. I can hear him gloating, even if we haven't crossed paths in New York City. *Yet.* It's just a matter of time.

My launch has to score. It has to.

Shutting off the water, I examine my reflection in the mirror. My beard doesn't need a trim, so I rub the towel over my hair. After tossing the wet terrycloth into the hamper, I put on my black pants—or boxer briefs as they call them here in America—and add a pair of grey sweats. Mam's affirmation plays on repeat: *I am doing my best, and my best will succeed.* Shockingly, I feel a wee bit better. I throw on a Dons shirt—the nickname for Aberdeen Football Club, whom I've rooted for forever. Except for having whisky in my blood, I might have tried out for them.

As I walk into the living room, a knock sounds. "Better be my pizza."

I open the door and am greeted with a box containing the most delish ambrosia on earth. After paying, remembering the American tradition of also tipping the delivery guy, I put the box on the kitchen island and inhale. My mouth waters. I don't even bother to get a plate, rather stuff a gooey slice with extra cheese and pepperoni into my mouth.

“Crushing Blow” plays. When Darren shockingly died last year, I feared the band would break up. But they found a replacement and are back together . . . and will be playing at my launch. When the prospect of getting entertainment for the event was broached, they were the only band I wanted. At the time, though, only a rumor was circulating about them looking for a new keyboardist. Despite this, I reached out to Platinum Records and the next thing I knew, we had a signed contract.

UC's social media is replete with teasers and tidbits about how it's going. They're thrilled with this new keyboardist, Tristan Lambert, and have been jamming to prepare for their return to the stage. All of which is being documented by a film crew. Their first performance is going to be at my launch. Again, no pressure. I'm not only introducing my whisky to a whole new demographic, but also reigniting the band's career.

The ping of an email causes me to snag my mobile. It's from Dadaidh. Swallowing the final piece of this slice, I wipe my hands on a paper towel while doing a quick time difference calculation. It's around one in the morning at home—what's keeping my father awake? So many possibilities. I click to open the message.

Son, I woke up from a dream about how hard you're working in New York City to bring Moray Distillery to America. I'm so proud of all your hard work. I'm sure your great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, and grandfather are joining me from above to cheer for your work to introduce the family business to another continent. Lang may yer lum reek!

I translate my Da's final words from Scottish Gaelic—*I wish you good luck and good fortune for the future*. His email is like pouring salt on an open wound. I want to live up to his praise but know I'm failing. I square my shoulders. No. The launch is going to be epic and will propel Moray Whisky onto all the shelves across this new nation. Not wanting to disturb him at such an early hour, I draft a quick message of thanks and set it to send seven hours in the future.

Unsettled, I scoop up another slice of pizza. At least here, no one's vying for the title of Mrs. Moray Whisky. Truth be told, no one outside of the company here knows I'm heir to the distillery, and I want to keep it this way. Don't need to add another gold digger to my list of worries. Been there, done that, bought the medium Prada Nappa-leather tote bag with topstitching.

Fiona. I would've done anything for the lass, and she ken it. Took advantage in ways I could only understand in hindsight. My parents and friends all warned me off her, but it took her haranguing me for weeks over a designer gown she "had to have" to wake me up. Really, it was her appalling comment about how "a MacMurray must set certain standards to which others merely aspire." I dumped her opportunist arse and haven't had any desire to find a full-time girlfriend since.

The initial beats of "Upside Down," UC's first number one, start and I turn up the volume on this hard-pounding beat. Within seconds, though, thumping from the ceiling catches my attention. Seriously? It's not loud.

The need to clear the air with my above neighbor urges me to turn off my music and close the pizza box. I've only been in New York City for five months and can't afford to make any enemies. All I need is some flashy tabloid story to knock the brand off a (shaky) positive trajectory before we even launch.

After slipping into my trainers, I jog up the stairs and stand at her door, complete with a welcome mat saying, "Hello from the Other Side." Guess she has a sense of humor. Sort of.

Balancing the pizza in one hand, I ring the bell and it echoes throughout the apartment. Her eye appears large in the

peephole, followed by the telltale sounds of the lock opening. The door widens a fraction and my cranky neighbor appears, still in her slippers. “At least you’re wearing clothes.”

My hackles raise. I came up here to clear the air. “What’s your problem? You dinnae have to bang on your floor, I wasnae playing my music loudly.”

“I hear Untamed Coaster all dammed day and I don’t need to hear it all night too.”

Some of the frustration in her voice penetrates, even though I don’t understand her meaning. We stare at each other for a long moment before I hold up the pizza box. “We got off on the wrong foot. Peace offering?”

She glances from me to the box. I’m about to say forget it and return downstairs when the door swings open wider. Is she inviting me in?

The brown-haired woman sighs. “Please put it on the island.”

With a quick nod, I stride into her apartment, which is an exact replica of mine. Except for her furnishings, which are one hundred percent cosmopolitan to my random finds. Unlike in my flat, however, the television plays something in black and white. Who, under sixty, watches old programmes? The snick of the door closing confirms I’m now trapped in this crazy lassie’s apartment. Better do something to realign this cask before we have to toss the liquid inside.

I place the box down as instructed and extend my hand. “Halò. I’m Callum MacMurray. I’m in this fair city by way of Elgin, Scotland.”

Her cheek inflates. “I’m Quinn Walker, from New York City by way of New Jersey.” She removes what appear to be chopsticks from the back of her head and smooths her long, dark hair. Her fingers appear too dainty for a lass her height, considering she’s only a couple of inches shorter than me. We shake, the touch of her smooth skin skittering throughout my nervous system. *What’s that?*

Ignoring my weird reaction, I say, “Untamed Coaster has been my favorite band since they came out of the gate. Sorry if you think I got carried away with the volume. I’m stoked because they’re going to be playing at my company’s launch next month.”

Quinn places two dinner plates on the island, together with napkins. She opens the box and slides the two remaining pieces onto them. “You work for Moray Distillery?”

I adjust my posture so my shoulders are lowered and my spine is straighter. We haven’t launched yet. Is word about our whisky already getting out? “I do. How do you know about the company?” No need to correct her about my ties to the distillery.

She nibbles on the pizza. “Well, I don’t really.” Three quarters of the pizza drops on her plate and she wipes her hand with the napkins. “I’m directing a documentary about Untamed Coaster, actually. They’re practicing for the party and I hear their music all day. After five months, we just flew in from LA yesterday. Home is my safe haven from the band.”

Her explanation enters through my ears and lodges deep in my soul. She knows my favorite band personally? I bet she has the skinny on how they’re welcoming the new guy. *Wait. A. Minute.* I snap my fingers. “I knew you looked familiar! I’ve seen you on their social media posts talking about the documentary. You have my dream job, following Bennett, Río, Coop, 007, and Tristan around as they practice their songs. What’s their process like? Has it changed since Darren—” I pause to perform the sign of the cross and mumble “God rest his soul.” My gaze meets her brown one. “I have so many questions.”

Quinn’s lips rise. “They’re a hard-working band, for sure. I think you’ll enjoy them at the party.” Clearing her throat, she continues, “I’m honestly shocked you know about the documentary.”

“Big news in the UC community.”

Her lips dance at my use of the band’s nickname. “Would you like something to drink, Callum MacMurray? I have

wine.”

Looks like we’ve reached some sort of truce. While whisky is my preferred drink, of course, I’ve been known to enjoy the elixir of grapes. “Sounds nice.”

Chapter 3

Quinn

I pass *Callum* a glass of red zinfandel and lead him into the living room. Since he sits on the chair, I take my usual spot on the sofa. Remote in hand, I point it at the television. “*Rear Window* is one of my favorite movies. Have you seen it?”

“I huvnae.”

Huvnae? I sound out the word and realize he said he has not. This guy’s Scottish brogue is thick. Clicking the set off, I say, “It’s an American classic. You should watch it sometime.”

He nods, takes a sip of his wine, and swirls the liquid in his glass. “I’m more of a sci-fi lad myself.”

I settle into the sofa. “Can’t say I’ve seen too many of them. I’m more of a Golden Age of Hollywood person. Alfred Hitchcock is my hero—he was a genius, in my opinion.”

The corners of his blue eyes crinkle as he smiles. “Lucas, Spielberg, Scott, and Nolan are fantastic. Have you seen the original *Star Wars*? Absolutely brilliant.”

I trace the rim of my glass. “Can’t say as I have.”

“Sounds like we have some movie education to teach each other.”

Never considered this before. Classic movies are classic for a reason. Sci-fi is so . . . nerdy. But I don’t want to offend *Outlander*. “Sounds like.”

His full-fledged smile reaches into my chest and burrows into my empty crevices. “May I ask you a question?” When

my head tilts, he adds, “About UC.”

The buzz in my body, which began with our handshake and was cemented by his smile, dissipates into the ether. Of course he’s interested in me because I know his idols. Toss aside he’s the only non-family member to have knocked on my door since I moved in here three years ago, he isn’t here to be neighborly or friendly. He wants something from me. At least he’s honest about his curiosity. I temper my voice. “Sure.”

“The media is portraying Tristan as being embraced with open arms by the rest of the band. Is this true? I mean, I want it to be true, but it seems to me it has to be hard for them. Bennett, Ríó, Coop, and 007 have been together for so long, how can they not miss their old chum? Especially given the way he died.”

His insightful question causes me to reach for my wine. He’s a big fan, and I don’t want to burst his bubble that the transition has been anything but easy. Still, I never lie—given my upbringing, it’s against my religion. I choose my words with care. “The band is working on coming together. Your thoughts echo most fans’, and the band is well aware of the weight of these expectations. By your company’s party, they’ll be a changed version of Untamed Coaster, but one you should appreciate.”

His head bobs. “I understand. Thanks for being honest with me. I’m sure they’ll add a certain aura of excitement to the company’s big launch here in the United States.”

It’s my turn to find out a bit more about this oversized Scot sitting in my living room. “Have you been working with Moray Distillery long? Since you’re from Scotland and all.”

Callum tugs on his ear. “Aye, Scotland flows through my veins. I’ve grown up knowing about all the great distilleries in my country, Moray included. We always cheer when one of our own jumps the pond and makes a splash in the New World.”

I chuckle. “The New World? Well, us freedom lovers do enjoy our whisky too.”

He joins me with a laugh that's free, inviting me to trust him, which isn't something I do often. Or ever. Not going to be sharing any secrets with this fanboy, no matter how open he appears. "Glad to hear it. Hope your shelves have room for one more."

"I'm sure we do."

He takes a sip of his wine. "I know the company's going all out for the launch. Besides UC, they're inviting a ton of press and have hired one of New York City's leading caterers." His shoulders straighten. "I've been working on the invitations, which are going out this week."

He must be in their marketing department. "Sounds like it'll be a big blowout." I hope UC is up for the task. Judging from how rehearsals have been going, this is a fifty-fifty proposition. But the band seems to want to come together and today was a breakthrough of sorts. I only hope the guys can keep the momentum.

Callum rubs his palms against his thick thighs. "I don't want to overstay my welcome. Would you be okay exchanging phone numbers, so you don't have to run down the stairs or bang on the floor if you want me to turn down my music?"

This has to be the smoothest ask for my phone number ever—and he's not giving off user vibes like the other UC fans I've met over the course of the last months. How can I refuse? I pick up my cell. "Sure thing." I enter his digits and call his phone.

"It's been a pleasure, Quinn Walker." He gets to his feet. "I'll be on my way. Thanks for the wine and have a good evening."

I close the door behind him. His scent lingers in my apartment as I bring our glasses into the kitchen, picking out earthy tones combined with a hint of whisky. How I imagine Scotland would smell.

Shaking my head, I fill the dishwasher and toss the bits of pizza into the garbage. As a peace offering, the Scot did pretty good.

Whatever. Our paths probably won't cross again.

Chapter 4

Callum

The week since I met my upstairs neighbor flew by in a blur. With relief, I signed off on both the invitations and guest list and handed them over to my director of marketing to distribute.

The construction manager points to the cask system in our showroom. “I’m double-checking with you that this set up meets your requirements. We followed the scheme to the letter.”

I examine his handiwork. “For someone who hasn’t done much by way of whisky distilleries, I have to hand it to you. These look perfect.”

The manager stands tall. “Thanks, sir. We wanted to do this right by you.”

Walking around the showroom designed to hold the casks of whisky, I confirm my father will be pleased. “These look like they were made in Scotland.” Can’t ask for a higher compliment. I extend my hand. “Thank you.”

This piece was the only outstanding item before we can get the last seal of approval on our building from the city. Legal informed me yesterday that the copyright issues have been resolved. Looks like our launch is a go. I close my eyes and send a quick prayer of thanks to my ancestors for watching over this project.

We make our way into the office where I sign off on the construction manager’s paperwork and write his check. When

he leaves, I call the city and schedule a final inspection—the last piece of New York City construction’s intricate puzzle.

Sitting in my chair, I swivel to the wall of windows and stare at the people scurrying below. This city is so unlike my experience in Scotland’s rugged northeast. Nary a sheep or Highland cow (pronounced “coo” to the uninitiated) to be found here. A pang of longing darts through me.

The people in America don’t seem to place a high value on heritage the way we do in Scotland. To be fair, I haven’t shared my lineage with anyone outside the company, but no one has asked, either. Unlike at home—when you meet someone, it’s customary to share your lineage. Americans want to know what *you* have accomplished. I like that. It’s refreshing.

“Knock, knock.” My executive assistant Angus breezes into my office. His family has worked at Moray Distillery for the past fifty years, and we’ve grown up together, almost like brothers. When this “opportunity” fell into my lap, he jumped on the chance to come to America with me. “Got the mail, your messages, and updates from HQ.”

“Thanks.” I swivel my chair in his direction. “Anything I need to handle?”

“I think you have everything pretty well wrapped up.” He drops a stack of papers on top of my desk. “Any plans for the weekend?”

“I have a big date with the laundry room in my building tonight. Otherwise, I’m looking forward to working out and relaxing.” I sort through the messages. For once, nothing pressing demands my attention.

Angus sits in a guest chair facing my desk. “Sounds like a quiet weekend for you. Good. You’ve been working way too hard, if you ask me.”

“Hazards of opening a new branch here in America.” His observation about my life leads me to believe he’s hiding something. It’s no secret he’s a wee soft on the lassies—his tastes only have grown since we’ve been in New York City.

Might as well get this over with. “How about you? Got a hot date lined up?”

He crosses his leg over his knee. “As a matter of fact, I do. If you’re a tad bored Saturday night, join me at this club in the Upper West I heard about. There will be live music and plenty of hot lasses to choose from. Might help you exorcise some of this work from your system.”

I roll my eyes. “No, thanks. Don’t have the time to move my eyes from the prize. The launch is happening in three weeks, and it has to be a success.”

“With all you’ve prepared for it, there’s no other option. Pretty soon we’ll be able to play football again.” He stands. “Call me if you change your mind.”

“Thanks for the invite,” I call to his retreating back. He means well, but now isn’t the time for me to indulge. Once this launch is over, though, I’ll have time to unleash the appetite I’ve suppressed. Need to quench my thirst with something other than whisky and my fist. If the gold diggers in my life have taught me anything, it’s to have fun without letting them get any hooks into me.

I focus on work for a few more hours while everyone empties out of the building. Shoving paperwork into my bag, I do a walk-around to ensure everything’s in good order before locking up the distillery and returning to my apartment.

After a grueling workout in the building’s gym with my neighbor Jacob, I refuse his invitation to join him at a local bar and take a much-needed shower. Clean again, I open my dresser and pull out my final clean shirt. Guess I can’t put it off any longer. Time to do what I told Angus I was going to do—laundry. I’ve tried this exactly once and lasted ten minutes before giving up and hiring a service. It’s time to reclaim this for myself.

I shrug into the clean Dons shirt and a pair of jeans, gather my dirty clothes into an oversized garbage bag, and trudge down to the building’s laundry room. Even though it’s located in the basement, someone painted a happy mural on the concrete walls, with lots of primary colors.

Nice try.

Even painted butterflies cannae cheer me up.

I walk in and place the bag on top of the tabletop, thankful it's Friday and no one else is in here. One of the machines is running, though. Hopefully the owner will show up after I've figured out how to make these appliances work.

Mobile in hand, I follow the directions helpfully provided by Google. Step One: Sort the clothes. Okay, I've got this. I upend the bag and sort my clothes into darks, whites, and colors.

The washing machine that was running when I got here stops. I check, but I'm still alone. Whew.

Step Two: Put the sorted bundle of clothes into a washing machine and pour in the laundry detergent. Seems easy enough. I dump the three bundles into three of the washing machines and go to the dispenser to purchase detergent.

Pods? Where's the liquid stuff? I put in my credit card and receive a pack of three pods. The directions are not in English. Great.

Behind me, someone shuffles into the room and opens the lid to the washing machine that ended not long ago. Swallowing my pride, I turn to ask how to use these contraptions when my upstairs neighbor comes into focus. Quinn looks adorable in her leggings and long shirt. The return of her pink bunny slippers completes the outfit, though.

“Hey, Flopsy.”

She startles and turns around, holding wet clothing. “Oh, Callum. I didn't see you there.” She tilts her head. “What did you call me?”

I grin and stare at her feet. “Flopsy. My favorite Beatrix Potter character growing up.”

She returns my smile. “Well, I guess I can't quibble with your favorite childhood story.” She returns her attention to her laundry as I position myself next to the three washers containing my clothes. When she turns on the dryer and places

her laundry basket on top of the machine, I give her a lopsided smile. “Hey. Could you lend me a hand?”

She’s going to think I’m a total prat. Since I have no idea how to use these blasted machines, I guess it’s not far from the mark. To be fair, I never had to handle this when I lived at home.

“Sure thing. What’s up?” She approaches and her fruity scent swirls around me. Raspberries and gardenias, if I’m not mistaken.

Shaking such fanciful notions out of my head, I hold out my palm filled with the pod thingies. “Do you know how to use these? The directions say to pour the detergent on top of the clothes, but don’t mention anything about how to use pods.”

I tried my best not to sound clueless, yet I brace myself for her admonishment. Or at least derision. I’m shocked when she replies, “Sure thing. I was confused when these came out as well.” She shows me where to place them and helps me turn on the three machines. Soon, all four of the appliances in the room hum.

“Wow. You’re a real expert.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear. “That’s me. A laundry wizard.” She hops on top of the table, her feet—adorned with her adorable pink slippers—dangling.

Not wanting to encroach on her space but interested in learning more about her and maybe hearing a couple of tidbits about UC, I lean against the table a few feet away. “So, besides washing clothes, what other hidden talents do you have?”

“I can tell you every Hitchcock film, who was in it, and what awards it won.”

I nod. “Impressive. You really are his biggest fan.”

Her shoulder rises and falls. “It’s a gift.” She extends her right foot and rotates her ankle. “How about you? What’s your superpower?”

Without hesitation, I point to my shirt. “If I didn’t get into whisky, I would be playing football. The Dons are my team.” I glance at her. “You call it soccer here. Love the sport.”

“I don’t know them.” She gives me a lopsided smile. “I do know a lot of people who are into it though. It’s been gaining popularity in recent years. Did you play in school?”

“I did. All the way through university.” I shove my hands into my back pockets. “Still play when I’m at home, but it’s been too cold here. Obviously.” Even if the weather were cooperating, I have way too much on my plate to join a league. The launch has to go off without a hitch and put Moray Distillery on the map.

“What position did you play?”

“I was a striker.”

She blanches. “Sounds scary.” Shaking her head, she says, “I have to admit, I don’t really know too much about soccer. Maybe you can explain a game to me one day.”

Is she hinting at wanting to spend time together? She seems like the least likely gold digger I’ve ever met. Lives in her own apartment and is directing a kickass documentary, yet my walls remain unscalable. Still, something about this lass intrigues me unlike anyone I’ve met in a very long time. “I’d like that. When the season starts, maybe we can go to a pub and watch a game together.”

Pink stains her cheeks. “Yeah. Maybe.” She flips her ankle, and her slipper falls to the floor.

Bending down, I pick it up and slide it back on her foot. “Can’t be losing your Flopsy slippers.” She giggles, a cute sound. “How is my favorite band doing?”

The smile on her face falls off, causing my stomach to tighten. Not only because I love their music, but due to the fact UC is headlining my whisky launch. They need to be in top shape. *Please have nothing bad to report.*

“They’re doing well.” Her tone conveys a conflict, so I keep my mouth shut. Soon, she taps her thumb against her thigh. “Can I be honest with you?” Her light brown eyes meet

mine and I dip my head. “It’s been a rough week. It’s like they take one step forward and two back. When they play, the music sounds great, don’t get me wrong. It’s just there’s no . . . spark.” She shakes her head.

I mull over her comment. “Do you mean they play all the right notes but without any feeling behind it?”

She snaps her fingers. “Yes. I can’t say they don’t sound good, ‘cause they do. I only wish they were playing with their hearts instead of their heads. And I think they all know it, too. Today, Bennett said—”

She stops talking as if she’s giving away a royal secret.

I wait, but she doesn’t continue. While loving her insights, and hoping for the best for UC, I won’t prod. “I’m sure you’re capturing every nuance for your film. Fans like me are going to love watching how they evolve, even if it’s into a different sound.”

She bites her bottom lip. “I hope you’re right. I don’t want them to sound like a cover band of Untamed Coaster, if that makes any sense.”

“I’m sure they’ll come together. They still have a few more weeks to work out the kinks. Sounds like they need to find out who they are today as compared with last year. Maybe they need some fresh air to kick-start their new beginning?”

I don’t want a poor imitation of the band to play at our launch either. I want one of the best bands on the planet to be back, encouraging buyers to purchase our label as well as their records. On a personal note, I want more music from the lads. I stand taller. I was able to get the building completed relatively on time and the launch is more or less progressing as expected. UC will also rise to the occasion. They have to.

The buzzer for her dryer sounds and she hops off the table. I’d offer to help her but don’t think she wants me folding her knickers. Besides, she loads all her clothes into the laundry basket instead of folding them.

Finished, she places the basket on top of the table she abandoned as my washing machines go off. Tucking her hair

behind her ear, she offers to help me move everything over to the dryers. Relief surges through my body. She can show me how to do this without making me feel less than.

I wink. “I appreciate your expert help.”

Her response is a sweet giggle and soon all of my clothes are transferred into the dryers. Her bunny slippers take her to the table. Palms closing around the handles of her laundry basket, she picks it up. “I’m glad I ran into you, Callum MacMurray. Best Friday evening I’ve had in a long while.”

“I’m happy too, lassie. See you around.” She walks toward the door, and I add, “And I’ll make sure to keep my music low.”

With sass, she quips, “You do that!”

Alone in the laundry room, I slide onto the table she vacated. Flopsy didn’t comment on my clear inability to do laundry. She allowed me a peek into her work, even if it isn’t spelling good news for either Moray Distillery or me personally as a fan. If I were looking to meet someone, she’d be a good contender.

But I’m not.

Chapter 5

Quinn

My alarm goes off and I smash the snooze button. Much more satisfying to have an actual clock than having to speak out loud to Alexa like in LA.

I turn over and try to recapture my dream about a hot Scot wearing a kilt, taking me horseback riding by a loch. Of course, I've never been on a horse before. Or anywhere near a loch. Or even seen a man in a kilt other than cops playing bagpipes in a parade. Yet, this ginger-haired man with a trimmed beard and honesty blazing from his gorgeous blue eyes makes me feel safe.

When my alarm sounds again, I give up hope of getting back to sleep and shove the blankets down my body. Callum MacMurray is too sexy for his own good. *Bet he knows how to handle a horse.* Rolling out of bed, I begin my morning ritual, secure in the knowledge the Scotsman living one floor below has no interest in me at all. Besides, he works for Moray Distillery and my guess is once the launch party is over in a few weeks he'll return to Scotland. Getting entangled with such a short-timer does have its allure, though, considering my job is all-consuming. Callum doesn't have any messy strings.

I select one of the sweaters I washed last Friday, remembering my encounter with the real man who starred in my dream. A smirk touches my lips. He was clueless about how to wash clothes but put up a valiant effort to hide it. I had no desire to make him feel embarrassed about his lack of knowledge. If I've learned anything from my experiences with

Paige and the whole Hansen family, it's the need to be humble is more valuable than putting someone down.

Eating my toast, I go through my messages to prepare for the day. Gary's email is the last one. "Reviewed your notes and the footage you sent. Agreed that you're capturing the band's struggles to regain their spark. Still think they'd do well in playing in front of people before the launch party. Had a messenger deliver my comments to your apartment building. Contact me when you've reviewed."

His suggestion plays on repeat. He isn't wrong, but I'm afraid if they perform live, they may not get the feedback they need. Still, maybe I should suggest it to their manager. I put my dishes into the dishwasher and set it to run. Scooping up my black Prada bag filled with notes, I put on my coat and head to the mailroom.

After I retrieve my boss's package from the desk, I go to my mailbox since I haven't checked my mail in a couple of days. Bending down, I open it and grab the mail. Junk. Junk. Junk. I rise up, another piece of junk in my hand.

Bam.

I yell, "Ouch!" as I connect with a wall. Which so happens to put its arms on my person. "Are you alright, lassie?"

I know this voice. Those hands were around me in my dream. "Callum?" I lift my eyes and meet his blue ones exuding concern. "I'm fine. I didn't see you there."

He chuckles and rubs his hands up and down my arms. "I wasnae creeping up on you, Flopsy."

I take a step back to get away from his spell. Using my toe, I point to my mailbox. "My box is down there. I'll have to be more careful when I stand up from now on." I lift my mail. "All junk anyway."

"Aye, usually is. But sometimes there's something good."

Says the man who probably gets care packages from his girlfriend at home. I nod. "Have a good one." Turning, I leave the Scot, his accent, and his cologne behind to make my way to the rehearsal space.

When I arrive, Untamed Coaster is playing their first hit, “Upside Down.” I sit at the desk and review Gary’s notes while listening to the band. He repeats his recommendation to play in front of an audience.

Bennett holds up his hand. “Guys, guys. The sound’s there, we’re hitting all the right notes, but we’re not playing the shit out of the song. You hear me?”

Río bangs on his drum set a couple of beats.

I make my way into the room and approach their manager. “Hey, Luke. How’s it going?”

His jaw’s set tight. “They’re pretty frustrated today.”

I’m the director of the rockumentary, not supposed to insert myself into their drama. Still, a little nudge to the manager can’t hurt, right? Gary’s idea doesn’t sit quite right, but it’s a start. “Do you think performing in front of a small crowd would help them?”

He shakes his head. “No. They’re not ready for that. This gig hanging over their heads is hard enough on them.” He rakes his hands through his hair. “I’ve been thinking they need to do a total one-eighty, though. Maybe send them to an amusement park. You know, ride the coasters and stuff like when they were kids. Bonding time.”

Now the door’s open, I walk through. “I like the idea of them getting out of the rehearsal space. Not sure an amusement park would be good, though, considering the original members worked together at one. Might make Tristan feel more of an outsider.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” We listen as the band begins another lackluster performance. “But this can’t go on much longer. I think the guys are going to blow a gasket.” He points to Coop, whose face and neck are turning red.

My heart hurts for them. “Why don’t you ask what they want to do besides rehearse. They may surprise you.”

“Good idea. Thanks, Quinn. I’m sure your crew will capture whatever it is they decide to do.”

I smile. “That’s our job.”

Luke approaches the band. “Hey, let’s take a break. New York City is in our backyard and I bet you haven’t seen any square foot of it other than here and bars. What do you think about checking out some sights? I could set up a tour for you. Anything you’d like to see?”

Gotta hand it to their manager. He has their backs. Electricity rips throughout the room with his suggestion—the spark that’s been missing this entire time. The guys spout landmark names of places they’d like to visit, from the Statue of Liberty to the Empire State Building to the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. Since it’s too cold, they rule out Central Park, but fixate on something with sports. After a while, they land on Chelsea Piers.

Where my half-brother, Theo, plays ice hockey.

I’ve only met him at Paige’s wedding, and he was nice enough, but don’t fancy running into him again. Especially unannounced. Hell, what’s the chance his team would even be practicing now? Besides, this is a huge complex, and I bet these rock stars don’t want anything to do with skating. *I hope.*

While I’ve been debating their choice in my head, Bennett has pulled up information about Chelsea Piers on his phone and reads it aloud. “They have basketball, soccer, ice skating—hey, they have rock climbing. Who’s up for that?”

“I’ve never done it before,” Coop admits.

“Me neither,” Tristan adds.

At least he’s not the only member of the band who hasn’t tried this crazy sport. On a personal note, I breathe a sigh of relief they didn’t choose anything related to ice.

Río puts his arm around both bandmates. “I’ve done it a couple of times. It’s a blast.” He pulls them into his side and focuses his gaze on the remaining band member. “What do you say, 007? Are you game?”

He taps his leg. “Yeah. I’m up for it.”

Luke claps his hands. “Great. While you put your instruments away, I’ll arrange a car and make a call to Chelsea Piers. Rock climbing it is!”

In under an hour, we’re standing outside the sports complex. Not for the first time, the weight of my “extended” family members settles around my shoulders. Theo’s passed through these doors innumerable times. He was pleasant enough to me at Paige’s wedding but in a passing acquaintance sort of way, especially considering his fiancée and my half-sister through my mother, Jackie, are sworn enemies. We haven’t had any interaction since then, nor do I expect any. Gathering my strength, I follow the band as they walk straight to the rock climbing area. Far away from the skating rink.

A few guys wearing T-shirts with matching logos greet us and help the guys get suited up. “You joining us, Quinn?”

Shocked at Bennett’s ask, I reply, “Nah. This will be great for the film, and you don’t want some random chick in the mix.” I laugh. “Someone will make up a sensational story about me with you guys. That’s all you need.”

The lead singer’s chin juts up. “You’re not some random chick to me.”

Is he flirting with me? *Nah*. He’s only a good-natured—if cocky—guy, trying to get his band back together. I give him a quick shake of my head and watch as Coop gets into the gear. “It looks uncomfortable.”

Bennett leans closer to me. “They have to make sure you’re safe. I can come back here when the cameras aren’t rolling and show you. It’s actually very fun.”

“How about I watch you guys and see how you all do before taking you up on your offer?”

Bennett gives me a thumbs up. “You got it.” He leaves my side to suit up, and soon all five band members plus Luke approach the wall.

I spend the afternoon wandering among my crew, ensuring they’re capturing the best angles. Even from down on the floor, it’s apparent the band is doing what this activity is meant

to do—bonding. When Tristan’s three-quarters of the way up the wall, his hand slips off a rock. Next to him, 007 latches onto his wrist. I can’t hear their exchange, but the smile across Tristan’s face is impossible to misread.

After their session is over, the guys ride a high I haven’t seen from them. Ever. They’re shoulder-bumping and teasing each other based on this new experience. Including Tristan. My heart warms.

“Drinks?” Ríó’s question is met with agreement from everyone, so we make our way to a sports bar within the complex and take up the entire back area.

Of course, this wasn’t pre-planned, and the bar has other patrons. Specifically, women. Who spot UC. It’s my job to document their actions, not interfere with them, so I motion for the cameras to keep rolling.

In short order, the women swarm UC. The guys morph into rock stars greeting their fans—groupies. All except Tristan, who remains in the background. Until Bennett commands the attention of everyone in the bar.

“Thanks so much for remembering us,” he shouts, much to the joy of the ladies surrounding them. “In case we haven’t met, we’re Untamed Coaster, and we’re in New York City practicing for our comeback. I’m Bennett.” He points to Coop, Ríó, and 007 as he introduces each one of them. “And please let me introduce you to the newest member of our band. Someone who’s kickass on the keys and a terror on the rock wall—Tristan Lambert!”

Running his palm over his stubble, which throughout the day grew into nearly as trimmed a beard as my Scottish neighbor’s, Tristan gives the crowd a wave. I suck in my breath. This could be the moment that makes or breaks them.

Around Tristan, people applaud, seemingly catching him off-guard. He even high-fives some of the fans. All the air whooshes out of my body. They’re going to be okay.

Bennett continues, “We appreciate your support. Drinks on us!”

A cheer goes up and drinks are passed around. The guys huddle around each other, all smiles and back-slapping.

Today has been a good day. Tristan has been accepted by both the band and their fans. The reconstituted UC created a new, happy memory, which we captured on video. For the first time, I'm eager to see how this translates in their music.

Lifting a glass of water high in the air—I am working after all—I join everyone in toasting the new and improved band. In my mind's eye, I start editing today's footage. I immediately focus on how Tristan was brought into the fold, mainly with 007's save on the rock wall. Feels like the pivotal shot. I need to build this out.

I turn to place my glass down when a new figure entering the bar captures my attention. Tall, brown hair, broad. *Theo*. My fingers release and my glass smashes onto the table, splashing water all over. Shit.

“Here, let me help.” Tristan passes me a wad of napkins and joins me in sopping up the mess.

“Thanks.” I blot the water off my sweater.

“No problem.” He drops the wet napkins onto the table. “I wanted to say thanks for making today happen.”

His words stop me cold. “I didn't do anything. This was all you guys.”

He calls a server over and looks at me for my order. “A water.” With raised eyebrows, he adds a beer for himself, then replies, “In any event, today was really important to me. For whatever part you played, I appreciate it.”

He's truly a nice guy. The rocky road he's been on with UC hasn't broken his spirit. For the first time, I can picture him blending into the band. With one eye toward my half-brother glad-handing it with the other half of the bar, I give Tristan a warm smile. “I'm happy you're settling in. I think you're going to be making beautiful music.”

The server reappears and hands us our beverages. With a clink, he excuses himself and I focus on how to disappear into the woodwork. I want to avoid any interaction with Theo. The

band is enjoying their time, even including Tristan in some jokes. The camera crew captures the moments, both big and small. But for the unwanted person across the way, I'd be on cloud nine. No need to tiptoe around Callum anymore about UC's upcoming performance at his company's party. That is, if I happen to see him again.

From my side of the bar, Theo bro hugs some big guys, probably his fellow ice hockey teammates. UC doesn't look like they're going to be wrapping up anytime soon, as they're surrounded by fans. Which means I'm stuck here for a while. Time to talk with Luke. Or one of the camera operators. Whomever—anyone to allow me to keep my distance from my half-brother.

I spy Luke first. He's on the other side of the bar. Good. I take one step in his direction when a rumbling tenor voice saying my name stops me. More like renders me frozen like an ice statue. Squaring my shoulders, I turn to face him. "Hey, Theo."

The broad hulk of a man stands a couple of feet away. He doesn't smile, but isn't frowning either. "I'm here following a hard workout with my ice hockey team. What brings you to this part of town?"

I respond to the curiosity in his voice. If there was a hint of accusation, I would've bolted. The truth spills from my mouth. "I'm working on a rockumentary about Untamed Coaster." I point my glass in their general direction.

He looks at the guys and nods. "I see your cameras now. Didn't notice them before. Paige mentioned your new job. Congrats."

"Thanks." I don't get into how I went to school to make documentaries. Nor how I quit *Renovation TV* after "New York Views" turned into a soap opera when Bo and MaryEllen were selected the winners over Paige and Jesse and were awarded their own show.

Paige.

When I saw her application cross my desk, I advocated for her. I wanted to meet my half-sister my entire life, and this was the perfect opportunity for me to do it without exposing my true identity. I didn't expect to like her. I didn't expect to root for her and Jesse to fall in love. I didn't expect to get caught up on the Bo drama and wish my sister had won the game. As usual, shame over my role in selecting Paige to be on the show washes over me in waves. In a sense, I used her, no matter it turned out wonderful for her in the end. She married Jesse, after all.

I steal a glance at my big brother, who sips what appears to be a Dark 'n Stormy. Never would've known the drink except for a fuck buddy I met last year who loved them. I clear my throat. "How's your team doing?"

"We're playing well. Not winning any championship this year, but we're holding our own." He sips his drink. "Do you think the band will be able to come back from the death of their keyboardist?"

I'm taken by surprise he was aware of the band's plight. Guess I shouldn't be, since the keyboardist's overdose made them a household name. "I do. Darren's death was a blow, don't get me wrong. But I think they're creating something special with Tristan. Different, but great."

"Good for them. I know how hard it is to start over, but things can be better than you even dreamed if you open yourself up to it." Someone yells Theo's name. "Gotta run. See you around, okay?" He gives me a quick hug and leaves.

Flooded with a fierce desire to get to know my father's other family, I stand immobile. Theo seems like a good guy, Paige adores him, and his last statement leads me to believe we might have a chance. I haven't seen Paige in person since I left for LA—I need to get together with her soon.



I'm still flying high from today's outing. The band really seems to have turned a corner, including Tristan in some newly made jokes about rock climbing. Even the camera crew commented on how well today's non-musical shoot went. Luke couldn't contain his massive grin.

I stop by the office and bring Gary up to speed. He reviews some footage and shares my optimism. He even complimented me on setting the trip in motion by allowing the band to choose their own adventure. I choose not to correct him.

Today was a good day.

Walking home, I remember I used my last teabag yesterday, so I stop into the corner bodega. While they don't have the same selection as a tea store, their ten different brands is big enough for me. I choose my favorite, English Breakfast Blend—which isn't only for breakfast—and get in the rather lengthy line.

For want of something to do, I pull up my notes on my cell. When I'm finally next, some guy rushes up from behind me and throws his items onto the counter. What the fuck? This jerk isn't getting away with this. "Hey, I'm next."

The clerk glances between the two of us. As if she didn't see me standing there for the past fifteen minutes. I stomp my foot and hold up my box of tea. "I only have this."

"I'm tired of waiting. I have a family to get home to. I'm surprised you don't have cans of cat food."

Steam comes out of my ears. What an asshole. "Listen—"

I'm cut off when a familiar Scottish brogue interjects. "I've been standing here and saw the whole thing. This lassie is next." Callum, in a suit, plucks the tea out of my hand and

places it onto the counter. “Mister Family Man needs to return to the end of the line.”

The clerk eats up Callum like a starving woman. Despite my righteous anger, I’m right there with her. “Yes, definitely, you are right. Sir,” she looks at the jerk. “Return to the end of the line.” She picks up my box of tea and scans it. The jerk leaves his shit on the counter and storms out in a fury of expletives.

Finally back in control of my faculties, I point to Callum’s basket. “You can add your items to mine, if you’d like.”

“Nae, I’ll wait.”

“Oh. Okay.” I focus my attention on the clerk and pay. Instead of leaving the bodega, I wait for the Scotsman to check out. My mind can’t wrap around the fact that he put me first. Didn’t try to check out with me or anything. He approaches me, bag in hand. “Thanks back there. I was shocked the guy jumped the line.”

His normally jovial face turns serious. “He was wrong. The clerk should’ve stuck up for you. I’m happy things worked out the way they shoulda.”

We walk toward our building, his actions defending me in the bodega still buzzing throughout my body. “Hey, if you’re not doing anything for dinner, maybe you’d like to join me? I was going to order in.”

“Pizza?”

Not what I was going to say, but sure. I shrug. “Why not?”

“I love the pizza here. So much better than back home. I’ll put my groceries away, place the order, and be right up.”

“Great.” He exits the elevator on the floor below mine and I continue up to my apartment where I change into more relaxed clothes, including my bunny slippers. Why not? He’s already remarked on them.

In my apartment, I realize I need to do some quick cleaning. First, I shove items into the junk drawer. Swiffer in hand, I do a quick turn and switch to dusting. Panting, I toss

the duster into the closet next to the Swiffer and lean against the kitchen island. Like the Energizer bunny—perhaps that’s the nickname he should’ve given me instead of Flopsy?—the apartment looks great.

Then it hits me.

No one’s ever given me a nickname before. I’ve always been Quinn to my family and friends. Not even my so-called boyfriends gave me one. Yet Callum has.

I shake my head. Must be his Scottish roots. They must build them different across the pond.

While I wait, I fill a mug with water and put it into the microwave. I’ve turned it on when the expected knock comes at my front door. I open it and am greeted by Callum, now out of his business suit, and dressed in a pair of ripped jeans with another Aberdeen Football Club shirt. The red should clash with his coloring, but it doesn’t.

“Come on in.” I close the door behind him and take a deep breath. Not to suck in his unique scent, but rather to calm my nerves. *Right*. It does both.

“Pizza should be here in about thirty minutes. Got pepperoni and extra cheese, since you seemed to enjoy it before.”

Prior to his peace offering, I always stuck with only cheese. However, I really did like the salty taste the pepperoni added. “I seem to have developed a taste for it.”

The microwave beeps. “That’s my tea. Would you like me to make you a cup? It’s English Breakfast Blend.”

His nose wiggles. “Nary a proper Scot would drink such swill.”

My back straightens. “I think it’s the best out there. What do you drink over there? *Scottish* Breakfast tea?” Never heard of such a thing.

“Aye. It’s between your English and Irish Breakfast teas. Full-bodied with a malty flavor.” He leans his forearm on the

kitchen counter. “Originally, Scottish Breakfast tea was blended to taste the best with Scotland’s soft water.”

My mouth drops open. “I’ve never heard of either Scottish or Irish Breakfast teas. Consider my mind opened.” I take out my mug with steaming hot water and dunk the teabag into it.

His eyes narrow. “Dinnae you have a kettle?”

I fold my arms across my chest. Sexy as sin or not, this Scot can’t tell me how to boil water. My chin lifts. “My microwave works fine.” I dare him to make another comment. Wisely, he doesn’t, so I relent. “If I can’t offer you tea, what can I get you to drink?”

He opens a bag I didn’t notice he was carrying and pulls out a bottle of Moray Whisky. “I brought some of the finest there is.”

I pick up the bottle and examine the label. Even though UC is playing at their party, I haven’t seen the actual whisky they’ll be hawking. “The label is very nice. I like how the Scottish flag is intertwined with the American one. Nice touch.” I set it down on top of the counter.

“Marketing did a good job with it.”

“They sure did.” Must be a different area than where he works. My temper about the kettle having ebbed, I realize he’s going to need to pour the whisky into something. “Here, let me get you a glass.” I busy myself by retrieving an appropriate tumbler from the cabinet while he unscrews the cap.

He taps the bottle with his pointer finger. “Let me add a wee dram to your tea. Take the edge off the English.” He chuckles at his own joke, which is good considering I don’t fully understand it.

What harm can the whisky do? If I don’t like it, I’ll make another cup of tea. “Sure.”

I remove the teabag and bring it to the garbage, then pour in a splash of milk. He adds a healthy amount of Moray Whisky to my tea and fills his glass, straight. Given his profession, he must be used to drinking this stuff. Probably has

it for breakfast. He taps his tumbler against my mug and watches as I bring it to my lips.

I take a quick sip, given how hot the water temperature is. Kettle, my ass. Warmth spreads throughout my limbs, which has to be the whisky. I can't discern the flavor of the alcohol, but the entire experience is enjoyable.

“Well? Do you like it?”

“At the risk of adding to your overinflated ego, yes, I do.” I blow on my mug and take another sip. “It's quite good.”

“I'll have you know my ego is not 'overinflated' as you called it. It's just the right size, thank you verra much.”

“Yeah, right. Says the man sporting a huge grin at the fact I'm liking how you spiked my tea.” I lead him over to the living room, where we take the same seats as the other day. “Today was a good day. We took a field trip over to Chelsea Piers, and UC had a blast on the rock wall. I saw a band today for the first time. Their manager is hoping this translates into the studio. So am I.”

Callum's shoulders lower. “Good news. They needed to come together on their own terms, and it sounds like you found a way to make that happen.”

I shake my head. “Oh, no. I simply suggested they change things up. Chelsea Piers was their idea.”

“They have rock climbing there?” His pink tongue swipes some liquid off his lip. “I may have to check it out. I've been known to climb a rock or two in my time.”

I laugh. “They're not real rocks, you know. Not like how I picture it to be over in Scotland.”

“We have indoor rock walls in Scotland, I'll have you know.” He pauses. “Although, I do prefer to climb outside.”

I shake my head. This guy's such a rugged man. The quintessential Scot, if ever there was one. The intercom sounds and I buzz up our pizza.

Sitting at the counter on the island, we enjoy our meal, sip our drinks, and chat like old friends. He tells me all about the

Scottish deep-fried pizza, which sounds awful. Who would fry a perfectly good piece of pizza?

Aware he wants to hear more about UC, I give him snippets from today. How both Tristan and Coop had never scaled a rock wall before but did great. The way Bennett lowered the cockiness level and was encouraging his band members. How Ríó added humor to the mix. Most importantly, 007's pivotal save on the rock wall. I finish my slice. "It was amazing to see them bond."

"I can imagine," he rumbles around a mouthful of food. He opens the box and offers me another round, but I shake my head. No way can I eat another bite. My drink, though, I'll finish this.

"Afterwards, we went to the sports bar to celebrate."

"Was UC recognized?" He picks up his glass of whisky and takes another small sip. People make fun of tea drinkers—the way he nurses his liquor puts all teetotalers to shame.

"As you can imagine, they were mobbed. Which was good. Will also be good for the documentary."

"I'm more concerned about the band, but I'm glad they're finding their footing."

"Unlike me."

The words are out of my mouth before I realize it. Something about being around Callum, though, makes me comfortable. Like I can tell him my whole horrible life story and he won't judge me. The concept is so foreign I don't know how to begin.

"What do you mean?" He pauses. "You can tell me anything, lass. Or nothing at all."

Should I share my truths with him? Can I trust him? Why do I think he won't judge me like everyone else has—maybe due to our laundry room escapade? Memories of kids making fun of me because I didn't have a father reemerge, which I shove down. I've always had a dad, only I wasn't allowed to let others know who he was.

I study him from beneath my eyelashes. Callum's so open and honest with me, laced with a healthy dose of Scottish humor. For some reason, I trust him.

Dipping my big toe in the waters seems the most reasonable. "While we were at the bar, though, something else happened. I double-checked, and it wasn't captured on camera. After all, it didn't have anything to do with the band."

Callum places his hands on his knees and stares at me. Doesn't ask a question, simply waits for me to continue.

I stare into his blue eyes for a beat, then begin, "My brother showed up at the bar. Well, he's actually my half-brother who I met a few months ago. Things are weird, but he seemed nice. Even gave me a hug good-bye."

He picks up his glass, swirling the golden liquid inside. I mirror his action and pick up my tea. Maybe it's the magic Scottish elixir making me extra chatty?

"A hug is good."

I shrug. "Yeah."

"Care to share how things are weird between you two?" He takes a sip of the whisky. "I mean, only if you want to."

Callum's earnest eyes lower the walls around my guarded soul a slight notch. "My existence came as a shock to his side of the family. He wasn't thrilled with the news for a variety of reasons." What an understatement. I continue, "That's why his hug was a surprise. Anyway, I have two half-sisters and three half-brothers. No full siblings. How about you?"

"Nay. I'm an only." He puffs up. "Mam said they broke the mold when they made me. Can't beat perfection."

I don't know what it is about this guy, but he's loosened me up even when I'm talking about my family. I burst out laughing. "I can see why they wouldn't want to mess with the amazing son they created." I sink into the sofa, laughing so hard tears stream down my cheeks.

"Done yet?"

His question throws me into another fit of laughter. “I’m not trying to offend you.”

“No offence taken.” He sips the rest of his whisky.

“Thank you. I really needed this laugh. Work’s been so stressful, and it’s my first documentary. Then seeing Theo Hansen—” I bite my lip.

He holds up his glass. “The son of one of the VOW³ Media founders?”

His comment removes all laughter from my being. “Well, yeah.”

“Is Theo the half-brother you mentioned?”

Shit. “Yes, but please don’t mention it to anyone. It’s not in the public sphere.”

“I understand.” Callum leans forward and places the tumbler onto the coffee table, next to my empty mug of tea.

Because I can see the cogs turning in his head, or maybe due to my need to share this with someone, I add, “We share the same father. Different mothers.” Never met his. She walked out on Daddy when she found out about me and hasn’t been heard from since—she didn’t even come to Paige’s wedding. I don’t bring this up with my sister when we talk, but the newspapers follow every piece of information about the Hansens and Turners. When their mother reappears, it’ll make front page news.

“You don’t have to share any more with me if you don’t want to. But I have been told I’m a good listener. By more than my parents.”

His encouragement spurs me on. My truths have waited too long to come out. “I was Daddy’s little secret all my life. We used to live in New Jersey, but when I was eight, he bought Ma and me, plus my half-sister Jackie, a place in Westchester—near Manhattan—so he could be closer to her. He would show up a few times a month with presents for me and take Ma out on the town. My existence came to light a few months ago. It put the already strained family, thanks to the legal issues, into a tailspin.”

No need to share my part in bringing the truth to light. Paige has forgiven me and we've become good friends. Not so much the rest of her family. Although Theo was nice today.

"I'm sorry you've had to go through all this heartache. At least you know you were loved, even if your Daddy wasn't around all the time."

Callum stands from the chair and sits next to me on the sofa, putting his arm around me. Providing comfort I didn't realize I needed. For a few moments, I allow myself to accept his strength. Then reality seeps back in. I am strong. I don't need to rely on anyone else. I shift away from the large Scotsman.

"Thanks. I've never shared this with anyone else. Please don't repeat it."

He places his thumb and pointer finger together and moves them from one side of his mouth to the other. "Your secret's safe with me."

His reassurance encourages me. Even though I barely know him, I trust him. I lace my fingers with his. "I've only known lies and omissions about family all my life, with people digging for more information or making fun of me. Thank you for listening without judgment, and for being so honest with me about your fantastic family."

He squeezes my hands, and I accept his reassurance. When he releases them, he places his hands on top of his thighs and stands. "I don't want to overstay my welcome. We both have big workdays ahead. Are you alright with keeping the leftover pizza?"

His compassion steals into my soul. I scramble for purchase on my feet. "Sure. Unless you want it for breakfast?"

A smile crosses his face, eliminating all vestiges of sadness my story brought. "Don't you want it? It's one of the best reasons for ordering pizza."

I walk into the kitchen and close the box. "It's alright. I'm more of a toast-for-breakfast type of girl." I shove the pizza box in his direction. "Here. Enjoy."

He takes the box from my hands and walks to the front door, which I open for him. “Thank you for sharing your secrets with me, Flopsy. Things will look better in the morning. Have a good night.” He leans over and kisses my cheek, then disappears through the door.

Closing it, I relax my head against the wood, my palm covering the spot his lips touched. For some reason, instead of feeling out of control, I believe him. Tomorrow’s going to be better.

Especially if I catch a glimpse of my ginger-haired neighbor.

Chapter 6

Quinn

Callum was right.

Today has been a *much* better day. The band never sounded so good. Their spark has returned.

“They’re sounding better than ever,” Luke remarks.

“Agreed. Yesterday did wonders for them.”

“Thanks for the idea. If you hadn’t suggested we perform live, I wouldn’t have thought of the idea to visit Manhattan. Look where that got us.”

UC hits the bridge of an older song, and it soars. We stop talking and listen until the end. Their manager compliments, “Great job, great job. What do you say? Are we done here for tonight? I’ll make dinner reservations if you’d like.”

Coop strums his guitar. “Where to?”

Luke offers a big smile. “It’s a surprise.”

Given the entire band’s approval, it looks like it’s going to be another late night. After last night, the need to speak with Paige burns bright, but work takes precedence. I catch the camera crew’s eyes, and they nod. Yup. Long night.

With the band’s eyes on him, the manager says, “Here’s the deal. I’ll send a car to your place at seven tonight.” He pauses. “Wear something nice.” Their excitement at Luke’s directions causes most of the tiredness to seep from my bones.

When we’re alone, I ask where they’re going. “Taking them to Mamma’s Italian in the Village. Down home cooking

at its finest. Reservation's at eight."

"Great. We'll meet you down there."

He cocks his head. "The cameras don't have to come. I was thinking this would be a good break for the guys."

"Hey, I understand. But we've been hired to create a documentary about Tristan's incorporation into the band. We don't want to miss anything important." At his pinched reaction, I add, "How about this? We bring only one camera instead of the usual three?"

His expression returns to normal. "You're right. Okay, one camera it is. Of course, you're coming too, right?"

I tap his forearm. "When you ask so nicely, how can I say no?" While it's true we've been hired to do a job, it's nice to be included in this transformation.

We break and I leave it up to the camera crew to decide among themselves who gets to come tonight. They're all fabulous at their jobs, so I want the decision to be theirs. Since I have a few hours, I reach out to Paige. After all that's gone down over the past five months, I can't wait to catch up with her. And bring her up to speed about seeing her brother.

I breeze into the designated coffee shop and order our usual brews. I'm sitting at a corner table when Paige comes in, her hair in its familiar pixie cut. "Hey. Over here!" I wave and she detours toward me.

She hangs her coat around the back of the chair before coming around and giving me a hug. "Hi. How are you doing?"

Her warm greeting always surprises me. I was the one who blew her world apart, yet she's the one showing me grace. "Hey, pretty good. The rockumentary about Untamed Coaster is coming along. How about you? How's the real estate business?"

"Wonderful. I can't believe how many apartments we have in progress. And Jesse's line for Arch Pointe Furniture has been picked up for another year." She describes the new pieces he's working on as well as their various renovations.

“I’m so happy for you guys. You deserve all this goodness.”

“Thanks. Your film sounds like it’s going well, too. Although, I have to admit, if I had to listen to the same songs all the time, I might go batty.”

I smile. “Especially when you get home for basically the first time in five months and hear the same music blaring through the floor.”

Her eyebrows come together. “Come again?”

I describe my initial meeting with Callum. “So I banged on his door until he opened it—dripping wet mind you—and ordered him to turn it down.”

She grins. “You’re so bad.” Then her brown eyes, which are so like mine, get wide. “Back up a minute. He was dripping wet?”

“Apparently, he was taking a shower. All he had on was a towel.”

“Damn girl.” She lifts her coffee to her lips. “What did he say to you?”

I don’t have to think too hard, as I can hear his Scottish accented words precisely. “He held up his wallet and said, ‘Where’s my pizza?’”

It’s touch and go for a second, but she manages to swallow her latte with only a slight dribble. “That’s classic.” She uses her napkin to wipe her chin. “But on to the goods. How did he look all wet and everything?”

I bang my cardboard coffee cup against the table. “I didn’t notice.”

“Bullshit. I would’ve noticed and I’m a married woman.” To prove her point, she raises her left hand to show off her diamond over her gold band.

“Fine. I didn’t notice *much*.”

“Well, what *exactly* did you notice?”

His wet hair. His neatly trimmed beard. The water running down his well-defined torso. The six-pack peeking at me. “He has blue eyes.” At her pursed lips, I add, “and a Scottish brogue.”

“Oh my. You’re living above Jamie Fraser.”

I adopt my best Scottish accent—which is horrible. “Aye, lassie, you ken.”

We both burst out laughing.

“Seriously, though, have you made it up to him for being such a bitch when you met? I mean, I’m guessing you’ve seen him again.” She takes another sip of her latte.

Heat rises up my neck, which I try to ignore. “We’ve bumped into each other several times in the building. I explained myself to him about his music and he says he understands.” I sip my coffee. “I even taught him how to do laundry. He stood up for me at the bodega when a jerk was trying to jump ahead of me.” I glance at the tabletop. “We’ve shared pizza a couple of times.”

“Oh.” Her gaze follows her index finger gliding up and down her cup. “So, when are you seeing him again?”

“I don’t know. We sort of had a pretty deep conversation last night.”

She leans forward. “Do tell.”

I shut my eyes and keep them closed while relating our discussion about my father. Our father. “So, now he knows.”

“Good.”

My eyes pop open.

“I’m happy you’ve found someone to confide in. You’re my sister and I love you, but this has to be difficult on you in a different way than it is for the rest of us. Sounds like Theo’s coming around too, from how you described your conversation yesterday.”

“That’s what I thought. Or at least, I hope.”

She nods. “All we need is to get Ryder and Kiefer on board, but they may be harder to crack. Ryder’s off playing baseball and Kiefer’s focused on saving his plastic surgery business. But with Theo and me on your side, we’ll bring them around.”

I reach out and hold her hand. “I don’t deserve you.”

She squeezes mine. “We deserve each other.”

I want to believe her. Sitting back, I ask, “Have you heard from your mother?” Although the fact of my existence isn’t on me, I was the one who spilled the beans to Paige. My own mother rejoiced when the secret was revealed, but Paige’s mother—Daddy’s *wife*—did the opposite. Shame, a constant companion, flows through my veins at my role in revealing Daddy’s other family. If we had remained hidden, this added pain visiting Paige and her family could’ve been avoided. And I would’ve continued to live like an outsider, catching glimpses of the family in news reports rather than meeting my half-sister in a coffee shop.

She shakes her head. “No. Not yet. Haven’t spoken with Father either, since he was put in jail pending trial.”

I haven’t visited him there, either, but for a different reason than Paige. “Are you planning on going?”

She stirs her drink with a straw. “I’m not sure. Father said some pretty horrible things to me when . . .” She stops speaking, and I fill in the blanks—when she confronted him about me after our discussion at *Renovation TV*. “Anyway, Jesse and I talk about him. I’m not ready to see him.”

What can I add? Time to get out of these troubled waters. “I’m sure we’ll make the right decisions when the time is right. He made an uncomfortable bed with the feds with VOW-cubed, and now he’s lying in it.”

“Very true.”

My alarm goes off. “Shoot. I have to get down to the Village to meet up with Untamed Coaster for dinner.”

Paige’s face lights up. “Not a sentence I usually hear.” Her voice pitches higher. “Sorry I have to run and meet up with

five of the sexiest men on the planet. And when I'm done with them, I'll go home to a Scottish neighbor. My life is so hard." She drops her hand on top of her forehead.

I roll my eyes. "I'm the director of the rockumentary about the band. It's not like that."

"Fine." She seizes on my unspoken part, her eyes shining. "But it could be with your man in a kilt."

Because I don't have anyone to confide in, I confess, "Maybe."

She claps. "I knew it. I'm excited for you. In the year we've known each other, you've never dated anyone, and I worry about you."

She *worries* about me? What Twilight Zone have I entered? No one has *ever* worried about me. I swallow. "You do?"

"Of course, silly." She grabs my hand. "No matter what, we're sisters. I've wanted a sister all my life, and I'm not letting you go."

I croak, "Thanks." Our hands squeeze, then I sit back. "I'm not sure what will come of this thing between Callum and me. I think after the launch party in a couple of weeks, he's returning to Scotland. The way he talks about the country, though, it sounds magical."

"How romantic. Who knows? You could have a highland fling."

I shake my head at her terrible quip. Although, the sentiment has its merits. If he's interested, perhaps her suggestion isn't half bad. Seize the day as they say. "We'll see." I stand. "Gotta run. See you soon."

She gets to her feet and gives me another warm hug. Having a sister who treats me like family, instead of the one who grew up tolerating me, could be a good thing.

I'm halfway to the door when her words float to my ears. "Don't forget to check what he wears under his kilt!"

Chapter 7

Callum

Angus and I work through the stack of RSVPs for the launch party. “We’re doing great, boss. So far, we’re at a fifty-five percent acceptance rate.”

The number settles into my bones. “Looks like we’re going to have a launch after all. How many invitations remain outstanding?”

His stylus bangs on the iPad a few times. “We’re still waiting on about half.”

Half. Why haven’t they responded yet? This party has to make our whisky shine, which means the room must be full. I steeple my fingers and bang them against my lips. “When’s the respond-by date?”

“Next Friday.”

I inhale. That’s still several days away. More people will respond yes. Hey, we may even increase our acceptance rate. We have to.

“On another note,” my assistant says, unaware of my inner turmoil. “The caterer scheduled the tasting for tonight. Are you sure you don’t want me to add myself as your plus one?” He rubs his stomach. “I’ve got a good taster.”

While most of my mind ruminates over the delinquent party replies, I shift my focus to Angus’s question. “Sorry, dude. I’m going with the director of marketing.”

His face falls. “She gets all the good assignments.”

“Believe me, trying to decide which canape to serve may sound fun, but I’m sure you’d rather be hitting a club.”

“Be nice to go on a full stomach, but between the two, I can’t argue with you.” He taps a few more times on his iPad, and his brows furrow. “Oh boy. Ewan’s at it again.”

He turns the device toward me. With alarms pinging up my spine, I take it. An ad for my former classmate’s label takes up the entire screen. In it, he’s decked out in a kilt with a glass of the American whisky in his hand. All ginger haired ballsy bastard. The headline reads pure Ewan: “A Wee Dram Will Hook You.” With a flick of my wrist, I toss the iPad back to my assistant. “At least he didn’t say he’d lift his kilt for any lassie who orders a bottle.”

Angus chokes back a laugh. “The bugger would’ve done so if he’d thought of it.”

I sigh. His success doesn’t mean Moray Whisky won’t make an even bigger splash. Maybe he’s primed the pump, so to speak. “We both know American whisky is good, but ours is better. We only need to get people to taste ours, and they’ll understand the difference. We don’t need some gimmicky ad campaign to make this happen.”

“Aye. I agree.” He focusses on his iPad for a moment. “A new email from the events director arrived. Says he’s putting together the program for the launch and wants some information to include about Untamed Coaster.”

“Does he say what he needs?” I’m the expert on all things UC, so I’m pretty sure I can field whatever questions he has.

“He wants to know when the band started. How many number one hits they’ve had.”

“Easy. They started ten years ago and have had seven number ones. And another eight songs that hit the Top Ten. One platinum album.” I continue spouting a litany of UC facts while Angus transcribes them.

“He has one last question.” My assistant’s eyes meet mine. “How to address Darren’s death and the introduction of Tristan on keyboards?”

This question stumps me. As a loyal fan, I know the truth about Darren's untimely passing by an overdose. I also understand the band prefers to keep details about his death quiet, so I'm unsure how they want to proceed. As for Tristan, he was selected after an exhaustive search by Platinum Records. I know nothing further.

"I actually don't know how to respond to this. But I know someone who does." Visions of Flopsy leapfrog to the front of my mind. The lass is cute and feisty, yet with a painful past I didn't suspect. She has many layers, all of which I want to uncover. Not in a girlfriend gold digger way, of course. I'm just a curious type of lad.

"Great. When you find out, I'll let him know." He stands. "I'm off to tackle some of these other emails." Angus leaves me alone in my office, my fingers itching to reach out to Flopsy.

I pick up my mobile but before I can place the call, receive a text from the director of marketing:

Sorry, Callum. My son was sent home from school with a case of the flu. I better not go to the tasting today. Don't want to infect you!

Great. I have to attend the tasting alone. Guess I could ask Angus. However . . . I stare at the contact information on my mobile. Maybe Quinn'd be interested in coming with me? At least, she'd be much better to look at than my old pal.

I jot off a quick "no worries" reply to Yvonne, then hit the button labelled Flopsy. She answers on the second ring.

"Callum? Is everything alright?"

"Didn't mean to worry you." With a start, I realize this is my first actual call to her. "Nothing's amiss. I have a question about UC for the program we're creating and thought you might have the answer. Oh, and I'm dangling a tasting with our caterer for the launch as incentive."

“You drive a hard bargain. Some intel for food? Sign me up!”

My cheeks inflate as I picture her—wearing those adorable pink bunny slippers—playing with her hair like she does. “Great. We want to know how we should handle Darren’s, uh, unexpected death and Tristan becoming his replacement.”

My question lands like a bad batch of sour mash. “Going right to the crux of the matter, huh?”

I try to soften the blow. “I was able to answer the easy questions.”

Her chuckle floats through the airwaves. “Of course you were. Would you mind if I speak with their manager and get back to you?”

“Sounds good. How about you get back to me at the caterer’s tonight at six?”

“It’s a date.” She hangs up.

I’m sure she didn’t mean it the way it came out. A date implies more than a business meeting, right? What we’re doing tonight is sampling the menu for the launch, nothing more.

The idea of a date with Flopsy doesn’t cramp my stomach, though. She’s so different from the other lasses I’ve dated. Hell, her family’s as connected as mine, if not more so. The fact no one knows about her relationship with the Hansens says a lot about her character. If she wanted to exploit her connection, she could’ve done it years ago. A lass like her cannae be a gold digger. My trampled heart quivers.

Quivers?

Time to focus on publicity for the launch.

Six o’clock arrives and I stand outside the caterer’s building in the Gramercy area of New York City. I haven’t spent much time in this area, although the park looks inviting. Reminds me of the gardens in Elgin. With this thought, a pang of longing for my hometown surges. I miss the quiet life of making whisky and chumming around with my mates. This

city, though, always bustles with people and cars—green areas are few and far between. While I love exploring Central Park, I recognize the main language of Manhattan is concrete.

My watch reads ten past. I'll give her another five minutes before going inside for the appointment. I suppose this should tell me all I need to know about Quinn. She's fun enough to pass the time but can't be counted on. Perhaps not a gold digger, but unreliable can be as bad.

Another five minutes pass and I check up and down the street without seeing her. Guess I should've invited Angus. My hand's on the handle when I spot her rushing around the corner, waving. "Callum!"

Ignoring how her Yank accent twists over my name, I offer her a smile. "Wasnae sure you were gonna make it."

She comes to a stop in front of me, her height making her not much shorter than me. "So sorry." She pants. "I took a taxi thinking it would be faster."

"Aye. Traffic can be brutal in the city. At any time."

In an effort to calm her breath, she pushes her hair away from her forehead. "You can say that again. I'm happy you waited." She offers me a sunny smile, and all my previous worries fade.

"Let's go in and choose the menu, shall we?"

"We shall."

I pull the door open, allowing her to precede me into the impressive space. The directory says the caterer is on the fifth floor. At the elevator bank, she says, "UC is shaping up really well. The detour we took to Chelsea Piers supplied their missing spark."

The doors open and I follow her inside the cab. "I'm relieved to hear it. The way you were describing them before, I'm not sure I wanted them playing at the launch."

"You definitely would not have. They're on the right track now."

The elevator pings our arrival and we approach the receptionist. “Callum MacMurray, here for the tasting for the Moray Distillery launch party.”

The woman behind the desk consults her book and nods. “I’ll let them know you’re here.”

A minute later, my contact Jean appears and ushers us into a cozy dining space. “We’re very excited for your menu, Callum. It’s not often we get to create items with a Scottish flair. We believe we chose foods that will pair well with the Moray whisky.”

“Everything does.”

My comment is greeted with snickers from both Jean and Quinn. Which reminds me. “Jean, please allow me to introduce you to Quinn Walker. She’s working on a film about Untamed Coaster, our entertainment for the launch. I thought it would be a good idea to bring her along.”

The women shake hands. “How exciting! I’m a big fan of UC. When I heard they were going to be headlining this party, I was thrilled.”

Quinn smiles, although it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “They’re practicing hard and will be in good form.”

“Great.” Jean walks over to the beverage area. “For our tastings, we only offer water so you can get a good taste of the flavors. However, in this case,” she holds up a bottle of our whisky. “We felt it would be a good idea to pair everything with the beverage being celebrated. Please take a seat while I pour.”

Soon we both have glasses filled with the golden liquid. “I’ll be back with your first course soon.”

I pick up my tumbler. “You’ve only ever drunk this mixed with tea. Can’t wait to see what you think of it straight.”

She gives me a fake smile. “Can’t wait.”

I take an appreciative sip of the whisky, my eyes trained on Quinn. She swallows a tiny amount, makes a face, and puts her glass onto the table. “What did you think?”

“It’s good.”

I raise my eyebrow. “I saw your face. You can be honest.”

“It’s not as if you brewed it.” Unaware of how my stomach constricted as if she punched it, she giggles. “Honestly, it tastes like lighter fluid. But when you mix it with my tea, it’s delightful.”

“At least you have a way to enjoy it.” I’ll find a way to change her mind. I can be persistent when I want to be.

Jean returns, carrying a plate of three possible appetizers and scorecards for us to record our reactions to the samples. I ask her for a couple of bottles of water, which she also provides. While we wait for the entrée selections, I jump into the outstanding questions about UC. Might as well get this part over with.

“Did you have a chance to find out how the band wants to handle the transition to Tristan?”

She licks her lips. “I did. I spoke with Luke, their manager.” Her brown gaze locks with mine. “It’s a sensitive subject, as you can imagine.”

I take a sip of my whisky. “I know. I do appreciate your help with this.”

“Luke raised the topic in a band meeting. Here’s the official line.” She pulls out a piece of paper and reads. “Following Darren Hilliard’s unexpected death, the band took some much-needed time to mourn. After an exhaustive search, we selected the talented Tristan Lambert to join us on keyboards. He’s been a fantastic addition to the band, and we can’t wait to introduce him to you. Thank you for your love and support.” She places the paper onto the table, her fingers running over it.

“Thank you for this.” I consider the statement. “It sounds, well, sterile.”

She blanches. “While the guys are finally finding their groove in the studio, they’re still moored in their feelings over Darren’s death.”

“Overdose.” My correction flies out of my mouth.

“Accidental.”

In silence, we watch the next round of food choices be placed onto the table. We serve ourselves. Between bites of prime rib, succulent chicken, and a nondescript fish dish, she gives me the complete story about Darren’s overdose. “He was prescribed Oxy for his wrist injury. Even though his therapy was over, he still had bottles of the meds, thanks to prescriptions from several doctors he visited during the tour. The night he died, he took a pill and went out drinking. Then, as close as we can tell, he forgot about the original dose and took another pill—or more—before bed. He never woke up.”

My stomach clenches. I can picture every step of his final night.

She puts her fork down. “The guys feel guilt over not having paid enough attention to him. I think that’s part of the reason why it’s been difficult incorporating Tristan into the band.”

“I can’t imagine having to carry such remorse around. Still, Darren was a grown man. His bandmates weren’t his babysitters.” I shove the remaining piece of fish off to the side and make a note not to include it at the party.

“It’s a heavy burden, to be sure.” She picks up her fork, only to push the fish away too.

“May I have the band’s statement? I’ll hand it over to the events director for him to use in the program. This way, nothing will get lost in translation.”

“Sure.” She passes me the paper. “Getting over Darren’s death will take years, I’m sure. But they’re starting by rebuilding the band. I even heard them playing a new tune today.”

My ears prick. “Something new? Really?”

We pause while the caterer brings in a variety of side dishes. Diving into some Brussels sprouts, she says, “Yes. First new music I’ve heard from them, and it sounded great.

Different from before. I've dubbed them Untamed Coaster 2.0 —not to their faces, though.”

“Must be hard for them, but I'm glad they're trying.” I sample a Brussels sprout and it's all I can do not to spit it out. Never liked those nasty things, so I'll rely on Quinn's judgment whether to include them or not. “Think the song will be ready for the launch?”

“I'm not sure. Its development will be chronicled in the rockumentary, though.”

“Cool.” I sip my whisky. “Don't be too surprised if they backslide. I know it's not the same by a long shot, but the year before I got to uni, our team won the football championship. Followed by a huge amount of players graduating. When we started, we played like shite and the coaches rode us hard. We won a few games, then got all up in our heads that we were somehow dishonoring the graduated players' memory. Took us a few games to get back to playing up to our potential. Ended up with a pretty good season. We won the championship my last year.”

She considers my story with her finger encircling the rim of her glass, which she's barely touched. Her water bottle's empty. “Thanks. I hope it doesn't take them years, though.” She scribbles a note on the caterer's scoresheet and takes a helping of garlic smashed potatoes.

“The potatoes are delicious. But addictive,” I warn. “Be careful, there's still a lot more to try.”

She pauses with her fork about halfway to her mouth. “Duly noted.” She swallows and emits an indecent noise. All my nerve endings hum. This dinner is taking a left-turn toward “nary-a-gold-digger-in-sight.” I'm enjoying it. A lot.

Following a selection of desserts, I pat my stomach. “Ach. I'm going to have to hit the gym twice tomorrow. I thought most of it was delicious.” *The company was better.* I finish my second glass of whisky, giving myself props for having kept it to two. Quinn's drunk both bottles of water.

“It was great. Here are my notes.”

She passes me the scorecard created by the caterer, which I review. “We mostly have the same conclusions. No fish, yes to both the prime rib and chicken, the pasta primavera was good as was the smashed potatoes. You thought the Brussels sprouts were good?”

“Definitely.”

Hiding my disgust, I add them to the final menu. Once everything is filled out, we discuss our choices with Jean over coffee, and she agrees to substitute a salmon dish. Satisfied with our decisions, I help Quinn with her coat.

“This was fun. Thanks for the invite.”

“I’m thrilled you were able to join me.” I adjust my leather jacket. While she may be all bundled up, this weather is nothing in comparison with home. “Would you like to go out for a nightcap before returning to our building?”

“You know what? That sounds fun. The band’s taking tomorrow morning off, so I don’t have an early call. Do you know any place down here?”

My lips twitch. “I was hoping you would.”

She pulls out her phone. “I don’t, but Google must.”

Chapter 8

Callum

Within minutes, we're on our way to a place called The Tribeca Club, hailed as the place where Cole Manchester, among others, was discovered. Even though it's a Thursday, we have to wait in line to enter.

Over her protest, I pay the entrance fee and soon we're in a large space with a band on the stage in the center, flanked by two bars. Throughout, photos of famous bands who have graced the same stage line the walls. In addition to Cole Manchester, this place boasts famous singers like Ozzy Martinez and Adam Baret, plus bands like Hunte and The Light Rail. "This place is a veritable Hall of Fame," I remark as I hand her a glass of red zinfandel while holding my American whisky, this one a Jack Daniels.

She tastes her wine, her eyes shining. *Too bad she didn't look like that when she barely choked down a half glass of my family's whisky at the tasting.* "It is." Her head bobs in time with the music. "This band's pretty good."

They have a catchy beat, but their vocals aren't up to snuff. "Not UC quality."

"Maybe before this week. Certainly not now."

The band finishes their set with a flourish, and we join in the applause. Piped-in music by The Light Rail takes their place. Next to me, Quinn's head lifts to the ceiling. "I love 'Take Me Higher.' C'mon, let's dance."

Abandoning our drinks, I allow her to pull me on to the dance floor. The girl can move. Wonder how else she can put

her rhythm to good use? Tangled sheets and sweaty bodies parade in front of me. Perhaps Angus was right? I could use a little pressure release.

We jump and shout and fist pound the air. If only the rhythm would slow down, then I could put my arms around her. For the present, we get lost in the music.

Once the song ends, the DJ comes over the speaker. “TLR really rocked the house, but I think it’s time to slow things down.” He elongates the last word, deepening his voice. *My man.*

“Love Rules” by Hunte starts to play. If we were at the band’s concert, everyone would be raising their mobile flashlights. Instead, here, people are pairing up. I hold up my hands to mimic a traditional dance hold. Without wasting a beat, Quinn enters my embrace. Er, dance hold.

Drawing her tight to my body, we sway in time with the sultry beat. The song speaks of the many ways love wins. Don’t know anything about love, but I’ll take a taste of lust.

Lost in the crowd, I surrender to the music. I pull her closer, our height differential allowing us to vertically imitate what my mind’s been conjuring. She lets her head fall backwards, exposing her lithe neck. “You don’t have a very Flopsy-like neck.”

Her head twists. “I don’t think much on me resembles a rabbit.”

Her ears are human-sized. Her thighs—I insinuate my leg between them—are one-hundred percent non-rabbit. She’s not covered in soft fur, although her hair is a gorgeous shade of light chocolate brown. The only part of her that could be likened to a rabbit is the way I want to entangle our bodies for hours.

“Maybe the sexy Jessica Rabbit.”

I stare into her light brown eyes, watching her pupils dilate. Pink creeps up her cheeks. The need to taste her overwhelms. A quick sip. If I don’t, I might explode. My lips

open, which she mirrors. I lean my head toward hers, giving her plenty of time to rebuff me.

She doesn't.

I don't stop.

As Hunte sings of the rules of love, our lips meet in an explosive kiss unlike any I've shared before. Maybe it's the alcohol we've drunk tonight. Maybe it's the atmosphere. Maybe it's *her*. For whatever reason, tingles race up my spine and explode behind my closed eyes. When I extend my tongue to meet hers, my heartrate ramps up faster.

I allow my hands to slide down her arms, landing at the small of her back. My cock has come to full mast, and the way we're plastered together can leave her no doubt as to my reaction. If only I could find out if she's as turned on as I am. In my mind's eye, I've already undressed us both and my lips have travelled south.

Her moan fills my ears, even though I'm sure no one else can hear her. Seems like she wants the same thing. I can maneuver us off the dance floor, into a cab, and in our building without too much fuss. Then we can explore our amazing chemistry.

The song ends. She steps back from my embrace, her hand over her mouth. Her delicious, talented mouth. I should suggest taking this to a more appropriate forum. She finds her voice first. "I need to find the ladies' room." She disappears.

Shite. I hope I didn't scare her off. I've never had an experience like this, especially with clothes on. In an effort to calm my pulse, I force myself into the bar area and order us another round.

Walking over to the restroom area, I lean against the wall and take a sip of the American whisky, this time from Jim Beam. The nose is pleasant, apple cider being the overriding smell. There's some cedar with a hint of cinnamon. I swallow, discerning some black tea, honey, and caramel. It finishes with the apple. Vastly different from Moray, but good in its own right.

While I wait, I review all I've learned about Quinn. Her upbringing. The recent unveiling of her parentage to her father's other family. How she's been welcomed into that side of her family—or not.

She's also the director of the best rockumentary ever known to mankind because it's about UC. How lucky is she? I'd kill to be in her shoes, but at least I'm going to have the band at my launch.

Therein lies my problem.

She doesn't know Moray is *my* company, *my* heritage. She thinks I work for them, which isn't a lie. Not the whole truth, either. After everything she's gone through with her father, I understand how important honesty concerning family is to her.

I can't see her as a gold digger who will glom onto me for what my great-great-grandfather created and my ancestors grew. However, I *really* like how she sees me. She treats me like a normal human being and not the walking embodiment of a dynasty like the lassies in Scotland have throughout my life.

Truth is, I want to keep things the way they are. With her, I'm simply Callum. I can be a regular bloke who doesn't know how to operate a washing machine. Who loves pizza. Who she kisses on the dance floor with abandon.

My full heritage can wait a little while longer.

“Need a hand with your wine?” A pretty blonde sidles up to my side, pointing to Quinn's glass in my hand. She has blue eyes, which she's accentuated with makeup and eyelashes that go on forever. In her black leather miniskirt and white button-down revealing a pale pink lacey shirt beneath, she looks ready to rumble.

“Sorry, lass. The owner is using the restroom and will be right back.”

She puts her open palm on my chest. “She's not here now.” Her hand slides down my left arm. “And I don't see a ring on your finger.”

I'll never get used to how aggressive lassies are in this country. In Scotland, they can be forward, to be sure, yet never

to this degree. With both of my hands occupied with glasses and my back against the wall, she's trapped me. Her smug smile indicates she knows it.

Still. I take a step to the left. "Sorry. We may not be married but she's taken my heart."

The blonde's face falls. "Lucky girl." She spins on her heel and disappears into the crowd.

"No, I'm the lucky one," I mutter.

"Excuse me?" Quinn comes up to my side.

"Eh, nothing." I extend my hand holding her wine glass. "Here you go. Red zinfandel."

Her eyes light up. "You remembered?"

The blonde beauty has nothing on Flopsy, with her business attire, long brown hair, and molten brown eyes simmering with desire to find a home. Maybe that's what drew me in to her? A kindred spirit.

"I make it a point to store important details in here." Using my free hand, I point to my forehead. "Want to grab a seat? I'm a bit tuckered from all our dancing. Plus, I want to enjoy this American whisky."

"Sure. I'll have to get going soon, though. Want to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for tomorrow with UC?"

I chuckle. "Like the good Flopsy you are."

We make our way into the area of the club filled with chairs, finding an empty nook with a table between two chairs. "Crushing Blow" starts to play. "I'm jealous of your job, you know."

"It doesn't suck." She winks at me. "I wasn't a fan of theirs before I got this job. My viewpoint has changed, and they're well on the way to converting me. I believe once they let Tristan in fully, they're going to be unstoppable."

"I thought the rock wall outing was a game changer?"

"It was a turning point, definitely." She takes a sip and puts her glass onto the table. "But you should have heard when

Tristan added a new riff to 'Crushing Blow' last week. The rest of the band didn't want any part of it."

Cheeky git. "He added notes to an already perfect song?"

Her lips purse. "He added notes to improve upon perfection. If you ask me, it worked."

I voice my original thought. "Cheeky git."

"Tristan may be cheeky, as you put it, but he was being honest. Himself. He wanted to share a thought." She shakes her head. "The others shut him down."

Her comment about his honesty doesn't slip by me. I bring my tumbler to my lips and gulp, not even appreciating its light apple notes. "You liked it?"

"I did."

"I can't imagine improving on their hit, but I'd be willing to give it a listen."

"I don't think you're going to get the opportunity. UC won't be playing it the new way. It's a shame. If they embraced Tristan's suggestion, it might help them move on from Darren's—" She clamps her mouth shut.

"Have you told them this?"

"No way. Not my job. Luke can. Or it has to come from one of the band. I'm only there to capture what unfolds, not interject my thoughts."

I tap my glass against my knee. "I edit my statement. I'm only jealous of your closeness to UC. I don't know if I could keep my mouth shut if I had your insight."

She smiles. "It's not easy, but it's how a director has to roll. Learned this at college and have to keep reminding myself on a daily basis." She reaches for her wine but sits back without picking it up. "Sometimes hourly."

The song ends and a new band is introduced to the stage. In her chair, Quinn yawns. Since tomorrow's a workday for both of us, I suggest, "Are you ready to go home?"

She flicks her hair. "If you don't mind?"

I order us a car service. Getting to my feet, I extend my arm, palm-side up. “Let’s go.”

She places her hand in mine, sending shivers shooting throughout my body. Not dropping her hand, I lead us to the front of the club and collect our coats. Releasing our connection, I help her put hers on first.

I check my mobile. “Our car should be outside in a minute.”

“Thanks for a fun evening.”

Fun? Exhilarating is more like it. Great conversation. Fantastic dancing. Mind-blowing kisses. I loved learning more about her, which overrides my guilt over keeping my relationship to Moray Distillery hidden. “I can give tonight many adjectives, with ‘fun’ being the least of them.” I steal a quick kiss on her cheek. Don’t want her to think I’m planning on jumping her the moment we get inside our building. Although . . . I glance at Quinn, whose cheeks are stained pink. Perhaps she’s reliving our overheated dance like I am?

Still. Mam raised a gentleman.

We get into the car and I intertwine our fingers. She says, “Tomorrow, I’ll be back in rehearsals with UC. I’m hoping everything continues on the upswing. Your company’s party is coming soon. I hope they don’t disappoint.” She squeezes my hand.

“From how you’ve been describing them, I doubt they will. I may be their biggest fan in the room, but most won’t be as well acquainted with their previous music and won’t judge them against themselves.” I close my eyes. Please be right. The possibility of their first performance should draw in people who haven’t tasted whisky before, or only think of certain brands. Moray will expand their palates. It has to.

We pass quintessential New York City buildings like the Flatiron on our way uptown. Soon, we turn the corner and the car stops in front of our building with its elegant portico, which was the reason I agreed to check out the apartment,

even though it wasn't in my preferred Upper East Side location. I wouldnae change it now for any reason.

I escort Quinn into the elevator and press the button for her floor. Not to get into her panties—a delicious idea—but in my effort to be the gentleman Mam raised. With my hand on the small of her back, we approach her door one flight above mine. With the saucy doormat.

Need to clear the air. “Here’s where our night ends. Thank you, Flopsy, for helping with the menu for the launch, and for joining me at The Tribeca Club. I had a wonderful evening.”

In a breathless voice, she replies, “So did I.”

I place my hands on her shoulders and bring her in for a kiss that echoes the one we shared on the dance floor. My heart rate picks up as I slide my tongue against hers. Time to end this before I start divesting her of her clothes in the hallway.

Breaking the kiss, I say, “Have a good night.”

I force my feet to take me to the stairwell, pausing only when my hand connects with the handle. Turning my head, I catch Quinn staring at me, mouth open. I don't want our first time together to be rushed because we have to go to work the next morning. I want our first time together devoted to exploring each other. I want our first time together to be sparked with passion we can't refuse. Tonight's not the night. *It soon will come.*

With a wink, I push open the door.

Chapter 9

Quinn

It's as if the band has taken two steps back. Instead of rehearsing like they have been, they play about half a song, then one of them—usually Bennett—holds up his hand for them to stop. They bicker about some part of the bridge. This goes on for an hour.

“Guys, why don't you take a break? Go around the corner for some coffee. Then, when you come back, let's remember you're Untamed Coaster and start playing like them.” Luke points toward the door and the five band members follow his instruction, albeit with dragging feet.

I approach their manager. “Backsliding, huh?”

He pounds the table causing his cell to bounce. “I thought we'd moved past this. The day at the rock wall was amazing, and then they were playing better than ever.”

“Maybe that's the problem?”

Luke raises a quizzical eye. “The fact they were finally in the groove?”

Callum's words last night come to mind. “Perhaps. Do you think it's possible they got into the groove and enjoyed playing? Afterwards, their psyches worked on them somehow and made them feel they were disrespecting Darren by moving on without him?” This is my version of Callum's story about his college soccer team.

“What? No.” Their manager flips his cell. “That's nuts.”

I don't interrupt. Let him dissect what I've said. I could be wrong. Maybe I'm not.

His cell continues spinning. "At the rehearsal following the rock wall, they were jamming. I know it."

I nod.

"They were riding a high I haven't seen since Darren was here—" His coffee-colored eyes become rounder. "Shit."

I place my hand on top of his. "I don't know how to work through this. I'm not a psychologist. Perhaps you should talk with them. Give them permission to move on with Tristan."

"Permission? They're grown-ass men."

"Who are hurting."

He retrieves his hand. "Can't argue the point. Maybe I'll sit them down when they get back and bring it up." His gaze bounces to mine. "Don't worry, I won't say this was your idea."

"The documentary world thanks you." I offer him a slight smile, which he returns.

The guys walk back into the rehearsal space carrying cardboard cups of various sizes. I glance at the camera crew, who all give me the thumbs up. They're ready to capture this. My only hope is Luke's discussion penetrates.

Bennett and Coop approach us, each carrying a tray with drinks. "We brought some coffees. For you and the crew." The lead singer extends his tray toward Luke first, who snags a cup. I'm sure they didn't get me a tea, so I take a cup and add creamer plus two sugars. My sister Jackie always teased me about drinking my coffee as if it were a sweet dessert, but it's the only way I know how to choke it down. I much prefer my English Breakfast tea. With whisky.

When the camera guys have their cups, Luke calls the band over to the table. I slide into the background in order not to ruin the shot. "I know you were frustrated earlier. Want to talk about it?"

“Nah,” 007 replies. “We just need to work out some kinks, that’s all.”

Luke nods. “Maybe not the musical kind.” The manager shoots me a quick glance, then focuses his attention on UC, as newly constituted. “Hear me out. I know Darren’s not here, and it sucks. His fingerprints are all over your songs. You can honor his legacy by playing the shit out of his works. Sing his lyrics even louder. Don’t you think Darren’s looking down on you, rooting for you?”

Bennett transfers his gaze from the coffee to his manager. “I think he’d be pissed we’re not living up to his standards. Out of all of us, he was the one who kept quality control.” His Adam’s apple bobs. I want to reach out and give him a hug, but I remain plastered against the wall.

“Yeah,” Ríó says. “Remember when he wanted us to change the lyrics in ‘Upside Down’ from ‘get on this ride’ to ‘get into this ride’?” He chuckles. “It was an all-out war.”

Everyone but Tristan joins in his inside joke. I transfer my attention to their new keyboardist, who looks like someone ran over his dog.

Luke must notice his expression too, as he explains, “Because the rider is ushered *into* the ride, not on it.” A light bulb goes off over Tristan’s head, and he smiles.

Bennett clears his throat. “You’re saying we should play *for* Darren rather than without him?”

Luke takes the mantle. “Tristan is great on the keys, we all know it. Why don’t you all include him in the band like you did on the rock wall? Know Darren wants UC to succeed. He sent us Tristan for a reason.”

I will the water filling my eyeballs not to fall. From the looks on everyone’s faces, I’m not the only one.

After a pregnant pause, Bennett says, “You’re right. Darren is still a part of us, whether he’s with us in the flesh or not. And Tris is doing a great job.” He wraps the new member in a bear hug, to which the rest of the band joins.

Tris? Did the lead singer give the new keyboardist a nickname? This has to be another milestone. I look at Luke, who mouths “Thanks.” Yes, breakthrough accepted.

The guys break and return to the rehearsal space. Picking up their instruments, the discordant sounds of them warming up fill the air.

Bennett points to each member of the band. “Want to try out the new song?” His question is met with murmurs of agreement. “Great. I’ve been thinking about a small rearrangement. *Tris*, how about you start us off?”

For the first time today, the keyboardist’s face cracks into a huge smile. “I can do that.”

And he does.

The music flows around the room, starting and stopping with changes made by each of the band members. Even *Tristan*. *Tris*. By the end of rehearsal, the song’s come together.

“Like old times.” Coop puts his guitar onto the stand.

Luke claps. “I like this new song. I think it’s time we started to focus in on the set list for the party. Want to add it to the lineup?”

Bennett shoves his hands into his back pockets. “The gig’s coming up in a week, but it feels surreal, you know? We haven’t performed in, well, a year.”

Coop puts his hand on Bennett’s shoulder. “We haven’t sounded this good in rehearsal in a long time either. I think we’re going to be fine.”

“Yeah, I agree,” *Río* adds. “My vote is to add this new one. Give the whisky drinkers something to talk about besides comparing us to how we used to play.” He bangs his sticks on his thigh.

“I’d love to debut ‘Take a Ride with Us’ at the party.” *Tris*’s comment is greeted by ten eyeballs, even *Luke*’s. He stands straighter. “I’ve been mulling over the title, and think it encapsulates the lyrics and, well, where we are as a band.”

007 is the first to find his voice. “Your title rocks.”

Relief stains Tris’s expression as the rest of the band agrees. It transforms into surprise when the bassist approaches him, fist extended. The two bump, and the rest of the guys take their turns.

Without moving, I confirm all of the cameras are capturing this moment. I’ll have to weave all of this into the rockumentary. The enormity of this assignment hits me. With so many turning points, how will I be able to demonstrate UC’s growth in a coherent form? I’ll have to showcase all of their self-doubt while showing them moving on from Darren and embracing Tris. Somehow.

It’s as if a swarm of pedicabs have taken up residence in my stomach, each seeking to outpace the other. I’ve never considered this job as anything more than my opportunity to create my first documentary. Thinking about all their important moments, crafting a two-hour coherent story about UC’s transformation mutates into an almost impossible task.

The guys congratulate themselves on the new song and decide to call it a night. Translation—they’re going to go out to dinner and play a game of poker in their hotel.

I confer with the crew and we decide only one camera person needs to follow them tonight. Grateful for another night off, I pack my things and go to the office to mull over how I’m going to turn all this footage into an understandable rockumentary. Since Gary’s in his office, I stop by.

“Hey, can I run something by you?”

“Sure thing. What’s up?” He points his remote to the television and turns it off.

I take my seat in the guest chair. His desk is as messy as ever. “I’ve been following UC, Untamed Coaster, for nearly six months now. Got some great footage. The band’s turned so many corners, which is great. They’re playing better and better every day.”

“Sounds good to me.” He flicks his Mont Blanc through his fingers. “Let me guess. You’re freaking out about how to

present this to the public?”

Am I this transparent? “Sort of. There are so many intricate facets to the band, and I don’t want to miss out on any. Any suggestions about how to turn this unformed clay into a gorgeous piece of pottery?”

Abandoning his pen, he strokes his mustache. “You’ve hit the oh-crap wall. We all get there at some point.”

The pedicabs in my stomach stop moving for the first time since this afternoon. “How does one get past this wall?”

“The best way I know how to do this is to find the hook. The lens by which you present your footage to the world encapsulating the entire point of the documentary.” When my forefinger taps my chin, he continues, “For instance, when I did the film about Hunte, I leaned in on how they managed to right the ship from being washed-up to on top of the charts. Had them ride the wave from the pinnacle to their lowest point and made the fans root for the band to get back on top.”

“For Hunte, that was a good move. This with Untamed Coaster is more nuanced. I’m not sure if they’ll end up back on top or not.”

“What does your gut say?”

My response is immediate. “They will.” I sit back into the chair. “I mean, I think they will. Their sound is nearly the same as before Darren died, but it’s different. Maybe more mature?”

Gary nods. “They’ve been through a trauma. It has to affect their output.”

“So you think my hook should be them coming back on top?”

He rolls his chair under his desk again. “I didn’t say that. You’ve been the one living and breathing their world for all this time. Only you can decide how best to present what you’ve experienced with them. My only piece of advice is not to create something for their fans. Create it for the people who’ve never heard of Untamed Coaster.”

I get to my feet. “I appreciate your suggestion. I’m going to go home to think about the hook.” I leave his office and, all up in my head, walk to my building.

My footsteps pick up as I get my mail, hoping to see my sexy Scottish neighbor. No luck. I take the elevator up to my floor and let myself into my apartment, my ears open to any music coming from below. Nothing. With deflated steps, I walk into my bedroom and change into another pair of leggings and my bunny slippers. In my mind, “Flopsy” said with a thick accent makes me smile, even if the author of my first nickname is nowhere to be found.

After our kiss on the dance floor last night, I had hoped we could explore what’s between us. Instead, he stopped us on my doormat and gave me a scorching kiss on my lips plus a chaste one on my cheek. The way he told me to have a good night, though, hinted he was as roiled as I was. Paige was right. I do want to find out if he’s as fantastic in bed as his dance moves predict.

Besides, Callum’s probably returning to Scotland as soon as the party is over. He’s the perfect candidate for a no-strings hook-up that won’t interfere with my job. He already has an expiration date.

Chapter 10

Callum

Our product is being held up in customs.
RSVPs aren't coming in.

The press has given a lackluster response.

The only thing set is the catering menu, which I owe to Quinn.

A mental image of her dancing with me last night erases all my worries—well, almost. While my concerns are taller than Ben Nevis, the tallest mountain in the United Kingdom located in my beloved Scottish highlands, my interest in her gives me the desire to scale it.

She's smart as a whip. Funny. Sweet. Everything I'm looking for in a partner. If I were looking for a partner. *Which I'm not.* Sorry, Mam.

The director of marketing knocks on my door. “Hey, Callum. I have a bunch of things to discuss with you about the launch that I'd hoped we could've gone over last night. Want to catch a bite to eat and discuss them?”

Who in this company doesn't have a bunch of things to talk about with me? I hide my feelings and reply, “Aye. Perhaps you can assist me with some of this.” I point to my desk, covered in paperwork.

“I'll see what I can do. Let's go.”

We walk around the corner to a small sandwich shop. Taking our seats, we discuss the weather, the local sports teams, and her son's health for a while. At least he's

recovering. It's nice to put the launch aside for a minute—I need the break from the stress. Apparently, so does Yvonne.

The server brings our waters. Yvonne lifts her glass into the air. “To a successful introduction of Moray whisky into America.”

“Here, here.”

Following a sip, Yvonne places her glass onto the table. “As much as I'd love to tell you more stories about my son, unfortunately, we have to discuss work issues.”

We spend the rest of the meal talking about caps and décor and positioning and ad placements. Taking my final bite of my greasy burger—I deserve to eat something bad for me, considering I'm up to my neck with the launch—we round the final corner. How to tackle the RSVP situation.

“We've sent out printed invitations to all the reps in the Tri-State area, plus press. Do you want to open up the party to the general public? With Untamed Coaster playing, I'm sure we'd draw a huge crowd.”

One of the reasons I wanted them to perform was to bring in people. “Any ideas about how we can do that? I don't want the party to turn into a free for all.”

“I understand. What do you think if we reach out to some local clubs? Invite their staff to come and sample our whisky and bring their VIPs?”

I consider Yvonne's suggestion. “I like this idea. Introduce Moray to them in a more controlled way. How about we work on a list of clubs we'd like to target here in the city separately and then meet up in, say, two hours to go over our lists. We can get the invitations out to them tonight.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” She wipes her mouth, having finished her Cobb salad.

A bunch of rowdy guys enter the restaurant. I glance at the newcomers, and a tall, redheaded one captures my attention. Ewan. “Great,” I mutter.

Yvonne's head tilts. "What's up?" She follows my gaze but doesn't recognize the group. "Who's over there?"

As the director of marketing for Moray Distillery, as soon as I say the name, she'll know who I'm talking about. The company crowing over their splashy launch. I tilt my chin. "That's Ewan Ferguson."

"Oh." A second later, she repeats, "Oh. The Scot hawking Michael's Malt's new whisky blend?"

"You got it."

She finishes her soda. "They're not a true competitor of ours. His blend is of the American brand Michael's Malt, while we're introducing a new single malt Scottish label known only in Europe."

"This is why you're our director of marketing, Yvonne. Only you can see these two companies as being different."

She places her knife and fork onto her plate. "They are. I did a SWOT analysis of them before we began our prep for the launch." At what I'm guessing is a blank stare, she clarifies, "SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats." She waves her hand. "Anyway, our ads play up your family's history because based on the SWOT, that's our sweet spot. Americans go gaga for anything British."

"Scottish," I correct her. "But thank you. I appreciate all your hard work." We were fortunate to scoop her up. Keeping most of my attention on Yvonne, I track my former schoolmate. "Ewan and I go way back, and I needed your perspective."

The man of the hour walks in my direction, presumably to use the toilet. Great. I don't have time to warn Yvonne before his long gait brings him to our table. I stand. "Callum MacMurray. I heard you were over here."

I give him a quick handshake. "I saw your ad about the new American blend. Congrats on the successful launch."

He straightens his shirt. "It was a big one. We're out here celebrating." He motions toward the full table. "So, how's

Moray Distillery coming along? I've heard rumblings you're gonna be doing your own launch soon."

Rumblings? We've been pushing our launch for weeks. I stand taller. "We're gearing up for it next week. Gonna be a blowout." I glance down at the table, where Yvonne watches our every movement. Politeness requires I introduce her. "I'm here with my director of marketing going over the final details for the launch. Yvonne Saunders, this is my old school chum, Ewan Ferguson."

Yvonne stands and extends her hand. "Any friend of Callum's is a friend of mine. Pleasure to meet you."

Who said we were friends?

Ewan, not one to miss an opportunity, kisses the back of her palm. "Pleasure's all mine."

I clap the back of his shoulder. "We don't want to keep you. Good luck with everything."

Before Ewan can reply, Yvonne says, "Hey, our launch is next week. Should we include you on the guest list?"

I stifle an eye roll. The last person on earth I want at the launch is the lad who made my life a living hell growing up. Took me attending uni to drop the "Whisky Boy" nickname. But the cat's out of the proverbial bag now.

My old rival replies, "Of course I'll be there. Wouldna wanna miss Whisky Boy's entrée into my market."

Ignoring his barb, Yvonne replies, "Wonderful." I'll ensure you're on the guest list."

When he leaves for the loo, I plant my butt and stare at my director of marketing, calculating how hard it would be to replace her this week. "What the hell was that all about? He's only gonna stir up trouble, dinnae ken?" My accent comes out sharper with my anger.

For her part, Yvonne doesn't appear perturbed. "I want him to come and see how a real launch party is supposed to go. Not with some gimmicky guy in a kilt, but rather with the dignity it deserves."

Her words placate my ruffled feathers. Maybe she's right. Ewan's launch was covered by stories in the trades and online, while ours is a full-fledged party. Still, it's *Ewan*. "I hope you're right." I pick up the tab and we leave our table, offering good-natured halos to him and his friends on the way out. At least I escaped without any further direct interaction with the tosser.

In the office, I set Angus on the task of creating a good list of clubs. "Are you kidding? You want me to create a list of the best clubs to invite to our launch? He holds out his arm. "Pinch me. This is a dream assignment."

With a chuckle, I do as I was told, eliciting an ouch.

With Angus working on the list, I return to my desk and start tackling the items based on my discussion with Yvonne. I can see her reasoning about Ewan and Michael's Malt's whisky blend, but the fact he's going to be at the launch doesn't sit well. He'll figure out some way to mess things up, like he always has. I pause and rearrange my normal negative thoughts when it comes to him. If all goes well, Ewan will be backed into a corner and the only thing he'll be able to say is how delicious Moray Whisky is.

Hours pass as I deal with all the issues the best way I can. Even tie up the customs problem so our whisky will arrive days before the launch. I tap my pen on my desk and Quinn's gorgeous face comes into frame. Followed by memories of our fantastic kisses last night.

My mobile pings with an incoming text, a smile breaking across my face before I even read Flopsy's message.

Breakthrough of a day with UC. Thanks for your football analogy, it came in handy. I'm sitting in my apartment thinking about other things of yours that also might come in handy.

Seems like my plans for the evening have become much more interesting.

Chapter II

Quinn

I sit on my sofa, trying to figure out a hook for the rockumentary. All of my discarded ideas litter the floor. I stare at the blank page, willing a good idea to hit me. Correction—a unique idea.

Everything has been done before. Most of my concepts, at least three times. UC is in a rare position and the hook for their film deserves to be as different.

What would Alfred Hitchcock do? His movies always had twists no one expected. The band ruled the airwaves, one of the members died, they got a replacement, and are on their way back.

Oh. My. God. To my own ears, this sounds depressing and boring.

I suck at this.

Maybe one of his movies will inspire me? For want of something else to do, and to stop myself from checking my phone for the millionth time to see if Callum's responded to my rather forward text, I turn on *Notorious*. Another fabulous Hitchcock film.

Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman take up the screen. Even in black and white (I'm a purist and refuse to watch a colorized version), the actors appear flawless. The spy thriller, however, can't capture my interest, as my mind wanders back to my pressing problem. UC deserves the best, and I'm still empty.

Bergman's character falls deeper into the spy world. Grant watches her slip further undercover. How can I weave UC's story to be as gripping as this tale?

I try to force my creativity. And fail.

I hit the remote and shut off the television.

My hand strays to my cell phone and I check to see if Callum replied. Still nope. Why am I not surprised? I re-read my words and cringe. I wouldn't respond either.

I stand and walk over to the window, hoping inspiration will fall on my head. I try to put myself back in school where the professor lectured about the structure of documentaries. While I can hear his voice, he doesn't offer me any assistance.

A knock sounds at my door, and I walk toward the noise. "Please be Callum" plays on repeat with each step. I check the peephole and lightness spreads through my body.

"Hi." I widen the opening. "Come on in."

"How are you doing, Flopsy? I got your text and wanted to respond in person." *The first good sign I've gotten all day.* He approaches me and gives me a fast peck on my lips. Too quick. I manage to restrain myself from latching onto his buff body, allowing him to enter the apartment.

"I'm doing alright." Might as well be honest. "Much better since you're here."

"I get you."

I take a hard look at Callum and see strain around his eyes. I cup his cheek. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." His hand covers mine. "At lunch, I had a run-in with Ewan Ferguson, my old classmate, who's now working for Michael's Malt. He's always been my rival, and he rubbed his own successful launch in my face." He sighs.

"I'm so sorry. I know how awful these things can get."

"Ewan always spews venom against me at every turn—he's been jealous of me since we were wee lads."

I kiss his tight lips.

“Thank you, lass.” A glint enters his blue eyes as he shrugs off his encounter with Ewan. He walks toward the living room and bends down. Holding up some crumpled paper balls, he asks, “What’s all this?”

I lick my lips. “I’ve been working on the rockumentary.” I glance at the papers strewn on the floor and am propelled forward to pick them up. “Not successfully, might I add.”

“I can see.” He straightens out one of the papers and reads, “Tris shakes things up.” He turns the paper toward me. “What do you mean?”

I gather the balls and drop them on top of the coffee table. “I need to come up with a hook for the film. Something to draw in people who haven’t heard of UC before, as well as their existing fans.” I point to the paper in Callum’s hand. “That was one of my bad ideas, to talk about how Tris changed up the dynamic of the band.”

He nods. “Oh, I understand. It’s a good change, though, right?”

“Today it is. I told Luke your football story and he gave a modified version to the band as a pep talk. They did a one-eighty afterwards and looks like they’re embracing the change. They even gave Tristan a nickname—Tris.” I wiggle my ankles. “I think nicknames show acceptance.” Like Flopsy. Has to mean Callum’s accepted me as more than his demanding neighbor. Remembering our kiss last night, I’m sure he has.

“I agree. Giving him a nickname is a good step. Is there anything I can help you with for your hook?”

“I don’t know. You’re such a big fan, I’m not sure you represent the right audience.”

“How about you let me try, lassie?”

His last word isn’t my nickname, but it still stirs something deep within. With his Scottish brogue, it almost sounds like a caress. I could get on board with that, too.

“Where are my manners? What can I get you to drink? I think you left your whisky here.”

I stand, but Callum jumps up. “Nay, you sit. I’ll make you tea.”

I love how he’s looking out for me. “I can make it. I still don’t have a kettle.”

He chuckles, the sound ping-ponging throughout my body. “I know you can, but I want to. Even in your barbaric microwave.” He points to my notebook and pen. “You work.” He leaves me with a whiff of his delightful cologne, and I do as I was told. Pen in hand, I bounce it on the paper, still without ideas.

A few minutes later, he returns. “One English Breakfast Blend with milk and a wee splash of whisky.” He places my mug onto the coffee table, and sips his whisky, straight, from a tumbler.

He remembered how I take my tea?

“Now, let’s talk about your hook.”

My mind’s so discombobulated, I barely register he’s sitting next to me on the sofa rather than in the chair he’s favored before. He takes my notebook from my limp hands, and I pass him the pen. I want to curl up with him. Feel his body next to mine. Do all sorts of wicked things together.

He seems to have work on his mind. “So tell me, what are the guys in the band like? Not public-facing information, but rather who are they”—he points to my heart—“in here.”

I consider his question while trying to tame the beast inside me that wants to ravage this man. I wrestle my naughty side into submission—for the moment. “Bennett is definitely the leader of the band. He’s confident, perhaps a bit cocky. Doesn’t lord it over the rest of the band, *per se*, but they all defer to him. Ríó is outspoken, while Coop is the one who always comes out with words of wisdom.” I pause. “007 is the shyest of the bunch, but he gets his point across when need be.”

“Tristan?”

“Tris is in a hard place. He’s as talented as the rest of the band, no questions asked. He was the driving force behind

their new song, which is coming along. They even talked about playing it at your party.”

“Cool. What’s it called?”

For a nanosecond, I consider not divulging the information. But this is Callum. He works for the company that hired UC to play at their party. Plus, he’s a huge fan. I look at his face (well, my eyes stray to his talented mouth first as I *am* human) and reply, “Take a Ride with Us.” I wait a beat. “Please don’t share this with anyone. I’m also not sure if it’s going to stick.”

“Thank you for letting me in on the secret.” His head falls backward. “I like the name.”

“We all do. It was Tris’s idea.”

He tugs on his ear. “How about we think of this from a different angle? From the outside-in rather than what the band’s been going through.”

I scramble to sit up straight and lean forward. “My boss suggested this as well. I’ve been so focused on the band that I haven’t considered this point of view.” My mind swirls with possible new ways to attack this rockumentary.

Truth is, UC was one of the hottest bands on earth. A vast majority of people know their music. When Darren died, it made front page news, exposing even more people to them. Those who knew him were shocked. Those who didn’t were introduced to his keyboard prowess and saddened they didn’t know of him before. Ever since, though, UC’s become known as “that band whose keyboardist overdosed.” I shake my head, putting his suggestion into practice.

“Maybe this is my hook?” I turn my entire body toward the Scot. “Something along the lines of getting to know the real men behind the traumatic story.” I pause. “‘Traumatic’ isn’t the right word, but you know what I mean?”

Callum tugs on his ear again. “Like the heart and soul rising from the ashes.”

“You’re good at this.”

His comment makes the wheels turn faster in my brain. We spitball ideas for a while. While I don't have a true hook yet, I'm getting there. I finish my spiked tea. "I think it's time for a reward."

I know what type of reward I'd like but follow his earlier lead. "May I entice you into watching a Hitchcock movie with me?"

"Do you have popcorn?"

"What self-respecting movie buff doesn't?" With a grin, I stand. "I was watching *Notorious* before you came over. How about I rewind it to the beginning, and we can watch it together. It's one of my favorites of his."

"Since you put it so nicely, how can I refuse?"

"I'll make the popcorn. Want another drink?"

"Nay, I'm good."

"Please, make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back."

In the kitchen, I find the box of popcorn in the cabinet and put it into the microwave to pop. Excitement pours through my body at spending the next couple of hours with my neighbor. The man who set me on the right path to figure out the best hook for the rockumentary. Who is sexy and smells like heaven and sin rolled into one.

When the popcorn's finished popping, I return to the living room where Callum's lying on the sofa with one of my throw blankets over him. He lifts his arm and pats the cushion alongside his body. "I'll keep you warm."

Of that, I have absolutely no doubt.

I put the popcorn onto the table and turn on the movie, then settle next to his hard body. With our shoes on the floor, his arm around my middle, and the blanket over us, I have no doubt this will be the best showing of *Notorious* ever.

I pass him the bowl of popcorn. We munch as Bergman is ordered to win the affections of a Nazi hiding out in Brazil. Grant's portrayal of a man in distress is brilliant.

Callum's arm closes around my body, and he whispers in my ear, "Donna ken if I could do what he's doing with the lass. Not with his feelings so exposed."

I want to turn onto my back and scream "take me." I manage to hold myself in check, instead swiveling my head in his direction and saying, "Keep watching."

"I'd rather watch you." He leans over my willing body and kisses me. This isn't a rushed meeting, but rather a slow exploration. It says he wants to savor every minute detail. I've never been kissed like this.

His tongue touches my lips and steals inside my mouth, unleashing a small moan from me. My hands skim over his beard and slant into his hair, holding our faces pressed together.

At long last, he breaks our kiss, panting in the sexiest way. "Flopsy, what are you doing to me?"

"The same thing you're doing to me."

His eyes close for a brief moment. "We'll not be watching your movie if we keep this up."

By a hair, I refrain from pulling him on top of me. This pace is more intoxicating than his whisky. "We better stop, then. You're going to love the film."

Callum gives me one final, toe-curling kiss, then returns his focus to the screen. I study him for a moment, his long eyelashes a perfect complement to his trimmed beard. At my back, his ripped abdomen teases me with its nearness. I swivel my head and rest it on our shared throw pillow.

The movie continues with its intrigue and danger.

Black-and-white images flash before us.

The longing between Grant and Bergman becomes palpable. *I get it.*

My favorite scene starts, and I turn to let him know, but he's fallen asleep. On my sofa with his arms around my body. A tiny smile graces my lips as I shut off the movie.

With the room quiet, I kiss his cheek goodnight. A tiny groan comes out of his mouth, causing a thrill to ping throughout my body. His breath remains even. I lean over and kiss him once more.

Chapter 12

Callum

An unknown feeling tickles my nose, and my head jerks away. Soon, another weird sensation rocks against my chest and my eyes pop open. A dark-haired beauty lays next to me on a sofa.

In a rush, snippets of last night dance through my mind. Popcorn. A Hitchcock film. Passionate kisses we shared. She's as exquisite in the morning as she is any other time of the day. I want to know more about this lass.

With care, I smooth her hair away from her cheek. Her makeup's smudged under her eyes, which gives her a ruffled, debauched look. Although, I'm sure she won't appreciate my assessment, given how put-together she is all the time. Even last night when she was puzzling out her "hook" for the rockumentary, she still was in charge. Her sass is compelling.

When she doesn't stir, I lean over and kiss her soft lips. At her ear, I whisper, "Good morning, sleepyhead." I glance out the window where the sky's becoming lighter.

Her head lolls, and her eyes open. "Callum," she breathes, her fingers tracing my beard.

I can't stop myself and kiss the inside of her palm. "That's me."

She bolts upright, untangling from the blankets. "It's morning."

"Aye. Usually follows evening. At least in Scotland, it does." I plant my feet on the floor. "Today's Saturday, so I'm

thinking you don't have to work."

Her body relaxes. "You're right. I'm so used to being on the go, I forgot the band wanted to take some time for themselves today, without us following them." She purses her lips.

"I'm sure they'll find their footing. When you get back together with them on Monday, I hope you find a new band."

"My only hope is our cameras don't miss anything." She stands. "Can I make you a coffee? I know what you think about my English Breakfast tea."

I join her. "I'd love a cup of java." I wrap my arms around her body. "But only after I get a morning kiss."

"I think one can be arranged."

Without hesitation, our lips dance for a moment until she pulls away to make our drinks. While I mourn her loss, I appreciate the way her hips sway on the way to the kitchen.

I force my thoughts out of the bedroom. She's not like the lasses I bed and bail on—something about her demands more. "We have the whole weekend ahead of us. Do you have any plans?"

She opens a cabinet and retrieves a pod for her Keurig. "Other than developing the hook, not really. How about you? Does your boss want you to do any work for the party?"

Her question lodges in my belly. I need to tell her I *am* the boss, but I'm still not comfortable with the implications my confession might bring. I'm not ready to give up what's developing between us.

"No. Everything's pretty well taken care of." More or less. I do have to review Angus's list of clubs for the invitation list and add to it. Time away might help me not obsess over how many RSVPs we have. Or don't have.

"Wow. Two free days sounds like a full vacation."

I laugh. "You need to come to Scotland if you think two days makes a vacation. Not even close."

The Keurig finishes brewing, and she places the steaming mug onto the island. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how you take your coffee.”

“I like a little milk, the same way you take your tea.”

“Got it. One splash coming up.” She opens the refrigerator, takes out the milk, and adds it to my mug. The microwave dings and she puts in her teabag to steep.

I take my seat at the island while my brain creates the perfect day. “What do you think about, following our morning beverages, going out for brunch? Maybe down in Chinatown?”

“I haven’t had dim sum in ages. I love your idea.”

“Great. Afterwards, I have the perfect place to take you. Just need to double-check one thing.” I sip my coffee, suddenly excited for this day to start. I think she’s going to love it. At least, I hope she will.

We finish our drinks and I bid her good-bye for the length of time it’ll take me to shower and get back here. Before she locks up behind me, though, I pull her into my body for another one of our amazing kisses. To remind her who she’s about to spend her day with.

Downstairs, I go into my bedroom and strip off my clothes, keenly aware she’s probably doing the same thing one floor above me. In the shower, I don’t think about the launch. Rather, I focus on what I’d like to do to her body if she were in here with me rather than twelve steps higher.

How I’d kiss her until she couldn’t catch her breath.

How I’d run my hands all over her body, squeezing and caressing every nook.

How I’d open her legs and use my fingers to bring her to pleasure.

My cock juts out from my body, demanding attention. In my mind’s eye, Quinn’s with me, and it’s her mouth around my erection rather than my own hand. It’s her tongue licking the pre-cum off my head rather than my fingers swiping it away. It’s her throat I coat rather than the floor of my shower.

Panting, I shove my palm onto the tiled wall as I catch my breath. Damn. I want the real lass in here with me. Or in my bed. Or the kitchen, living room, or table. Hell, I'm not picky. All I know is I want to experience this with her. Soon.

After I wash up and trim my beard, I select a pair of my Lucky brand jeans in the hope the name will give me success today. I think, based on the way we've been kissing, we're on the same page, but don't want to presume. By the end of today, though, I should have a better understanding of where she's at.

Some harmless fun. I pray we're on the same page.

Throwing a navy blue Untuckit sweater over my torso and shoving my feet into a pair of loafers, I pull out my mobile and attend to all my emails. Seems like everything's in good enough order. Our invitations to local clubs have received a warm response, which is what we hoped for. I do a quick check to verify the latter part of our day is a go, warmth spreading when my hunch is confirmed. A pit stop at the mirror allows me to double-check I'm presentable and I lock up my apartment. Hope I gave her enough time to get ready.

Part of me hopes I didn't.

Standing on her "Hello from the Other Side" mat, I inhale to clear my thoughts. We're off to dim sum, and then to my special surprise. I hope this day lives up to its hype, at least in my mind.

In response to my knock, her sweet voice invites, "It's open."

I turn the knob and step inside, my gaze straying to the sofa where we spent last night together. Not in the way I hoped, but in a manner that made the most sense for us. Tonight, though, might be different. *I hope.*

Since she's not in here yet, I wander over to the bookcase and check out the various framed photos. One of her as a girl with an older woman, presumably her mother, and another girl. Probably the sister she mentioned. They're at a beach where she's playing in the sand while the other two lasses watch. The next photo is her walking across the stage and

receiving her diploma. Other shots feature her in various work situations. I step back to check if any other photos show her doing something fun with friends, but there aren't any.

“Hey.” Quinn approaches from behind me, placing her hands on my back.

I turn to face her, cupping her face in my hands. “Hey back.” I kiss her, allowing us more time to get used to each other. Soak up her goodness.

Stepping back, I rub my hands together. “So, are you ready for Chinatown and then my surprise?”

On her shoulder, she hangs a medium black Prada Nappa-leather tote bag with topstitching. “I am.”

My eyes zero in on the bag. The very same one I gave Fiona all those years ago. I stifle my urge to rip it off her body. *Good reminder that all women are gold diggers.* No—not Quinn. I remind myself she isn't like the others. Still, the Prada stings. In a tight voice, I state, “Then let's go.”

Since it's Saturday, we catch a taxi and are brought down to Chinatown in relatively short order. I stand on the opposite side of her body from the offending purse. Holding hands, we stroll down the streets while we decide on our restaurant. We check out various eateries, select one, and are seated in short order. The servers push carts filled with all sorts of dumplings, buns, wraps, noodles, puffs, tarts, and puddings. Noodle dishes with chicken, beef, prawns, and vegetables also go by. Ignoring the Prada hanging over her chair, I manage to have a blast selecting our dishes. Not to mention sampling them all.

The server pushes another cart by our table and Quinn pats her stomach. “I can't. I want to try everything but my body might revolt.”

I address the server. “I still have a wee bit of room, so cannae try those spareribs.” The plate is placed on our table and the server marks our portfolio. I pick one up and rip the meat off the bone. “Wow. These are well tidy scran.”

“Excuse me. They're what?”

“Och, sometimes I forget where I am. Means they’re delicious. Scran’s another word for food.”

“Thanks. I love your sayings, but a translator might be helpful sometimes.” She raises a small cup of black tea to her grinning mouth. “Guess you feel the same way about us Americans, huh?”

“Sometimes, aye. I do love how direct you are.” I pick up my napkin. “Plus, Americans base everything on your own merit, not who your parents were. Or their parents before them.” *Or the purses they choose.*

She drains the remnants of her tea. “That’s true-ish. In general, I agree with your observation.” She leans forward and lowers her voice. “In my case, if the truth were known, I’m sure I would receive the same scrutiny the other side of my family is getting.” She frowns.

This is a conversation not to be held in a public sphere, so I simply nod in agreement. Besides, it’s hard to argue with her when all of the newspapers carry stories about the Hansens and Turners on the regular. Her father and his partners are in a right pickle—while they’re suffering in jail, their families are enduring their own type of scrutiny. I raise my hand for the server to bring us the bill and take care of it.

When we’re on the street again, I snag her hand because I want her to know I’m on her side, no matter what. I, of all people, understand the weight of ancestry, which I try to convey with this simple gesture. In spite of the purse she carries.

Put her at ease. “Are you interested in finding out where we’re headed?”

“I’ve been dying to ask but didn’t want to appear nosy.”

I bop her on the nose. “You coudnae appear so if you tried.” Another difference between her and Fiona. “It’s about a thirty-minute walk, if you’re up for it.”

“Sure.” After a few steps, she asks, “Where, exactly, are we headed?”

“To the West Village.”

“Oh.” A few more steps pass. “Can you at least give me a hint as to *where* in the West Village we’re headed?”

“Sure.” I squeeze her hand. “I think you’re going to like it. At least I hope you will. It’s along the lines of your ideal evening.”

Her brow creases in an adorable manner as she processes my clue. “Are we going to the movies?”

“Ding, ding. Score one for the American lass.” We exchange smiles. “But not any old picture.” At the stoplight, we stop and wait for the signal to change. They’re different here from back home. In Scotland, the yellow flashes on both the up and the downswings, while here, it’s only on the up. Took me a while to adjust.

“So this theater we’re going to in the West Village doesn’t play first-run movies?” The tone of her voice lifts with her question.

“Aye.”

We cross the street, and she continues to pepper me with questions. She’s homing in on the slant of the film but hasn’t arrived at it by the time we turn the corner and she reads the marquee. “*Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope.*”

“My favorite.” *May the force be with us*, I amend the signature line. “I figured since we watched *Notorious* last night, I should take you to experience the movie that shaped my life.”

“Hmmm. To be fair, we didn’t really watch *Notorious*. You fell asleep about halfway through.”

My shoulder lifts. “True. But you own it, and we can pick it up anytime.”

“Like you don’t own this one.” She points to the movie poster by the box office.

“I do, but it needs to be experienced on the big screen. Trust me.” I hold up my mobile to show our tickets, and we enter the old-time theatre.

She pulls me toward the concession stand. “I’m not hungry, but I’d like to get a water. Can I buy you anything?”

I pat my stomach. “A water sounds good.” I scan the counter with all the sweets available. My mouth waters when I spot Sour Patch Kids and I point. “Although, if these came with us to our seats, I wouldna be unhappy.”

“*Wouldna* want you to be unhappy.” She orders the two bottles and the box of candy, obviously proud of her mimicking my accent. It was adorable.

I usher her into the theatre, and we take our seats. After we get settled in, she notes, “Surprised there are so many people here. This movie’s been out, what? Fifty years?”

“Nay, Flopsy. It only was released on May 25, 1977 in a limited run, and expanded to a wider release on July 21, 1978.”

“First, simply knowing these factoids is impressive. Second, I *wasnae* too far off.”

I do the math. She’s right. “Fair enough, lassie.” She struggles to open her water, so I take it from her and pass it back before opening mine. “Even though you aren’t appreciating my film choice—yet—I wouldna want you to become thirsty during the epic fight scenes.”

She giggles. “Thank you, kind sir.” She pauses. “Or should I refer to you as a brave knight? Like *Braveheart*.”

This is one of the movie guesses she made as we walked through Manhattan. Seeing as how she’s mentioned that travesty of a film twice, the need to educate her about true Scottish history surfaces. I conclude my diatribe with, “All this and I haven’t even mentioned the blue paint worn, while true of the Picts, is about one thousand years too late for the film.” I sit back in my chair, arms crossed.

“Wow. Remind me never to wander over to the wrong side of your soapbox.” She leans over and kisses my cheek. “It’s a sexy soapbox, though.”

All my bad juju expended, I let her compliment soak in and snag her gaze. “Sorry. You hit on one movie that really

gets under my skin.”

“Your very not-blue skin,” she corrects, with a smile.

I pull back my sleeve, exposing my flesh. “Agreed.” I get up in her face and steal a kiss. Tonight is going to end in a bed, whether hers or mine. I’m going to savor every moment leading up til then. I trust Quinn enough now to believe she’s not a gold digger. After all, she didn’t ask me to buy the damned Prada bag.

You need to tell her the truth about your family.

The room darkens and the film begins. Throughout the screening, I watch her as much as Luke, Princess Leia, and Han Solo on the big screen. Her hand steals into my candy box several times. She reels back in her seat or leans forward, rooting on the Rebel Alliance. When the credits roll, her face is flushed and her brown eyes shine.

“*Star Wars* was surprisingly . . . fun.”

I crumple the empty candy box and pick up both empty bottles of water. Getting to my feet, I raise my brow. “Only fun? This was the best picture ever made.”

She swats my stomach. “Have to argue with you on that score. But it definitely was entertaining. Kept my interest throughout. Didn’t feel the need to snooze or anything.”

Her oblique dig at last night is playful, not accusatory. Not for the first time, I think how different this lass is from every other in my acquaintance. Yet I don’t feel the need to explain how exhausted I was last night. How my duties at the distillery wore me down. How I needed to respond to her text in person to right my world. I also don’t want to lead her on—I’m not in the market for a girlfriend. Moray Distillery is my full-time mistress.

When we exit the pictures, it’s still light outside so we stroll along the streets and do some window shopping. She makes it surprisingly fun. We duck into an antiques store where she manages to find a poster of *Braveheart* and taunts me with it. Unperturbed, I saunter over to their stuffed animal

section and pick up a Jessica Rabbit. We both purchase our finds to commemorate our day.

Back in our building, I invite her into my apartment since we're always in hers. "I'd love to see what you've done with the place."

"Don't get your hopes up. I don't have the eye for decorating you do."

I unlock my door and let her enter first. She drops her Prada by the door and comments, "Looks exactly like my place."

"Minus your special touches." The curtains on the windows in her flat are in stark contrast to my pleated paper ones. At least I did pick up a mismatched sofa and loveseat for the living room, with a big screen television taking up the entire wall. The only pieces I insisted on bringing with me from Scotland were my stereo equipment and all my DVDs—which I believe still sound better than streaming. What can I say? I'm a purist.

Her gaze lands on my collection of magazines strewn around the available seating. As she flips through them, she reads the titles aloud. "*Whisky, Whisky Advocate, Malt, Irish Whisky, Whisky Flavour, American Whisky*. Wow, that's a lot of whisky."

"What can I say. I love the stuff." I collect the magazines and dump them into a single pile. I don't want to dive any deeper into my family's work. No way am I confessing I cut my teeth reading them.

"Have a seat and I can get you something to drink." I enter my kitchen and offer her the drinks I have, excluding whisky. She chooses a juice while I go with water. As I'm walking toward her, her mobile rings. When she looks at the screen, her smile slides off.

With a sigh, she holds up her finger to me and answers, "Hi, Ma."

Chapter 13

Quinn

Of course she would have to call me and interrupt this amazing day with Callum. The past has taught me, though, that if I ignore her call, she'll continue to ring and text and bother me until I respond. It's usually better to get it over with anyway, before she works herself into a tizzy. Besides, I'm hoping later will include some naked time with my neighbor, and I certainly don't want her to be interrupting us then.

I walk over to his window, with the same view as mine only one flight lower. Her voice comes through my phone. "Quinn, how are you doing? I haven't heard from you in a week."

The accusation in her tone is annoying. I'm not allowed to have my own life, but when Daddy used to pop into ours, it was as if she forgot I existed. Long ago, I learned to live above her expectations. "I've been very busy. I'm working on the Untamed Coaster rockumentary and it's taking up a lot of my time."

"Oh, right. How's it coming along?" I open my mouth to respond, when she says, "Hold your thought. I'm calling to invite you over for breakfast tomorrow and you can tell me all about it then."

Warning bells flash. Whenever she invites me over for a meal, she usually has something bad to share. Breakfast means it has something to do with Daddy, while lunches are about Jackie or me and dinners focus on her complaining about her

life. My stomach flips. I don't want to hear about Daddy, especially since I'm making inroads with his other family.

"Tomorrow?" Can I get out of this?

"Yes. I've already invited your sister and she's coming."

I rest my forehead against the window. If Jackie's already agreed, there's no way out. "Oh, well I guess that means you'll have a full house for breakfast."

"Great. See you at nine." She disconnects the call and I drop my hand onto the windowsill.

My mother and Jackie. Two people I've come to recognize as toxic. But they're my family. *Oh joy.*

"Is everything alright?" Callum comes behind me and places his hands on my shoulders.

He's so open and honest. He took me to see *Star Wars*, which I actually enjoyed. We ate dim sum. Not to mention we slept together last night. In a platonic way, but our kisses lead me to believe we're soon going to be leaving platonic land behind. I was hoping tonight, but not with this breakfast looming over my head.

I rest my head backward against his chest. "Yeah. Ma invited me over for breakfast tomorrow."

"In Westchester?"

He has a good memory. "Yes." As far away from his other family as he could get, yet still have easy access. I've come to understand this. Even accepted it when I was growing up. Now knowing the actual human beings behind his other family, it feels cheap. We've always been the skeleton in his closet, even if Ma refused to accept it.

"Westchester's not too far. I've heard there are beautiful homes out there."

"Yeah. Ma has a gorgeous place with a view of Manhattan. Daddy bought it for her." My tone sounds brittle.

He wraps his arm around me and leads me to the sofa. "Here, sit down. I made you tea. I could get you something

stronger, if you'd prefer."

"This is fine. Thanks." I pick up the mug and take a sip—it's English Breakfast made the way I like it, including with a splash of his whisky. The fact he bought my preferred tea, despite his feelings about it, warms me more than the hot liquid. The need to unload my family's sordid history grows until it bursts out of me. I open with, "Daddy only showed up a few times a month when I was growing up. More after he moved us from New Jersey."

"To be more convenient?"

"You guessed it." I take another sip of my perfectly prepared tea. "Of course, Ma spun it as if we were taking a big adventure. It worked for me since I was only eight at the time. Jackie and I went to the best private schools. Have to say, Daddy gave Jackie as much as he gave to me."

"Jackie's your half-sister through your mother, correct?"

I nod. "Yes. Daddy paid for both of our tuitions as well as our house and clothes. It was a big deal when he came into town. He'd always show up with presents for us girls." My lips quirk. "Mine were always a tad bit nicer." My fingers run over the necklace I'm wearing. "He gave me this, for example. It has diamonds around my initial, while Jackie's didn't. I think stuff like that fueled her competition with me."

"I'm sorry." He brings me closer to his body and I accept his comfort—a foreign concept. I've never shared these thoughts with anyone other than my diary, which Daddy had given me. When Jackie found it when I was ten, she made fun of me. So ended my diary days.

"It's been challenging growing up in my family. Ma loves me in her own way, but only had eyes for Daddy when he came around. Jackie was jealous." Took me years to understand her animus, but I'm able to admit this to the universe. Rather, Callum.

"I always wanted a sibling, but never got my wish," he admits. "From what I've learned over the years, being a

singleton or from a big family both come with its own set of challenges.”

My fingers play with his. “I agree. Some big families get along great, but I think they’re more the exception.”

A comfortable silence envelops us. More confessions beg to escape. “I knew from when I was young about Daddy having another family. Ma took pride in his business accomplishments, and I did too. After all, they kept us housed and clothed and in school. As my curiosity grew, I started to research the Hansens. Saw all their photos—big family vacations, parties, balls. They lived the glamorous life Ma wanted. Me? I never sought the spotlight, but I did want to be in their circles.”

“So you grew up to become a documentarian. Move in their orbit but not be a part of it.”

I blink. “How did you become so insightful?”

“Part of my Scottish charm.” He kisses my temple. “What have you learned?”

I consider his question. “I think my biggest takeaway is the difference between what’s presented to the world and how things actually are. Take UC, for example. The world knows them as the tragic rock band who was riding high for years and has disappeared. Their reality is they’re five hurt men who are trying to figure out how to get back to where they were, in an unfamiliar vehicle.”

“I think you found your hook.”

I sit up and face Callum. “What do you mean?” He doesn’t respond, merely allows me to process my observation. A few minutes tick by as I work out the details. “I think you’re right.” I hold up my hands as if framing the title. “Untamed Coaster: Fighting Back from the Brink.” My nose wrinkles.

“I like your hook, but your title needs a bit of work.”

“I think you’re right.” I straddle his body and wrap my arms around his neck. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a great sounding board?”

His smile transforms his face from dangerously handsome to downright gorgeous. “Maybe a time or two. But not a lass sitting on my lap. And never one as beautiful as you.”

“Right answer.”

I lean forward and kiss this kind man. He listens to my stories without judgment. He offers positive observations rather than mockery. He treats me like a queen. I giggle.

He breaks our kiss. “I’ve had many reactions when I’m kissing someone, but never laughter.”

“I think you treat me like a queen.”

“Well, Mary, Queen of Scots dinnae have good luck.” He makes a slicing sound and runs his finger across his throat.

“How about one who kept her head? Although, many of your British monarchy didn’t have good luck with that.”

He grabs me around my waist. “How about you can be *my* queen?”

“I’ll take this title.” He leans forward and brings our lips together, his hand behind my head.

Like before, his soft lips mold over mine.

Like before, his tongue duels with mine.

Unlike before, my stomach chooses this exact moment to let out a loud gurgle. I rush to cover my tummy with my hands, but I’m way too late.

Callum chuckles. “Is my queen hungry? Want a quick bite?” A devilish smirk appears right before he seizes my finger and brings it to his mouth, his teeth closing around it. “Delicious.”

I giggle. “Unfortunately, I think I need actual food. Dim sum was hours ago.”

“Cannae have my lassie hungry.”

We end up at a neighborhood restaurant and enjoy a casual meal. We laugh and flirt and satisfy our physical hunger. Darkness has fallen when we leave.

While I'd love to get horizontal with this amazing Scot, my mind has settled on the fact I'm going to Ma's house in the morning. I don't want our first time to include storm clouds ahead. I squeeze his hand, which is ever-present in mine. "I'd better prepare for breakfast tomorrow, so I'm going to have to return to my apartment. Thank you for a truly unforgettable day."

"I had a fantastic time with you. And you even enjoyed *Star Wars*." He winks at me, and my insides flip. "I'd love to see you tomorrow, so you can tell me how your breakfast went."

I inhale. "I'm not so sure I'll be in the right frame of mind."

"Then you've kindled my desire to see you all the more."

His kind words are my undoing. I'm experiencing, for the first time, what it means to be put first in someone's life. It feels . . . special. I want to bundle him up and tote him around with me. He gave me my first nickname, helped me unlock the hook for the rockumentary, and knows how I like my tea—things no one else in my life has ever done.

"Well, I'm sure the prospect of getting one of your awesome hugs will help me through breakfast."

"That can be arranged." Like the gentleman he is, escorts me into the elevator and to my door. Callum stands next to me as I unlock it, then turns me to face him. "A kiss for good luck tomorrow."

His lips meet mine in a scorching kiss.

Before things get overheated the way my body's begging for, I take a step back. "Have a good night, Callum MacMurray. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Counting the minutes."

I enter my apartment and my back rests against the door. Those minutes can't pass by fast enough.

Chapter 14

Callum

I lock my door behind me, my mind awhirl with thoughts about this amazing day. Quinn's so much more than I imagined. Her broken home life, so unlike my own, calls out to me. She seems to have weathered the injustices wrought upon her, but the pain in her eyes tells the real story.

I can't imagine how I'd feel if I were Da's dark secret, like she is Ogden Hansen's. All I know about the man is what I've read in the news, which paints him as part of the next Enron—only worse. Still, even a crooked man can have a loving family life. I scoff. Seems like hers had two.

Whatever his choices, it's the effect on his daughter that concerns me. I want to make her see not everyone is like her family, including her mother and half-sister Jackie. Seems like the only family member who treats her as an equal is Paige. The void in her life makes me want to fill it with happiness. The lass deserves it.

She also deserves to know of my own family history.

Realizing I have to come clean to her sooner rather than later, I check my watch which reads only eight. I glance at the table where paperwork from the distillery beckons. Given all the creative energy flowing between us today, including a rewatch of my favorite movie—which she enjoyed, thank you verra much—the desire to tackle some of the lingering issues for the launch brims. I take a seat and start working.

A few hours later, I rub my eyes and set down my pen, satisfied I've worked through many of the problems. Yes,

today has been one for the record books. My gaze steals across the room to the sofa where Quinn and I spent too quick of an interlude. My blood heats, remembering how good she felt in my arms. Before I can get carried away, I abandon Jessica Rabbit on the stool and take myself into the bedroom.

In bed, I lay on my back with my arms behind my head, picturing her in here with me. Her body suits mine like none other. Her height is perfect for me, as are her long limbs. Not to mention her flowing locks and ready smile. I have to stop if I want to get any sleep. With a soft sigh, I drift into slumber.

The next morning, I'm still on a high. I eat and shower, unable to wipe the smile off my face. I send her positive energy to help her through the breakfast she was dreading. My only hope is her mother doesn't burden her with more about her father, as she fears. No matter what, when we get together tonight, I'll help her process whatever information she's been given.

Maybe even make her forget it.

Since it's Sunday, I decide I should check in with my own parents. While I love them, as the launch looms closer, I'm more and more insecure about what I've been building here. Dadaidh expanded Morray Distillery into Europe practically with one hand tied behind his back. I'm also bringing our whisky to another continent, but it's been rougher waters here than around the Shetlands.

I clear my brain. I've done my best over here, and it seems as if everything is full steam ahead. I'm sure Angus will point out any remaining holes tomorrow at work. For today, though, I'm proud of what we've done. I pick up my mobile.

"Hey, Callum. How are you doin' over there in New York City?"

Dadaidh always starts our calls the same way. My response varies—today I reply, "Doin' well. Been working hard on the launch, and I think we've about locked it all down."

"I'm sure you have," Mam says. "You've been burning the midnight oil over there. We're so proud of you."

I wander over to the wall of windows across from the living room. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“We’re planning on flying over a day before the party. Got our flights and hotel reservations all in order. We booked a two-bedroom suite, so you can stay with us. Your Mam loves the Big Apple, so we’re also arranging Broadway tickets. What do you want to see?”

Since coming to New York, I’ve seen every show possible. Some twice. At this point, I don’t have any shows on my bucket list. “Honestly, I’ve seen most of them.” As I’m giving them a list of my recommendations, it hits me. Maybe Quinn would like to see one? It might be good for her to experience how a relatively functional family works. “On second thought, I might like to ask someone to join us for a show.”

“A lass?” Mam jumps in before my sentence is even finished, hope exuding through the receiver.

“Yes, a lassie.” Despite my stated intentions, I’ve succumbed to her. Maybe we could give dating a whirl considering I’m not returning to Scotland until Moray Whisky has found its footing? Knowing I need to have this conversation with her—not to mention come clean about my family—I continue, “We’ve only started, uhm, dating this week though, so it might be too soon.”

“Ask her. We’d love to meet her. I remember when I was courtin’ your Mam,” Dadaidh says. “We were only dating a wee time before her Da invited me over to his house for a dinner and a talkin.’ He done set me straight about my intentions toward his bairn. Dinnae scare me off, though. And look at us now.” He chuckles.

Even though I’ve heard this story a million times, the love between my parents shines each time. A wave of sadness falls as I recognize Quinn doesn’t have this sort of role model in her life.

“While I love your story, times are different. No one has talks with fathers anymore.” Certainly not Quinn’s father, for many reasons. Being behind bars, for one.

“What your father’s trying to say is we’d love to meet the new lass in your life. It’s been too long.”

Ever since Fiona dug her claws into me. The gold digger was the last lass I introduced to my family. It was like she struck paydirt when she met my parents. And that was when the pretty requests for a Prada, a dress, a trip began. I shovel the memory far away. Self-made Quinn’s nothing like Fiona.

“We’ll see.”

Mam tries a different tact. “Will you be bringing the lass to the launch?”

She’ll be there. Working. Although, Mam’s question is a good one. I’d like her to be my plus one. Stand by my side while the whisky’s being shared and discussed. If I do that, though, I’ll have to come clean with her about my heritage right away. What am I thinking? She will be at the launch whether I invite her or not. No matter what, I have to figure out a way to tell her my true identity. I have to trust she’s different.

She is.

I dinnae have to reply to Mam, as Dadaidh says, “Let’s let Callum sort through this on his own. Just know we’re excited to see you.”

“Thanks.”

“Fine,” Mam sighs. We discuss other things, such as how the distillery is doing in Scotland and our production in Europe. We even talk about the challenges with the launch here in America. We end by getting caught up on all the dirt on my friends and extended family back home. As our conversation comes to a close, Mam ends with her usual. “Let’s repeat our family mantra—*I am doing my best, and my best will succeed.*” We recite her words, etched into our souls, and disconnect.

“I hope you’re having a better time than you anticipated, Quinn.” My sentiment flies into the air, and I pray it reaches her somehow.

Not expecting her to return anytime in the near future, I decide I should get my blood pumping. Entering my bedroom, I change into workout clothes and head to the gym in the apartment building, which is one of the reasons I rented this place. At the gym, the floor-to-ceiling windows overlook busy streets below. Such a difference from my hometown.

I get on the elliptical and set a punishing speed. Despite my best efforts, I envision the rugged landscape from home—the breathtaking beauty of the lochs and pastures filled with sheep, horses, and “Highland coos.” Those long, curly-haired cows stole my heart as a boy and still reside there.

Working up a sweat, I suck in much needed air to continue my workout. Even the oxygen here is different from in Elgin. In Scotland, bagpipers provide background music. In New York City, I’ve only heard them once when a funeral was being held at St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

When the elliptical session ends, I head over to the free weights where Jacob’s hard at work. “Hey. How’s it going?”

He lifts a kettlebell over his head. When he drops it to the floor, he replies, “Good. I finished up a project at work on Friday and have been enjoying the weekend.” His eyebrows wiggle.

“Congrats.” After putting on a weight vest and selecting a couple of fifty-pound weights, I begin this portion of my routine. “Been working my arse off getting ready for the launch, but I finally feel as if we’re on solid footing.”

“Imagine it’s going to be quite the party when you’re done.”

I raise my chin toward him. “That’s the payoff.”

“Looking forward to it, man.”

I focus on my workout while Jacob moves over to the Nautilus machine. I keep my mouth shut about Quinn. Jacob obviously lives in our building and I don’t want to give him any ideas.

When sweat pours off my brow, I know I’ve reached my limit. Snagging a towel, I join Jacob at the water cooler.

He tilts the paper cup to his mouth. “Do you have any plans for tonight? I’m meeting up with some friends for dinner and drinks.” He pours more water into the cup and tilts it over his head.

We’ve hit the town quite a few times since I moved here, so his question isn’t unexpected. However, with Quinn coming over, I’m not interested in his offer. “Got a hot date with my spreadsheets.” I down a cup of water.

Jacob adopts the worst Scottish brogue I’ve ever heard. “If you finish up early, gimme a ring. There might be a wee dram and a lassie involved.”

Shaking my head, I swallow my second cup of water in one gulp. “Not if you say it like that. All the bonnie lassies will run for the lochs.” Our laughter garners quizzical looks from the others in the gym, encouraging me to perform an over-the-top bow.

We leave the gym together and take the stairs, where he exits the stairwell first and I continue down another couple of flights. Back in my flat, I go straight for the shower. Finished, I step onto the mat when knocking from my front door captures my attention. “This is becoming a habit.”

I half-dry my body and wrap the towel around my waist before rushing through the living room, hoping Quinn’s making a repeat visit. Without checking the peephole, I swing the door open and am rewarded at the sight of a tall, brown-haired American lass. She’s wearing a bright blue dress with a heavy gold chain around her neck.

Quinn steals my breath when she stomps her foot and exclaims, “Why am I jealous of a towel?”

Chapter 15

Quinn

Callum stands in the doorway looking proud of himself. As he should, since he's even more pumped today than I remember. And I have a good memory.

His hand drops to the top of the towel. "Dinnae want you to be envious. Should I give it to you to make amends?" He moves his arm as if he were going to unwrap himself.

My hands land on top of his. "No, no, no. It's fine. You have a very nice towel." I rub the top of it to make my point. *My internal Paige chastises me for such a denial.*

He throws his head backward and laughs. "C'mon in. I'll set your tea to boil while I get dressed."

Doesn't have to cover up on my account. Although, all his exposed flesh is distracting. "You're too kind."

"Believe me, Flopsy, I have ulterior motives. Don't want to run you away before I've reeled you in."

The idea of being on the receiving end of his hook makes my heart pound faster. To divert my attention, I turn my back and close his front door. "You need a doormat."

From the kitchen, he asks, "What should it say?"

My forefinger taps my chin. "I'm not sure. Something about *Outlander*, maybe?"

"Well, the show has done much for Scotland. Sam's a nice enough guy, but I'd prefer to be compared with a Dons football star."

My mind blanks at the first part of his sentence. “You know the actor Sam Heughan?”

“Aye. He’s the older brother of one of my friends from uni.”

“Damn. I was born in the wrong country.”

He fills a proper teakettle with water. “Maybe I can take you to Scotland sometime. ‘Tis a rugged, wild country. I think you’d like it.” He turns on the stove.

Damn. I can’t help but admire his fluid movements. The way his back muscles bunch and flex. Without a twinge of nerves at what I’m implying, I reply, “I bet you’re right.”

“Let me put on some clothes and I’ll be right out.” He points in the direction of his living room. “Make yourself comfortable.” He ambles into his bedroom, taking all the air in the room with him.

Callum MacMurray is one fine specimen. *Even his name is hot.* I detour to his bookcase and check out all his framed photos. Him with two older people, presumably his parents. They’re smiling and holding up a fish they each caught. Another one is from his graduation where the couple has their arms around him.

Such a contrast from the debacle that is my family. Ma’s breakfast today was a perfect example of how dysfunctional we are. The only photos of Daddy I have are a couple of ones Ma took on rare occasions we were together. My graduation photos from both high school and college were professionally taken of me walking across the stage. Neither Ma nor Jackie attended either. Certainly not Daddy.

My gaze jumps to other photos of Callum with his buddies—playing soccer, drinking whisky, or simply in Scotland. In every photo, he’s smiling his big, wide grin. Sometimes clean-shaven and in others with the sexy beard he sports today. I trace my finger over his cheeks. The beard suits him. Replacing the picture, I realize—smoldering good looks and hot bod aside—his good nature is the trait I most admire. Something lacking from my corner of the world.

I want it, though. A big group of friends who get together to laugh and have a good time. The closest I've ever come has been with UC, and even with them, I'm an outsider. I double-check my phone where the camera crew has provided updates about the band's movements over the weekend. They had a blowout good time at a club last night and are off to a slow start today. At least they're finally on the right track. And none too soon, considering the party is closing in.

The teakettle whistles as Callum returns to the kitchen wearing grey sweats and his favorite football team's long-sleeved shirt. His sexy feet remain bare. *Gah*. "Let me pour the water for your tea."

"A girl could get used to this."

"You've figured out my ulterior motive. Wind you in with my tea-making skills." He pours the hot water into the mug and puts the English Breakfast teabag into it. "Although, I've asked Mam to bring over some Scottish Breakfast tea for you. You'll taste the difference and start importing it by the pound."

I giggle. Who would ever want to import their own tea? "We'll see about that."

He offers me a toothy smile. "You laugh now. Wait and see, lass. Speaking of Mam, my parents are making the big trip over here for the launch and wanted me to ask if you'd like to join them for a Broadway show?"

My skin tingles. Meeting his parents smacks of something more permanent than I had in mind. Before I can go down this rabbit hole, I latch onto the timing issue. "I'm going to be tied to UC until they take the stage." I lick my lips. "Please tell your parents I can't wait to meet them at the party."

"Understood." His smile takes the sting away from this missed opportunity—or is it folly? When he's doctored my tea and taken a bottle of water for himself, we walk into the living room where we settle into his couch.

Callum dives right into the deep end. "So, tell me. How was breakfast with your mother and sister?"

I pause from blowing on the hot tea. “About as expected. Ma wanted to pump me for information about how Daddy is faring in jail.” I take a tentative sip and place the mug on the saucer. “You prepared it perfectly.”

“Just because I dinnae enjoy it doesna mean I don’t know how to make it for you.” When I don’t respond with anything more than a sunny smile, Callum tries again. “Have you visited your father in jail?”

“No. I’m not on the list of approved visitors.” When he was taken into custody, I tried to get into the jail to see him but was turned away as “unauthorized.” Cemented my understanding of where I fit into his family.

Without probing deeper, he says, “Must’ve been hard for you. I’m sorry.”

“Not your doing.” I wave my hand. “Besides, today Ma told us in her usual dramatic fashion that she’s been denied access to him, too. Five times.”

“Wow.”

I nod. “Then my sister Jackie said she has an appointment with him in two weeks, after the party. She’s an award-winning journalist, you see, and used this fact to worm her way into visiting him. As soon as Ma found out Jackie’s going to be seeing Daddy, she transferred all her frustrations and worry and charm to my sister for her to share with him.” I take a breath. “He was all she talked about for the rest of the meal.”

He rubs his beard. “So sorry, lass. This must’ve hurt.”

Hurt? No. I’m beyond being hurt by my family circumstances. *For the most part.* “Not really. I’ve accepted being second best to his other family. His arrest cemented my feelings. Ma, on the other hand, pounced on Jackie the way reality television stars fake not having scripts.”

His chuckle makes me feel as if I won the lottery and carries away the reek of the onerous required breakfast in Westchester. Although, Jackie did share about the FBI seizing Daddy’s assets. Thankfully, the house is in Ma’s name only, since he purchased it for her with cash seventeen years ago.

Wouldn't that have been the kicker? His "other family" gets to stay in their Manhattan apartment while she'd be kicked to the curb. Again.

Callum puts his arm around my shoulders. "I'm sorry you had to endure this. On the opposite end of the spectrum, my parents are coming stateside next week and are all up in my business."

"Since they only have you, I'd say it's allowed." Foreign concept, but still, their being interested in their son's life shows how much they love him.

"One set is overbearing, while—"

"The other set doesn't care." I complete his thought. The ache in my chest isn't as acute as usual. "If we put them together, would they be like Goldilocks? Just right?"

"I'm not sure, lass. They could turn out to be total busybodies you'd wish would give you a moment's peace."

Such an alien concept. I take a sip of my tea and continue, "Anyway, the breakfast was about as expected. Jackie complained about some blog out there run by her archrival." I take another swallow and place the mug back down. "Want to know the kicker?"

"There's more?"

"Oh yes. There always is." I lean forward. "Her archrival is Theo Hansen's fiancée." I allow my confession to sink in. When his eyes pop open, I know he's figured out that if Theo's my half-brother, she'll soon be my sister-in-law. "Yep."

He slings back his water. "You don't live a straightforward life, do you?"

"Accurate way to put it."

"So let me see if I got this straight. The only person in your true immediate family who's allowed to see Mr. Hansen is your half-sister—who isn't related to him by blood. Neither you nor your mother can visit him. And your half-sister's biggest rival will soon be married to your half-brother." He

shakes his head, then opens his arms wide. “Come here. *I* need a hug.”

His dramatic statement makes all the clouds dissipate. A moment later, I fling myself into his arms. When they close around me, I come to believe this is what I’ve been missing all day. Perhaps my entire life. Being held by someone who knows but doesn’t care about my family. Loyal and honest and unwavering. Who’s surrounded by a large group of people who love him.

I meet his gaze. “You’re not using me for my connections with Untamed Coaster are you?”

Without missing a beat, he replies, “No way, Flopsy. So long as you aren’t getting close to me to meet the *Outlander* star.”

His reply is so outrageous that a giggle flies from my mouth. “Nope.” I snuggle closer to his hard body, soaking up his distinctive cologne urging me to start a Paige-inspired Highland fling. We sit like this for a while, his heartbeat a calming background noise.

His palm strokes up and down my back. Not in a sexual way, but more of a comfort. A reassuring touch showing he’s here for me.

Soon, it’s not enough.

Soon, I want more from this amazing man than a simple touch over my clothes.

Soon, I lift my head toward his and stare at his talented lips. Wanting them to be on mine. Loving every slight movement they make.

“If you keep on looking at me like this, Flopsy, I cannae be responsible for my next actions.”

“Why hold back? I want to feel your lips on mine again. I want to run my fingers over your bare chest and savor every bump. I want to—”

My next words are cut off when Callum’s lips cover mine in a kiss so scorching I’m surprised the fire alarm doesn’t go

off. His hands go behind my back and he lowers the zipper on the back of my dress. My fingers reach the hem of his shirt and it flies off his body.

I sit back and admire his chiseled torso. My finger traces each individual cut of the muscles on his abdomen. My eyes trail upward to his pupils, which dilate to double their size.

“Let’s get you out of this dress. I need to touch you as much as your hands are on me.”

It’s not his direction that spurs me off the sofa so much as the urgency underlying it. I get to my feet and the material shimmies down my body, pooling at my heels. Before I can make another move, he stands and picks me up, his mouth fused to mine.

With my legs wrapped around his waist, we cross the living room, pass the kitchen, and speed through the open door into his bedroom. I only fleetingly notice the differences between our bedrooms—his room is dark blue and moody to my floral and pastels, his king-size bed is covered in a navy duvet with only two pillows versus my white comforter and a dozen pillows, and he has blinds to my curtains. My attention swings back to the Scotsman in front of me as he removes my necklace, unclasps my bra, and lifts my boobs into both of his palms.

“I love these. They’re the right size for me.” To prove his point, he kisses both erect nipples, which tighten more under his ministrations.

My fingers end up in his ginger hair, tugging hard to show how much I want him. Which is more than I’ve wanted any other man I’ve known. I glance downward and his cock strains against his sweats. Bet the man didn’t bother to put on underwear. *Can’t say as I blame him.*

He pulls the duvet downward, exposing matching navy blue sheets. “Up you go.” He helps me get onto his high bed then joins me, his hands sliding over my body as if he owns it. *Shockingly this thought doesn’t scare me.*

He trails kisses from my mouth down my body, his fingers caressing my skin. “You have goose pimples. Dinnae tell me you’re cold.”

I shake my head. “On the contrary, I’m burning up.”

He chuckles, the sound landing low in my stomach. “Then I guess I should help you out of your knickers. Seeing as how you’re so hot and all.”

“Please.” I don’t care that I’m begging. I want what this man is offering. *Now.*

Staring at his progress, he watches as his fingers tease the waistband of my panties. Pulling one side away from my hip and then the other. My legs open, wanting him to pull the lace off my body. Finally, finally, finally he slides the material down my limbs and tosses it onto the floor.

I’m exposed but safe. Callum ensures this with his next words, spoken in quiet reverence while his fingers trace my thighs. “You’re more beautiful than I imagined.”

Spurred on, I jackknife up and reach for his sweats. “Let me see you.” I push the grey material and it slips downward, over his naked hips. He takes over and soon his sweatpants meet my panties on the floor. His cock is engorged, pointing at me with a bead of pre-cum at its tip. My mouth waters, and I obey its nonverbal demand. Leaning forward, I close my mouth around him and suck.

“Ach. You’re too talented for your own good, Flopsy.” He swivels his hips backward and frees himself. “You first.”

His hands land on my shoulders and he steers me toward the bed. On my back, I reach out for him and am rewarded when he lies on top of me. “I trust you to take care of me.” I breathe. “You always have.”

He kisses me, obliterating all thoughts. His mouth worships my body . . . there’s no other way to describe it. From my mouth to my nipples and down my stomach, he licks and kisses and nips my body. Before arriving at my wet core, his finger enters my channel and he emits a hiss.

“Lass. All for me?”

“Aye.” My smile at his using one of his Scottish go-to words slides from my face when he adds a second finger inside me.

“I’m gonna prove to you I deserve it.”

He settles himself between my legs. The tip of his tongue touches my center in a long lick, sending shivers up my spine. My head thrashes on the pillow. He does it again and my breath hitches before restarting on a rush.

“You’re so open for me. Let me return the favor.”

He redoubles his efforts, alternating between moving his fingers inside my channel and laving my pussy with his tongue. When he focuses all his attention on my clit, though, my response is electric. An orgasm shimmers on the horizon and I focus my entire attention to bringing it forward. From past experience, this will take my full concentration and extra stimulation. My hands are on their way to pinch my nipples when an explosion detonates within my body.

It doesn’t bang and run like usual. No. Callum’s mouth works some sort of sorcery, causing my orgasm to ripple throughout my body in what seems to be an unending loop. When the final ounce of pleasure is wrung from my body, he pulls away and I slump into the bed. I don’t have energy to do anything else.

After rolling on a condom, he perches over me, his mouth at my ear. “You’re the most expressive lass. Thank you for trusting me.”

A laugh bubbles. He’s thanking *me*? I trace the dent of muscle on his shoulder. “You’re a magician, Callum. No. A leprechaun.” Score one for me with the Scottish reference.

He chuckles. “I hope not. Them Irish can keep their mischievous devils.”

“Rats. You short-circuited my brain. I know they’re from Ireland.”

He rocks his hips against me. Inexplicably, my sex zings back to life and I hook my ankles around his legs. “You may refer to my oversized Nessie, if you’d like.”

Despite being more turned on than ever before, I laugh. Dropping my arm lower, I encircle his shaft. “A very formidable monster,” I agree.

He surges forward, prodding at my entrance. “Want to see him swim?”

I drop my legs. He’s bigger than any man I’ve been with, and I crave to know how he’ll fill me. Although I’m under no illusion I’ll be able to climax again. I’m a one-and-done type of girl. Still, I can enjoy the act without reaching another pinnacle. The one he already sent me on was higher than I’ve ever experienced. “Oh yes. Please.”

He kisses my mouth and takes his time pushing into me. With every inch he enters into my body, I feel fuller and fuller. The pressure builds, but it only increases my pleasure. With a final grunt, he fully seats himself. Dropping his head onto the pillow next to mine, he pants, “I love how your body welcomed me. So tight, it’s as if you were made for me.”

I stroke my hand down his back, ending on his ass. “I feel the same way.” Not only physically. The way he watches out for me, stands up for me, puts me first. A surge of longing races through my body, followed by a zap of sexual energy when he thrusts his hips forward. Unusual. But oh-so-yummy.

Grabbing hold of his butt, I pull us together in a slow movement. He allows this coupling for a minute, then kisses the life out of me as his hips begin a faster piston into me. As he does, my body springs back to life like the past thirty minutes didn’t happen. I climb up another hill, higher than before. How is this possible?

Callum lifts onto his hands, sweat rolling down his brow. My gaze travels down to his ripped torso, with its pronounced muscles. His hand slides underneath my legs and lifts so they’re on top of his shoulders. The change in angle snakes through my body, awakening every nerve ending along the way.

On his knees, he pumps into me faster, his finger seeking my clit. When it grazes me, another explosion—more

powerful than the first—races from my toes to the top of my head. I scream as I clench around him.

This doesn't stop him, no. He continues his pounding pace, putting me on a trajectory I never even dreamed existed. When this orgasm stops, another shimmers. Within seconds, it's gathering into the biggest storm yet. His grunts couple with my moans, providing a backdrop of sexy music UC wishes it could achieve. This time, my entire body contracts as a billion bursts of light leap forward. A second later, he stiffens, then roars his completion, emptying himself into me.

All of my limbs are lifeless, yet my insides buzz with endorphins chasing each other. My breath comes in shallow pants. Above me, Callum pulls out and takes care of the spent condom, then lies down next to me. He brings me to his hard body.

What do you say after experiencing the most amazing sexual experience of your life? Thank you? *Ugh*. I can't string more than two words together, and my count may be off by two. I cup his face and kiss his talented mouth. Which is even more gifted than I realized before. My body is wrung out in the most delicious way.

“How do you feel?” Lazy blue eyes seek my soul.

Why lie? “Amazing.”

He chuckles. “Me, too.”

Innumerable kisses later, he rubs my arm. “Let me take care of you.”

“Uhm,” I giggle. “I think you already did.”

His smile is breathtaking. “Then I want to do it some more. Stay right there.”

He disappears into the bathroom. I stretch, savoring how places I didn't know existed yawn in repletion. The Scottish grow them well. Beyond compare, in fact.

Callum returns to the bedroom carrying a wet hand towel. What's he planning on doing with that? I don't have to wait

long, as he approaches the bed and says, “Open your legs for me.”

I squeak, “What?” He can’t want to do what I imagine he’s thinking. No one has ever done this for me—clean-up is my responsibility. I shake my head. “No, I’m fine.”

Ignoring my reaction, he pushes my legs apart and stares at my pussy. I want to shove them closed and block his embarrassing view, but I’m fascinated when his tongue licks his lips. “I can say, without a doubt, you’re beautiful, inside and out. Please allow me this.”

I could push him away, but when he says something like this, how can I? Still. “No one’s ever done this for me before.”

“Then you’ve not been with the right man before.” He straightens. “You clearly *huvnae*, since this was our first time.”

Three orgasms and now this? What’s next? He creates a whisky for me? My wayward thoughts cease when he brings the towel to my pussy and caresses my flesh in the most erotic way.

“Feel good?” His Scottish accent mirrors how he’s taken care of me. Warm and comforting and exciting, all rolled into one delicious feast.

On an exhale, I reply, “Yeah.”

Tossing the towel onto the floor, he wraps me in his arms, placing his chin on top of my head. “I need to recharge before we can go another round.” He closes his eyes.

Another round? That’s something else I’ve never experienced. All the guys I’ve been with have never come back for seconds. Callum is straight out of a woman’s fantasy. *I’m not complaining.*

What’s happening to me? I mean, I enjoy sex as much as the next girl, but it’s been my experience men don’t stick around after getting their rocks off. Since I’m in *his* bed, though, it’s not like he can leave.

I don’t plan on it, either. Maybe ever. I shut down this wayward thought, noting it didn’t cause horror to race through

my bloodstream. Truth be told, the idea barely registered a blip on my panic-o-meter. *What is he doing to me?*

Trailing my hand down his back, I savor when his stomach constricts against my bare torso. “Any way to jump-start those batteries?”

One blue eye opens.

Chapter 16

Callum

Round Two with Quinn is even more amazing than the first. She's adventurous, eager to try anything my mind conjures. This time, I took her doggie-style, leaving my mind—and body—blown.

Once we've recovered our breath, I interlace our fingers and lead her to the shower. Where I once imagined her with me. I must've manifested her.

The water streams down our bodies. Even though she's allowed me to take her twice, I want so much more. In every position imaginable, and then some. I bet we could create ones that would make the authors of the *Kama Sutra* blush.

Quinn is so much more than I anticipated. I've had plenty of sex in my life, but nothing comes close to what went down in my bed. Her unguarded reactions inspired me. She doesn't realize it, but her confessions about her past sex life also made me want to be better. For her.

Picking up my body wash, I squirt some into my hand and rub it on her body. I've only performed a cursory exploration of it so far, but have reveled in each square inch she offered. How her arms hold me tight. The way her legs urge me into her body. The perfect fit of her boobs into my palms. Her pussy. Well. A smirk crosses my face. It's sweeter than I've ever tasted. So. Much. Sweeter.

She plucks the container from my hands and begins to return the favor by washing my abs. She traces between each

bulge of my hard-earned six-pack, following the trail her tongue took. Could this lass be any more perfect?

The fact she's shared her innermost memories about how it was growing up in her family urges me to share my truth. She walks around my body, carefully washing my back and lower. It'll be fine to trust her. *Right?*

"This soap smells like how I picture Scotland."

Her comment brings me out of my mind. "Aye. It's my favorite."

She returns to stand in front of me, squirts a dollop onto both hands, and closes them over her boobs. "What do you think? Am I a Scottish lass now?"

Reaching behind her, I tug at her lower back until our bodies are pressed against each other. "I dunno about that, yet, but you certainly have hooked a Scottish lad."

Her hand trails lower and closes around my erection. "I do like how hooked he is."

Unbelievably, with her movements up and down, my cock grows in her hand. Not one to deny pleasure, no matter how unexpected, I note, "I think Nessie would like to get hooked again."

She giggles, and my cock jumps. "This can be arranged. I'm a tad sore, though, so I think my mouth will have to do this time."

It's as if my brain short-circuits. Can the lass get any more perfect for me? Still, I don't want to force her to do something she's not inclined to do. I tip her chin up toward me. "Are you sure? You don't have to do this for me. Or, I could release onto the shower floor." *I want to spew inside her mouth.*

"I've got you."

And she does.

Later, with her in only my Dons shirt and me back in my grey sweats, we sit at the kitchen island eating another pizza. I place my palm on her knee and run it up to her thigh and squeeze. "What's on your agenda for tomorrow?"

She lowers the slice onto her plate. “Now I know. You only want me for my connections to your favorite band.”

While this fact certainly was a draw initially, the truth is Quinn Walker is much more enticing. Conversely, the thought of her interacting with the band raises my hackles. I’ve never been a jealous man before, but I sort of don’t want her around the lads. After all, they do have a certain reputation.

“I can honestly say I’d be fine if you walked away from UC.” She sits straighter, her hand rubbing the back of her neck. “I do want you to make this documentary, it’s not that.” I slump. “Don’t think of me as a wanker, but I’m not sure I want you around the band members anymore. They aren’t choirboys.”

She throws her head back and laughs. Rubbing her eyes, she says, “You think I’m attracted to any of the guys in the band?”

“Wouldn’t be the first lass to be taken by their charms.”

She places her hand on top of mine. “I can reassure you. The members of UC are safe from my wiles.” She laughs again.

Guess I did sound stupid. “Not attracted to them in the least?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. When Gary gave me the assignment, I had to look them up. Now I’ve spent time with them, all I see is bleeding hearts, to be honest. They lost one of their best friends to an overdose and have been trying to adjust to their new reality for a year. When Tris was introduced, it brought back all of their negative feelings. Things are finally on an upswing. But to answer your question, I wouldn’t want to get involved with any of the band members. I’m damaged enough—I don’t need to add to their mess.”

I process what she’s shared. Shunting aside my unjustified jealousy, I pray the band can learn how to flourish with their new keyboardist. I love their music, their vibe. Excited to see their 2.0 version, as she calls it.

I address the most personal part of her admission. “I don’t think you’re damaged. You’ve had a hard upbringing, to be sure. But look at you.” Using my palm, I motion up and down her body. “You’re successful in your field, with a job many would kill to have. I can’t wait to see how you bring UC to life for millions.”

She leans against the back of the stool. “You’re very kind. I love how you always look at the bright side of things. I’m not like you, though. I bet your family misses you since you’ve relocated to New York City. Do you have scheduled calls once a week?”

I trace the veins on the quartz. “We do.”

“In those weekly calls, do you talk about what’s happening with your family and friends back in Scotland? You’re from Elgin, right?”

Surprised at her remembering my hometown, I rap on the countertop. “Aye.”

“Holidays are spent with them, eating copious amounts of food and drinking whisky.” I don’t reply, so she continues, “You have the Scottish equivalent of a Norman Rockwell family. I always dreamed of having one.”

“Who are meddlesome, opinionated, and think they know what’s best for me.” I cross my arms. While her family is her father’s shame, mine’s on display for everyone. Who all feel the right to comment upon it.

Her eyebrows move up and down. “Guess that’s a downside to having people who care.”

I love my family. Being only the three of us, we are close. But they don’t understand what I’ve gone through with being dubbed the Whisky Boy in childhood, followed by the gold digger parade. Why I’ve avoided settling down. Their pressure to marry and continue the MacMurray line is unnerving. Although with Quinn, it doesn’t seem quite so daunting.

I cup her cheek, gazing deep into her dark brown eyes. “We both had a rough time growing up, no matter if the grass looks greener on the other side. As any Highland Coo will tell

you, it isn't." She grins, and I continue. "How about we're each other's family from this moment on?"

My statement hangs in the air. We both process the implications of what I've said.

"You'll be going back home to Scotland soon. I'm sure the party will be a big success and your job here will be done. I live here. I wish I could see this working." Her hand flips between us. "But I can't."

Now's the perfect opening for me to explain about my family. Tell her I'm the man behind Moray Distillery. Yet my history with people like Ewan and Fiona prevents me from forming the words. Instead, I blurt, "Want to be my plus-one to the launch?"

She blinks. "I'll be there with UC."

"I know. But once they've taken the stage, you should be able to step away from your responsibilities, right?" Mam and Dadaidh will be there. I'm playing with fire, but I want her at my side. She has to know how important she is to me. I'll disclose my family ties. *Later.*

Our fingers play with each other. She hooks my pinky. "I'd like that. To know we'll be looking out for each other, even if we're on opposite ends of the party."

I don't waste time but lean forward and seal our deal with a kiss.

Which turns into much, much more.

Chapter 17

Callum

The next day at work, Angus walks into my office. “I haven’t seen such a look on your face in a long while. What’s the lassie’s name?”

“Quinn.”

“A right fine name.” He settles into the guest chair. “However, I’m here as the bearer of bad news. Looks like our pal Ewan Ferguson is up to his old shenanigans.” He passes me his iPad.

“What’s going on?” I’ve checked and double-checked all of the details for the launch and everything seems in good order. The only remaining piece is the RSVPs.

I glance at the screen and my blood boils. “Shite. Why would he do this?” A big bold advertisement proclaims Michael’s Malt “Movement” on the same day as our launch. It states the first drink of their new blend will be free at specified clubs throughout the day. “How dare he?”

“Because he’s a bugger, that’s why. Arsehole wants to rain on our parade. Guess we were makin’ too big of a splash.”

This is personal. I should’ve known he was up to something when we met up the other day in the restaurant. He’s been a thorn in my side since we were kids—he’s just kicked it up a level. My fist hits the desk. “How can we outdo him?”

“I’ve been trying to think of ideas. We could post fliers at each of the clubs he’s identified in his ad and invite them to

come to our launch.”

“I guess it’s an option.” I tug on my ear. “Did we already invite those clubs?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then we need something bigger.” Perhaps play up UC’s role at our party? Maybe I could ask Quinn to have them do a quick video of them with Moray Whisky, inviting people to come out and try some of the Scottish best. A smile draws across my face.

“I like the look of whatever you’re cookin’ up here.” He taps his forehead.

“What do you think about this?” I explain my video idea to him, and he loves it. Now to get UC on board. “Go out and gather up some bottles, posters, and other whisky paraphernalia. Oh, and include some trinkets from Scotland, too. I’m going to make Ewan sorry he messed with me again.” Angus gets to his feet and, after a fist bump, leaves to gather my requested items.

Now to get UC on board. I pick up the phone and press the contact for Flopsy, and she answers on the first ring. “How’s my Scottish lad doing today?”

“He’s been better. He missed you next to him in his bed this morning.”

Her voice lowers. “I had to get a good night’s sleep, which I wouldn’t have had if I was sleeping next to a big ginger. What’s up?”

I take a big breath. “Seems like one of our rival American blends is trying to overshadow our launch. They’re offering a free drink at clubs throughout the city on the evening of our launch.”

“That’s low.”

“It is.” I gather my courage. “I was thinking, what if UC did a video featuring Moray Whisky in the background inviting people to the launch? Would cut our rivals off at the knees, am I right? Think the band would be up for it?”

“I love how your mind works, Mr. MacMurray.” She laughs. “Let me ask them. They had a good weekend and are in a better headspace today. If they agree, when do you think you’d like to shoot?”

Now. “Is tomorrow too soon?”

“Since there’s only a few days until the party, I say we have no time to waste. I’ll text you once we’ve talked, okay?”

“Sure thing. And thank you.”

“You can thank me later. Bye.” She hangs up and all sorts of ways of doing so play in my mind.

I’m putting the final touches on the concept for the video I’m positive UC will agree to when I receive her text saying tomorrow’s a go. I reply to her with my ideas for the short video and get to work finalizing all the details.

At night, I knock on her door holding some of the props for the video. She doesn’t even bother with the peephole, rather opens the door wide. “Good evening. I come bearing gifts.” I lift the props. Closing the door with my foot, I walk over to the small dining room table tucked by the windows. “What do you think of these?” I show her a Scotland calendar, a Scottish picture book, and other pieces of Scotch lore including a cute stuffed Nessie wearing a plaid scarf and traditional hat.

She picks up each piece, then turns her attention toward me. “Pieces of Scotland?”

“Aye. Some items for the video shoot tomorrow. I was thinking UC could play a snippet of a song with these items around them to get fans riled up.”

“By fans, you mean yourself?”

I tilt my head sideways for a brief moment. “Side benefit.” I hold my fingers in a square. “Picture this. The band plays on a makeshift stage, puts down their instruments, and picks up a glass of Moray whisky.”

She giggles. “That’s a way to do it.” Her fingers trace the various items I brought up. “Or we could have this stuff placed

around by them as they play. Bennett could stop the song and talk about how excited he is to be returning to the stage and introducing this Scotch whisky to America.”

Bennett. For a half-second, I forgot she knows these lads personally. I grin. “This is why you’re the director and I’m simply with the whisky company.”

She raises to her tippy toes and kisses me. “Together, we can conquer the world.”

I rest my hands on her hips. “I know what else we can conquer together.” Adjusting my stance, I lower a fraction and stare into her mesmerizing eyes. “I’d love to try out your bed.” Work’s done, time for pleasure. Quinn’s the ultimate in bliss. The need to make her mine overpowers me, so I give in and add, “Girlfriend.”

Her brilliant smile could light up the entire city. She traces my beard. “My *boyfriend* doesn’t have any clothes here for tomorrow.”

One of my shoulders lifts, then lowers. “Whatever will we do?” She takes my shirt out of my pants and starts to unbutton it. I left my blazer in my apartment but didn’t bother to change. “That’s Tomorrow Callum’s problem.”

Her whisper makes this whole day worth it. “Aye.”

In a frenzy, we get rid of each other’s clothes, and I place her on top of the kitchen island where I step between her legs. She shivers. “Who knew quartz was this cold?”

I chuckle. “Where are your oven mitts? I could put them beneath your arse.” I put my fingers beneath her bottom.

“Ick. No, thank you. It’s getting warmer by the second.” She rocks from cheek to cheek.

“How about if I blow on them for you? See how helpful I can be? Lean forward.”

“Another hard pass.” She opens her legs wider. “But I do know where you could put your mouth.”

Adjusting her closer to the edge of the countertop, I reply. “Let me see what I can do for you.”

I approach her wet core and suck on her pussy. Her legs clamp to each side of my head as I lap up her hidden treasure. In the most beautiful sound ever, she comes undone against my tongue. Her back arches and her head falls backward, her fingers laced in my hair, sealing me against her sex. Her sweet scent drifts into my nose. I want to plunge into her body, but dread stops me. Shite. In my haste to come upstairs, I forgot condoms.

From my position at her thighs, I look up. "I remembered what I forgot."

Her glazed eyes lower to mine. My back straightens. I put this look on Flopsy's face. "Huh?"

"Do you have any condoms?" Please say yes. I don't know if I can make it all the way down to my apartment.

"Umm." She shakes her head. "No. I don't."

I lower my forehead onto her right thigh. Fuck. "I have some downstairs."

She strokes my hard erection, then her hand threads in my hair. "I don't want you running around in this condition. Give me a second and I'll go down."

"I know where I want you to go down." She giggles. "My keys are in my pants. I'll wait for you in your bed." I trust her to enter my space. Quinn's not the type to snoop.

With effort, we extricate our bodies and she throws her clothes back on. Well, only her shirt and leggings, since I hold her panties and bra high above her head. "Be right back."

Alone in her apartment, I leave my clothes where they fell and walk into her bedroom. It's a mirror image to mine, only in florals and pastels. Her bed is also a king size, which means enough room for us to play. Her bunny slippers sit on the floor next to it, bringing a smile to my face. I shove the comforter down to its foot and scramble into her bed as the front door opens.

Quinn enters the bedroom, a sleeve of condoms held high. "Think this is enough?"

“It’s a start. We need to put a full box in here.” I pluck them from her fingers. “Let’s start with one.”



The next morning, I go another round with Quinn before eating breakfast wearing only my pants. Boxer briefs, I correct myself. I give Quinn a kiss and tell her I’ll see my *girlfriend* at the UC’s rehearsal space this afternoon. With a spring in my step, I return to my apartment and get ready to tackle the day. When I’m actually going to meet UC.

In the office, Angus provides me with extra items he found to represent Scotland. He’s so excited for this video that I can’t deny him an invitation to join me for the shoot. “I thought you’d bring the director of marketing.”

I shake my head. “Yvonne’s busy working on other aspects of the launch. I want you with me.”

He grins. “Don’t have to ask me twice.”

At two, we leave the distillery for the address Quinn texted me. We approach the rehearsal space and I swear the air’s different here. Angus must feel it too, as he remarks, “This is where the magic happens.”

We enter the building and are directed to their studio. Standing at the threshold, we watch Bennett, Coop, Ríó, 007, and the new guy at their instruments playing one of their older hits, “Make Me Feel It.” Off to the side, Quinn sits next to a man I recognize from their website as their manager. Angus leans toward me. “Is this for real?”

“I hope so. C’mon, let me introduce you to Quinn.” We head in her direction. I warn, “Be nice.”

My girlfriend’s brown gaze warms when she sees me. “Callum, you’re here.”

Quinn stands and gives me a brief hug. Too brief, in my opinion, but now's not the time to stake my claim. Introductions are made with Luke Allen and Angus. Soon, the song ends and the manager motions for the band to come over.

In what has to be the most surreal moment in my life, I shake hands with the band I've admired for a decade. Their hands feel normal, if not a bit more calloused than mine. One of the guys burps, while another farts. They really are regular dudes. Uber-talented, yet normal lads.

I glance at Angus, whose mouth hangs open. I elbow him in the ribs, causing him to start then settle into his regular breathing pattern. For a moment, I wonder where he would be if he were born over here. His father and grandfather both worked at Moray Distillery, so the job landed in his lap. He's a fabulous executive assistant, but perhaps he would be interested in another position?

My musings stop when Luke explains how the video will go down, which is similar to how Quinn described it last night. We exchange glances and it dawns on me she gave her idea to the manager, who then tweaked it a little. As director of the rockumentary, she's repeatedly told me her job isn't to interfere. Yet, it must be challenging to have your ideas appropriated in such a fashion.

Bennett stares at me, his green eyes piercing. As if no other person exists on earth but him and me. "Any request for the song?"

Every UC song flees from my head. Have I even heard one? From behind me, a feminine cough pulls me out of my stupor. "'Crushing Blow' has special meaning to me, but I'd understand if you don't want to play that one."

"We can play a little bit of it." He glances toward Luke. "If you're alright with this idea?"

Luke demonstrates why he's been the band's manager since they began. "You could. Or you could play your new song. Give the fans a taste of what's to come."

Quinn mentioned they were working on a new song, but didn't make it sound as if it was this far along. Bennett rubs two fingers over his nose. "Yeah. Makes sense." He returns his attention back to me. "We'll play 'Crushing Blow' for you first, though."

For me? "Awesome."

He fist bumps me and Angus, as does the rest of the band before they file over to the rehearsal space. My assistant murmurs, "Holy. Shite. You're the best boss ever. Imagine how our fathers would react to seeing us now."

Fuck. I plummet back to earth and glance at Quinn. She's busy flipping through her notebook, so she probably didn't hear what he said. Can't explain this to him at this very moment, but he has to stop with the family references. Under my breath, I mutter, "Let's not bring history into this. I don't want to spoil the moment."

Angus gives me a quizzical look. I channel all my energies into focusing on the band setting up and breathe a sigh of relief when Angus shrugs.

Bennett takes the mic. "This is for you, Callum MacMurray."

The familiar strains of "Crushing Blow" start and I leave worries about Quinn discovering my ties to the distillery behind. UC sounds great. Better than great. I shift my weight between my legs. I'm getting a private concert from the best band ever. When they hit my favorite part of the song, my head snaps backwards. There's a slight difference. Nothing major, it's like they missed a half beat or something.

I glance over at Luke, who's sporting a frown. Guess I wasn't the only one who noticed. I give them a pass. Truth is, they're coming back from a major loss and sound awesome, with the same passion as before. Mostly. Their "spark," as Quinn called it, is on full display. Even if it's slightly off-kilter. They're a different band now, but I have faith they'll figure it out.

When the song finishes, both Angus and I clap. He even whistles, which garners smiles from the guys. “That was great.” I give them a thumbs up.

“Thanks, man. You’re the first people outside of this room to hear us play.” Bennett addresses us. “Means a lot.” The group goes into a huddle.

I lean over to Quinn. “I understand what you mean about the 2.0. They’ve still got it, though.”

She whispers back, “They’re professionals. They understand their job and are working to find their new footing.”

“Their reality is they’re five hurt men who are trying to figure out how to get back to where they were, in an unfamiliar vehicle.” I repeat the hook for her rockumentary back to her, receiving a brilliant smile in return.

Luke walks over holding his mobile. “I think the video will be more authentic if I film it on here rather than using one of your cameras.”

Quinn replies, “Makes sense to me.”

Even though he didn’t ask me, I add, “It’ll be like the audience is here with us.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Luke turns toward the band. “Great job, guys. Now let’s play ‘Take a Ride with Us’ so we can lay down this video.” He holds up his mobile. “I’ve got you.”

Río bangs on the drums, ending by hitting a couple of cymbals. I’m once again transported into the alternate universe where I’m experiencing UC in such an intimate setting rather than at a stadium with thousands of other fans.

Bennett takes the mic. “Alright, let’s do this.”

They start to play the unfamiliar strains. It’s a power ballad, with a hint of wistfulness underlying a hope. It tugs at my heartstrings.

Angus shouts, “Wait! Can we adjust the Moray Distillery props a wee bit?”

I blink. They have all our stuff out, scattered around the room. “What are you doing?”

“Pretend you’re the video camera.” He holds up his mobile. “You’re not going to be able to see our stuff since the band will hide it. It would be better if we had it all on one table with the band crowding around it before or after playing.”

Too swept up in the experience, I didn’t notice any of this. I consider his observation and realize he’s right. I clamp my hand on his shoulder. “I knew I kept you around for a reason.”

Together, we walk into the sacred rehearsal space and rearrange our paraphernalia. We leave some things where they are but drag out a table and set up an arrangement dedicated to Moray.

Coop comments, “Looks nice. What’s your whisky taste like, anyway?”

Now we’re in my territory. I describe the smooth notes of smoke and apple with an undertone of seaweed and brine adding a hint of the salty sea. How it’s been aged in an oak cask for over four years, even though three is the legal requirement. My great-great-grandfather worked for a long time to perfect this recipe and, like UC, hit all the right notes. “Want a taste?”

“Hell, yes. I thought you’d never ask.” Coop’s response takes me off guard. They were waiting for an invitation. From me?

Angus pipes up. “I brought some glasses, just in case.” He unzips his backpack and passes out cups. “My man.” Río claps my friend on the back when he takes his cup.

Not to be outdone, I crack open a bottle and pour for the lads, then hand a cup to Luke. Quinn raises her water bottle to me. Someday in the future, I’ll teach her how to enjoy whisky as it was meant to be.

Bennett raises his glass. “To Callum and Angus. Bottoms up!”

Never quite heard a toast like this, but I tap my cup against everyone's. I take an appreciative sip of the whisky. Around me, the guys exclaim how much they like my family's beverage.

One of the guys pushes my shoulder and I turn to receive Ríó's appreciation. I can't believe this is my life.

Luke claps. "Now we have a much better understanding of the product we're going to be launching, what do you say we get started?" UC agrees and soon they've laid down the video, complete with some close-ups of the Scottish items we brought with us. I love their new song. It doesn't try to be like what they played before, yet it still showcases their unique sound.

Once the video's wrapped, I spend some time getting to know the band members. They're more down-to-earth than I anticipated. If they had grown up in Scotland, I bet we would've been pals. Maybe. Whatever, that's how I'm gonna think of them from this point on.

While Angus and I pack up the items we brought, the band peppers us with questions about each one. Excited to share our homeland with them, we provide stories our fathers taught us, especially about the highlands and our football team, the Dons.

Eventually, Luke steps in. "Alright, it's time to get back to rehearsal. Why don't you exchange numbers like the little girls you are and set up a playdate with Callum and Angus?" We ignore the ribbing and exchange our info.

I stop at the table Quinn's commandeered before leaving. "Thank you for this. I'll make sure you know how happy I am tonight."

Her cheeks pinken. "Counting on it, big boy." I lean over and kiss her, channeling my excitement for the day.

Back on the street, Angus and I decide to enjoy the weather and our lack of paraphernalia—most of which we left with UC—and walk toward our building. I need to address what he said earlier. "Today was a great day. I'm glad you were able to share it with me." I take another step. "But there's

one thing I should've told you before we went in. Quinn doesn't know about my role at Moray Distillery."

Angus tilts his head. "What do you mean? She doesn't know this is your launch?"

"My family's," I correct. "But, well, I've never told her I *grew up* in the whisky business."

"So that's why you shut me down in there when I mentioned your da."

"Yeah." We stop at a busy intersection. "I've come to realize she's not a gold digger, but haven't found the right time to explain it all to her."

The light turns green and we proceed across the street. "I get it. Quinn seems different from the lasses back at home and from what I could tell, she's pretty into you." He elbows my stomach. "If the scorching kiss back there is any indicator."

I rub my lips, still tingling from our good-bye. "We've gotten to know each other on a fundamental level. We're in America. Who cares about lineage here?"

"Verra true. The lasses here are different in that respect." He puffs up. "I'm getting lots of love based on my job." His eyes slant toward mine. "When do you plan on telling her about your family? Your parents are coming for the launch, right? She'll meet them then."

The pit of my stomach drops below my knees. "Don't worry. I'll tell her beforehand."

We walk a couple more blocks, each in our own thoughts. Suddenly, Angus holds up his mobile. "We have the personal numbers of UC. Can you believe it?"

Relieved at his ability to pivot away from the unpleasant conversation, I shake my head. "Not really. Know what else? Ewan cannot top this video."

Chapter 18

Quinn

I press stop and jot down the time stamp. The footage from today's session is pretty good. When I start again, Callum's on the screen. I stop taking notes and stare at my boyfriend. *Boyfriend.*

The members of UC surround him. While other women would be drooling over the band members, my eyes remain fixed on the Scotsman. His accent is thick. His trimmed beard suits his face to a T. His stylish watch looks mighty fine around his wrist. I know, firsthand, his body is sculpted beneath the clothes he's wearing, which fit him as if they were tailor-made. They must pay more attention when making clothes in Scotland.

In only four short weeks, I've gone from being an annoyed neighbor to totally besotted. Unlike the other men who've passed through my life, I'm so comfortable with him that I've run my mouth and shared all my secrets, none of which scared him away. I'm blessed to have such an open and honest man in my corner. My thinking has morphed into ways to *keep* him in America once the launch party is over rather than how to get him out.

The video shows Callum giving me a kiss goodbye. Ignoring my face, I focus on his. He's kissing me like they do in big romantic movies—eyes closed, hands on my cheeks, thumbs moving back and forth. If I concentrate hard enough, I can feel his lips on mine. This man owns my heart.

“Hey, Quinn. Can you come in here?”

Gary's voice penetrates my daydream. I stand. "Be right there."

I pick up my red notebook and a pen and enter his office. "What's up?" As I settle into the guest chair, I notice *NewsTime* playing on the television. Jackie always complains about this news outlet, but I think it stems from jealousy rather than true journalistic one-upmanship. She has a good job at *Truth Tellers*, a print daily.

"I want to go over your plan for the party. It's coming up in a couple of days, so let's make sure you're covered from every angle." He rolls a Mont Blanc across the top of his desk.

Expecting this oversight, I respond with my prepared speech about how the footage matches with my hook.

"That's great. Sounds like you're right on track." He smiles, his eyes darting over to a news segment on the television.

One of the announcers states, "The Founders of VOW-cubed Media are spending their days in jail. We here at *NewsTime* have learned new evidence has surfaced which could ensure they don't ever see the light of day as free men again."

My breath bottoms out. *Shit*. What new evidence could there be?

"Scumbags." My boss's comment lingers in the air. "What they did, stealing all the money from pensioners, is despicable. I, myself, have a tidy sum tied up with the company. I hope they put them away forever and throw away the key." He takes a breath. "Assholes like them deserve it."

I process the fact my father fleeced my boss. My fingers shake, causing me to clasp them in order to hide my shame at my lineage. In a voice I hope is normal but fear is the opposite, I say, "I wonder what new evidence has been uncovered."

"Who cares? They deserve what they're getting, and more."

The talking head on the television continues, "Rumor has it the new evidence exposes how this trio funneled the money

into their own pockets and made it appear everything was normal.”

What could this new evidence be? How did the news outlet get their hands on it? A litany of questions bounce through my brain.

My boss tosses his pen. “Fuckers.” He turns his attention to me. “You were saying?”

Where did this new evidence come from? How could it implicate Daddy? *How* could Daddy have done all these bad things? Even though he kept my existence separate from his other family, he never seemed to be a bad man at his core. He did give me presents every time he visited. My hand steals to the necklace he gave me when I graduated college. Of course, he skipped the ceremony and couriered the gift to me the next day.

Snapping pulls my attention. Gary’s fingers are in front of my face. “Earth to Quinn. Talk to me about the rockumentary.”

I blink several times and tune out the noise being spewed from the television. “It’s, uhm, coming along well. I’ve been compiling snippets showing how far they’ve come over the past months, although the pain of Darren’s loss is never far away.”

“Good. Very good.” He hits me with insightful questions requiring all my concentration. When our meeting concludes, I’m more centered about how to create a story out of the footage. “I want this film to be compelling.”

“Don’t worry. Sounds to me like you’re well on your way.”

Back in my office, I try to do more work, but my mind continues to dwell on the news segment. Ma won’t have any information for me, but I know someone who might. I pick up my phone and text Paige to meet for coffee, to which she agrees.

We choose a table in the back of the coffee shop. I dive straight in. “What can you tell me about Daddy?”

“It still shocks me to hear him referred to like that.” She blows on her coffee. “I haven’t visited Father in prison, and

Mum's still missing."

I place my hand on top of hers. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine how upset you must be."

"It's sort of a dull ache now. She's been gone for months, since—" She looks away. Her shoulders raise on an inhale, and she continues, "Since we found out about you."

There's the crux of it. I ruined her perfect family. Rather, my existence did. It's not as if I asked to be born, or to her father. My guilt lies in how I disclosed myself to her as her half-sister. "Like I said before, if I could reshoot our meeting, I would."

"Don't worry about it." She tucks her hair behind her ear. "No matter how I found out, I'm happy you're my sister. It feels good to be able to share this with you."

I allow her statement to sink in, and share her sentiment. Returning to the earlier topic, I ask, "What else do you know about this new proof they were talking about on *NewsTime*?" I sip my tea.

"Not much. Father's lawyer showed us the newly discovered evidence. It was a set of books, accounting ledgers to be exact. The numbers in them are different from those contained in the tax returns." She bites her lower lip. "Theo didn't appear to be as surprised as the rest of us. Well, Xander either."

Xander Turner, my cousin. Son of Vince Turner, one of Daddy's partners and his best friend. Together with his fiancée, Xander's turned into a marketing mogul whom the press loves. He and my older brother Theo are tight. Paige's observation piques my curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. I confronted him and Xander the day after the lawyer met with us. I think they're hiding something, but I don't have anything to verify my suspicions."

"Well, how bad are these ledgers?"

Her brown eyes—replicas of mine—meet my gaze. "Bad."

My shoulders slump. For the first time, I consider the possibility Daddy might be guilty. “Do you really think he and his friends did this? How could they?”

She sips more of her coffee. “I don’t know. It’s looking like they did.”

I remember Gary’s words. “My boss had some money tied up with VOW-cubed. He cursed Daddy and his partners when a news segment came on the television earlier.”

“He should get in line.” She plays with the stirring straw in her cup. “I’m lucky. I’m a Dimon now.” She holds up her engagement and wedding rings, the diamond glinting in the light. “But all the reporters know me as a Hansen. They hound me whenever I step into their line of sight.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“I hope you never have to. Ryder has it really rough.” As a pro baseball player, he’s always in the spotlight. “I’m starting to believe Father and my uncles should enter a plea deal.”

“Do you think they will?”

She shakes her head. “No way. They’re not going to stop fighting. None of them will. Even Uncle Ward, who’s the most relaxed of the three.”

I’ve read articles about Ward and his kids, twin girls. Until this rained down on them, they appeared to be happy. Recent photos show the newly-minted college graduates are mere shells of their former selves. For the first time, the fact I’m Daddy’s secret plays in my favor. At least I don’t have to go through this in public.

“What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. None of us can. Live your best life.” She sips her coffee. “Speaking of which, how’s your hot Scottish neighbor?”

I can’t control my smile. “Correction. He’s my boyfriend.”

Her eyes widen. “Wow. Look at you.” She toasts me with her cardboard cup.

Heat infuses my face. “He’s really awesome. I’d love for you to meet him.”

“Look at us. From my director on ‘New York Views’ to my real sister. I don’t care how it came about, I’m so happy you’re in my life.”

“Mine too. You know it meant the world to me when you invited me to your wedding. I think we should do a double date, with you and Jesse and me and Callum.” I sip my tea, which is good but not great. Moray Whisky could add the missing something. “No, wait. Why don’t you both come to the launch party? I have some extra tickets. You can meet Callum there. This would be perfect.”

“Oh, I love this idea.” She pulls out her phone. “I’m texting Jesse. It’s the day after tomorrow, right?” I nod and she sends the text. Within minutes, Jesse responds with a thumbs-up emoji. “I’m so excited. We get to sample some Scottish whisky, hear the second debut performance of Untamed Coaster, and get to approve of my sister’s boyfriend all in one night. This is going to be epic!”

“No arguments here. I can’t wait to tell Callum he’s going to meet my sister.” I pause. “Not the one who’s been a pain all my life, either.” She knows all about Jackie.

“Amen.” Our cups touch.



Back at work, I confirm with my camera crew we’ll capture every moment through tomorrow’s performance. They report UC’s doing pretty well today. Working out some nervous energy. When Callum had a bottle of Moray Whisky delivered, the jittery timbre fell.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. It’ll be our last day to prepare for the party. Have a good night.”

I finish up the rest of my paperwork and envision how Thursday's going to go. I picture Callum walking around the room and glad-handing the press and VIPs. His bosses must be proud of what he's done for the company. Maybe he'll even get a promotion?

Gary pops his head into my office. "You're burning the midnight oil. Time to get out of here."

I raise my finger. "I only have a few more things to double-check."

He walks in and settles into my guest chair. "You remind me of me." He strokes his mustache. "Always working or thinking about how to tweak another piece of the documentary to make it better. A wonderful trait, Quinn."

I pause from working on the timeline. "Thanks."

"But a better trait is being well-rounded. No need to be married to your job, the work will always be here. Go home and tend to your family."

"I appreciate what you're saying, Gary, but my boyfriend's working overtime too. It's his party UC is playing at."

"Oh, okay." He shakes his head. "No. Not okay. It's late. Get a good night's sleep and be bright-eyed for tomorrow."

I take his order to heart. I'm not used to having such a paternalistic boss, but it's nice to know he's looking out for me. "Maybe you're right." I pack up.

"Smart girl. I'll walk you out."

At home, I order in some Chinese food. Even though I know Callum's working late, I order him his favorite dish as well. When it arrives, I send him a text:

Some sweet and sour pork is in my fridge with your name on it.

CALLUM

I wish. Last minute meetings. XX

I focus on the kisses at the end of his text as I change out of my work clothes. I slip my feet into my pink bunny slippers and make my way into the kitchen.

In silence, I eat my General Tso's chicken. When I finish, I pull up another Hitchcock movie and turn it on. The screen goes dark and features the words *North by Northwest*. A classic. I settle into the sofa and watch Cary Grant lead this film.

When they're about to go into Mount Rushmore, someone knocks on my door. In a flash, I leap to my feet, rush over, and swing it open. A sexy Scot stands in front of me, looking disheveled.

"I've missed you, Flopsy."

Chapter 19

Callum

Quinn captures my hand and pulls me to her for a kiss. While it's electric, I'm a wee bit lethargic. I've been working too damn hard.

She pulls back and studies my face. "You look exhausted. Come and let me take care of you."

Her words soothe my aching body. To have someone caring for me—other than Mam—is unusual. And oh-so phenomenal. With dragging feet, I follow her inside her apartment, and deposit my briefcase on the floor by the doorway. I scan her oversized tunic and leggings, ending with those adorable slippers. "Ach, Flopsy, you and your pink slippers are a sight for very sore eyes."

"I bet. It's ten o'clock and you're just getting home. Did you even eat?" The concern for my well-being warms my tired heart.

I shake my head, my tired blue eyes tracking her movements as she pulls out a dish and loads it up with sweet and sour pork and puts it into the microwave. Selecting chopsticks as well as a fork, she directs me to the table by the windows. "I still have some whisky, if you'd like a dram?"

For once, I have no desire for my family's drink, no matter how adorable her word choice. "No, not tonight." The group of us drank a few bottles while we were setting up today. I need to hydrate. "Water would be amazing."

"You got it." I plop into the chair while she goes into the fridge, pulls out the Brita, and pours water into a glass. Placing

both the drink and hot plate onto the table, she says, “Here you go.” She kisses my cheek, rubbing her fingers over her mouth afterwards. Damn. I need to trim my beard.

Using the chopsticks, I enjoy the Chinese food like a man who hasn’t eaten in a week. Quinn goes into the living room and turns off the television—presumably another Hitchcock film—and sits next to me. “You look exhausted. Can you go into the office later tomorrow?”

I wish. “The launch is the day after and we have a lot of loose ends to wrap up.” Long days are expected. Have to get through tomorrow and then the big day will be here. Although, my parents arrive tomorrow afternoon, presenting another host of issues.

“Which you can’t do if you’re passing out.”

“True.” Abandoning the chopsticks, I grab the fork and shovel more food into my mouth.

With a bemused smile, she continues, “Why don’t you stay over here tonight? I promise not to let you do anything funny to me. Only sleep.”

“That’s the worst idea you’ve ever had, Flopsy. I may be tired, but I’m not dead.” To prove my point, I get to my feet and tug her hand to bring her to standing. “Let me show you.” I pull her into my body and plant a kiss on her mouth.

With each moment, my desire to be with her grows.

With each moment, my tiredness shakes off.

With each moment, my passion for the woman in my arms climbs higher. And higher.

She’s captured my entire world and makes it better. Abandoning my Chinese food, our kiss continues as I steer us into her bedroom. My lips work their way toward her ear and I nibble on her perfect lobe.

Her hands raise the hem of my shirt, which soon is on the floor. Her clothes follow and we stand, naked, pressed against each other. “Get into bed,” Quinn directs me.

I obey.

She leans over my body and plants kisses all over my face. “Plan B. I want to take care of you tonight.” Her kisses drop lower. And lower.

My hand steals to the back of her head as she sucks on my cock. My eyes roll back as her mouth closes around me harder. Damn.

“No, lass. I want to sink into your body.”

“How about this?” She straddles my hips. “I can still do all the work, and we both benefit.”

“Doesna sound like a bad deal. First,” I lean over and open her nightstand table, pulling out a condom. “Put this on me.”

She licks her lips, and my cock throbs in response. “With pleasure.” She rips open the wrapper with her teeth and rolls it over me, causing my breath to lodge within my throat.

“How’s that feel?”

“Better than the Dons winning the title.”

“Oh wow. Very high praise. Hope I can live up to it.”

I reach out and cup her boobs. “I have no doubt, lass.”

She starts to move up and down at a slow pace, making my mind want to explode. It feels amazing and maddening at the same time. I want to flip her over and take charge. Or, I want to let her drive me crazy. On the bed, my arms thud to my sides.

Her hips roll. “Do you want something?”

“Aye.” No way can I deny her the excitement she’s radiating. “I want you to ride me like the wild woman you are.”

“Like this?”

She rocks faster, my cock buried deep within her. My balls draw up. I want her to come before me, but she clenches around me and, without warning, I explode into her body. Above me, she keeps moving for another few thrusts and screams her completion. Thank fuck. She collapses on top of

me, and I stroke her back while our breathing returns to a normal pace.

With a hand on her sexy ass, and another buried in her hair, I hold her body over mine. I land a lazy kiss on her mouth, ensuring our tongues mimic what we did moments ago. Like a tidal wave, an overwhelming rush of love pulses through me. *Love?*

In a rush, I pick her up, place her onto the bed next to me, and take care of the condom. In the bathroom, I stare at my satisfied reflection and accept the truth. Quinn owns my heart. God help me, I do love her. Prada bag aside, she's nothing like Fiona. I'm sure if my family were paupers, we'd still have this connection because—for once—they haven't played any role in our relationship.

The need to share this revelation with her overwhelms me. Turning on the faucet, I wet a towel and return to the bedroom.

“Let me take care of you the way you took care of me.” She opens her legs and I wash her glorious pink pussy. I give a loving lick over her sensitive clit and toss the towel onto the floor. “Next time, you're mine first.”

She giggles. “I'll hold you to this promise.”

Settling into bed, I pull her into my chest. “It's one I will gladly perform.” I kiss her lips once more while my realization demands to be shared. I begin, “You're different from any other lass I've ever known, Flopsy. I've known other smart women, but you're so much more. You work at a fantastic job —”

“Which happens to be with your favorite band.”

My lips turn up into a grin. “A bonus. By the way, thank you for letting me be a part of the video. It was amazing to meet the band.”

“I only suggested it to Luke and he ran with it. However, the guys couldn't stop talking about you and Angus. It's like your visit shot a dose of adrenaline in them.”

“Angus and I were walking on cloud nine afterwards, fer sure.” *Get back to the point.* I stroke her hair. “Still, you're

much more than a businesswoman. You're kind and funny and thoughtful. You make me want to do better." I suck in air. "I love you, Quinn Walker."

Next to me, her body does a full body roll. The only tell she heard me.

I stroke her hair. "Dinnae feel like you have to say anything." *An "I love you" back would be nice.*

She struggles to her elbow, her free palm cupping my cheek. "I've marveled at these wonderful feelings strumming through my body. I figured it out when you were making the video. I love you too, Callum MacMurray."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Thank the gods." Exhaustion be damned, I make love with the most beautiful woman on earth once more.

The next morning, my alarm goes off and my eyes open to the realization today's a big day. I'll be seeing my parents as well as tying up all the loose ends for the launch. This is the time to come clean to Quinn about my role at my company. Tell her about my family's legacy. Gathering my strength, I kiss the center of my girlfriend's naked back.

She rolls over and runs her finger over my chin. "You need to trim this."

"You're right." I bite her finger as it passes over my lips. "First, I have something I'd like to tell you."

Her mobile chirps with an incoming text. She doesn't move to check it, rather smiles at me. "That you love me?"

"Well, true." I kiss her nose.

Her mobile rings. With a groan, her hand reaches out and she brings it to her face. "Shit. It's Gary. I better take this." She presses the green button. "Hello?"

She sits up. Even though her glorious boobs are on display, all her focus is on the conversation with her boss about the rockumentary. My news will have to wait a wee bit longer. Kissing the top of her head, I throw on my clothes, motion toward the door, and leave her to her day.

Downstairs, I take a shower and get dressed, all the while picturing how Quinn will receive my admission. She'll probably not care I'm not in marketing or whatever she thinks I do for Moray Distillery. She's American. They don't give one whit about ancestry. No, the weight of my lineage is only mine to bear. Her feelings—her love—won't change when she finds out about my family. She won't look at me differently. This isn't a big deal.

Right?

I check my mobile, seeing a text from Mam saying they'll be landing at JFK this afternoon and will go directly to their hotel to freshen up. They'll pop into the distillery for a tour around six. I need to make sure everything's perfect.

When I get into the hall, the undeniable need for a pit stop surges so I take the stairs up one floor. Quinn answers her door wearing only a bathrobe and her cute bunny slippers. "You look ready for work." She gets on her tiptoes and kisses me.

Closing her door, I encircle her waist with my hands. "I'm off to the office but couldn't leave without seeing my lass one more time."

"I like the sound of that." Her arms come around my neck and she flattens her body against mine.

When we break apart, I say, "I won't be able to see you tonight, Flopsy. It's going to be a long day, and my parents—"

Her fingers tap my lips. "I get it. I'm going to be wrapped up with UC today, too. They're releasing your video. Plus, I have no idea what their vibe is going to be on the day before their first gig since Darren passed. I really hope they can continue as they have been going."

"They will. Listen, my parents will be here today."

She nods. "You said. It's pretty cool how supportive your family is of your job."

Here's my opening. "As a matter of fact—"

Quinn nibbles on my neck, short-circuiting my brain. "I can't wait to meet them at the launch party."

That's what I'm afraid of. “Mam’s excited to meet you as well.”

“Now I can’t wait for tomorrow for two reasons.” She shakes her head. “Three.” Holding up one finger, she recounts, “UC will have their debut.” Her second finger is added. “I’m going to be your date to your company’s party.” A third finger joins the mix. “Plus, I get to meet your amazing parents.” She grins at me as if she won the lottery.

I can’t match her exuberance. “It’s going to be a night to remember.” *Tell her the truth.* I screw up my courage and say, “There’s one other—”

The alarm on her mobile goes off. She dismisses it and explains, “Oh, sorry. You were going to tell me something?”

The proverbial spotlight turns on me. I buckle. “Nothing important.” *Only the truth about my life.*

“If you’re sure.” At my head tilt, she continues, “I better take a shower and get ready for work. On the phone, Gary gave me some good advice for today. The next time we see each other will be at the party.” She opens her bathrobe to reveal nothing underneath. “What should I wear?”

Brain synapses fire in all directions when I see her in all her glory. “This is not an option.” With effort, I close the terrycloth material over her luscious body. “Only for me, you got it?”

“As you wish.” She reties the cloth belt. “What will you be wearing?”

“A tux.”

“Wow. I didn’t think it was going to be so fancy.”

“Whisky events are usually a wee bit dressy, but don’t feel like you have to go crazy. Since I’m with Moray Whisky, I need to play the part.” *More than she knows.*

“I have a go-to little black dress I can wear.” She runs her palm over my chest. “Oh, I forgot to tell you. I invited Paige and her husband Jesse to be my guests.”

“Sounds great. I can’t wait to meet them.”

“Yes. Guess we’ll each have family members to introduce. They’ll bless our relationship.” She kisses me again. “This is getting real.”

“Because it *is* real. Better than anything I’ve ever had in my life.” I give her a hug. “But now I have to go before I rip the bathrobe off you and take you on this floor.” I take a few steps backward. When I reach the door, I open the handle and race out to the sound of her giggles.

In the hallway, I exhale. I’ll tell her about my connection with Moray Whisky tomorrow before the launch.

It won’t change our relationship. *I hope.*

Chapter 20

Callum

The past thirty-six hours have gone by in a blur. I thought we were in good shape for the launch, but it's like we hadn't done anything at all to prepare. Finally everything is ready.

My parents were impressed with the facility, which made all the hard work worthwhile. Dadaidh even complimented me on the room I built for the casks. Their approval boosted my spirits, even while nerves swarmed around the launch. This has to be the blowout we need.

In my office, I unzip the bag over the tuxedo Mam brought over with her. As the face of Moray Distillery in America, I need to make a good impression. I pull out the blue, green, and black kilt with its bright red accents, representing the MacMurray clan. Can't wait to see Quinn's reaction to me being in full Scottish regalia. *Hope it soothes any hurt from when I tell her about my ancestors.*

Standing naked, I begin the process of putting on my tux. First, I roll the hose up and over my knees. I secure the garters with the flashes attached—complete with tartan material matching my kilt—right below my knees and fold the top of the hose over to hide the white elastic. Once both socks and flashes are in place, I slip my feet into the traditional Ghillie Brogues and spend the next ten minutes ensuring their long laces are tied around my ankles the way Dadaidh taught me when I was ten.

Once I'm satisfied with my footwear, I pick up the kilt and put the material behind my body so the lining is against my

waist. Using my right hand, I bring the material over my left hip and attach the buckle, ensuring the material is secure. Next, I pull the apron over my right hip and confirm the pleats hang properly before securing it first with the top buckle, then the bottom one. I walk over to the floor-length mirror Angus set up in here. The kilt's in a perfect "A" shape, hanging at the right length at the middle of my knee. "Whew," I say to no one. At least the bottom half of the kilt is almost done.

Someone fiddles with the handle of my door. "Callum. You in there?"

"Aye." Sporrán in hand, I cross the room and unlock the door so Angus can enter.

"You got a jump on me." He holds up his tuxedo and begins the process of putting it on.

Once I've properly attached the sporrán so the fur pouch hangs about a hand's length above the end of the kilt, I quickly affix the cross kilt pin that's been passed down for generations in my family. Frowning, I ask, "Does this look right?"

Left hand on his kilt, Angus pauses and gives me the once-over. "I'd raise it a bit."

"Thought so." I readjust the pin, then tuck my Sgian Dubh into my right hose so the handle sticks out at a jaunty angle.

"I've always admired your knife." Angus points to my Sgian Dubh, another family heirloom.

I retrieve it and flip it in my hand, admiring the engraving. "'Tis a fine piece of workmanship." After replacing it in my hose, I'm ready for the easy part—the white button-down shirt, vest, and jacket. With nimble fingers I finish my ensemble, with the bow tie the singular remaining piece. Standing at the mirror, I square the tie, wishing Quinn were here to assist. In more ways than one.

"Are you ready fer tonight?"

Angus brings me out of my daydream. "Honestly, I'm happy it's here. I'm looking forward to talking with our VIPs and getting Moray Whisky finally into American hands."

Angus adds, “And down their gullets.” As we stand side by side at the mirror, he fiddles with his bow tie. “We clean up pretty good for two lads from Elgin.”

I wrap my arm around my friend. “Aye. I wouldna wanna be here with anyone but you.” I step toward my desk and put my mobile into the sporran together with a pen, my keys, and some of my business cards.

“In my wildest dreams, I never thought I’d be here in New York City. Thanks for taking me with you.”

I raise my gaze to the friend who I’ve known forever. “You’re the biggest asset of Moray Distillery.” I mean it. Because of our relative standing in society, he’s always treated me with a degree of reverence, but I hope this trip to America changes things. If the United States has taught me anything, it’s to value someone based upon their merit. Not their family tree.

A knock sounds from the door. I call, “Aye?”

The director of marketing pokes her head inside. “Don’t you both look spiffy.”

“Thanks, Yvonne. How are things going out there?”

She beams. “Perfect. We’re about ready to open the doors. I might have peeked out the front and there’s a line around the corner. All our hard work is paying off.”

Angus folds his street clothes. “I’m ready to show them what real whisky tastes like.” He joins Yvonne at the door and faces me. “Comin’?”

“Be right there.” The door closes and I rub my hands together as the weight of my family’s legacy settles over my shoulders. I close my eyes and offer a prayer to my ancestors. “Please watch over our launch today, guide me to make the right connections, and let everyone enjoy the whisky you developed over a century and a half ago.” Relatively young according to Scottish standards, but ancient history here.

With one final glance into the mirror, I add, “Help Quinn not to be mad at me.” Opening the office door, I enter the main floor. All my employees mill around. Pride swells that I

selected or approved every one of these fine men and women. Tonight's going to be a success. *It has to.*

I walk over to Angus. "Can you make sure everyone here gets a glass of Moray? I want to make a toast."

"Sure thing, boss."

While Angus takes care of my request, my top executives surround me. Comment on my tux. Marvel that today's finally here. A rousing cheer raises as the whisky starts flowing throughout the room.

When everyone has a tumbler, I tap my Sgian Dubh against my glass. The weight of their attention lands on me. Inhaling, I start, "Before we open the doors and this launch gets underway, I wanted to thank each and every one of you for everything you've done in making tonight come true. My family's whisky is ready to be introduced in this new market due to all your hard work. We met as strangers, but now I can truly say you're my pals. *Slàinte Mhath!*

"Cheers" echoes throughout the room, the American equivalent of my Scottish toast.

I approach the events director and instruct him to open the doors. While he's walking toward the front, the DJ starts spinning tunes. I search the room for Quinn but she's not to be seen. Must be with UC in the area designated as the green room. The clock has run out for me to confess my role, so I make my way there.

"Callum, I can't thank you enough."

"Callum, this is going to be the best launch in history."

"Callum, did you hear the reviewer from *The New York Times* is here?"

I'm surrounded by the people who made today happen, so I abandon my pursuit of Quinn and give them the attention they deserve. Within minutes, the room fills with our guests. I'm caught up in a swirl of introductions, congratulations, and glad-handing.

I catch a glimpse of Quinn, wearing a black dress, across the room. Despite having a whisky in my hand, my mouth goes dry. It's like I'm starving and haven't seen her in weeks rather than little more than a day. My desire to gather her in my arms wars with the knowledge I'm about to share my deepest secret.

Desire wins.

"You all are part of the Moray Distillery family. I hope you enjoy the launch!" I smile at the people around me, then follow my gorgeous lass in black into the green room.

When I enter, my feet stop moving. Despite our previous interactions, I'm still struck at the fact UC is in my workspace. In stark contrast to my tux, Bennett, Coop, Río, 007, and Tristan—Tris—wear jeans and T-shirts, standard rock star wear. I appreciate the fact they didn't try to change their image for the launch. I want them to shine as the hit band they are, even if I'm wearing a kilt.

From my vantage point at the back wall, I watch the lads as they interact amongst themselves for a bit, then steal a glance toward the woman I love, who's focused on her computer. Wonder what she's working on? Without conscious thought, my feet take me behind her and see "Taming the Coaster" as the title of a document. Huh. Must be the working title of her film. *Could use some fine-tuning.*

I force myself not to read any further before making myself known. "Hey, guys."

Luke starts, then extends his hand. "Didn't see you come in, Callum. How's it looking out there?"

I clasp his hand. "Great. The place is filling up, and we only opened the doors a half-hour ago."

"Dope." Bennett greets me, whisky in his hand. "Thanks for stocking our room with this."

"Yeah," the UC drummer agrees. "Nice duds."

I glance down at my kilt and chuckle. "Sort of required dress code for a Scot."

Bennett elbows me in the ribs. “Is it true what they say about Scotsmen and their kilts?” I tilt my head, pretending to be uninformed at the common question. In a loud stage whisper, he asks, “You know, about what you wear under there?”

I bow my head and give my standard cheeky answer. “Lipstick, when I’m lucky.”

Around me, the band laughs. Río even claps me on the back. “I knew I liked you, dude.”

With a smile, I address the band. “On behalf of Moray Distillery, I want to express my gratitude for you guys coming and playing at our launch party. I really hope our whisky will live up to your return to the stage.”

Tris holds up his glass, filled with the golden liquid. “This is the bomb.”

“Yeah,” adds Coop. “We’ll do your whisky proud.”

“I have no doubt.” I hold up my hand. They’re saying all the right things, but there’s an awkward vibe in here. “I don’t want to interrupt your pre-show rituals. I only stopped by to say a quick thanks, and I can’t wait until you take the stage.” I walk over to Luke. “Hey, wanted to let you know we also invited some music folks from *Ratatat* and *Rolling Stone*. They’re excited to hear the new UC.”

“Appreciate it. I suspected as much but didn’t want to put any more pressure on the guys by telling them. They’re ready for this, but it’s been rough.”

“I understand. From the snippets I’ve seen, and from what Quinn’s told me, I think they’re ready to unveil their new sound.”

“So,” he lifts his chin toward Quinn. “You and the director, huh?”

“Yup. She makes me happier than I’ve ever been.” Hope she still feels the same way after I tell her my secret, which now begs to be shared. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to steal her away for a second.”

“Go ahead.”

I leave the band’s manager and return to Quinn, who’s typing on her laptop. “Hi, lass.”

Her brown eyes lift to my face. “Hi, yourself, *Outlander*. Why didn’t you tell me you were going to be wearing a kilt?”

Without moving her gaze, her hand steals up the back of my leg. I enjoy how her palm slides up my thigh and I don’t stop her when she reaches my bare arse.

Her mouth drops open. “No. Way.”

I chuckle. Bending over, I whisper in her ear, “Dinnae you believe I was a true Scot?”

“I knew that to be true before. Now, I think you’re just brazen.” She pinches my bottom and, with pink staining her cheekbones, she returns her hand to the laptop, all prim and proper like. While I’ve enjoyed this interlude, I need to tell her what I came here to say. Her next question is my perfect entrée. “I’m surprised your boss didn’t come in here to meet the band. He must be thrilled with how this evening is coming along.”

“Actually,” I take a deep breath. “I stopped by not only to welcome UC to the Distillery, but also to speak with you.”

No sooner are the words out of my mouth than one of the tumblers of whisky smashes on the floor. Followed by another. This isn’t a Greek wedding—glasses are *not* supposed to be flying. Río shoves Coop backward. Bennett and Tris jump into the fray, pulling the lads into their own corners, while 007 yells unintelligible directions to his bandmates. I have no idea what started this melee, but Quinn’s on her feet engrossed in capturing the incident. Closing my eyes, I send a quick prayer for UC to get it together for their performance.

A sinking feeling takes over my body. Soon I’ll be onstage with welcoming remarks and introducing UC. I didn’t want Quinn to find out about my connection to the whisky this way, but what choice do I have? I maneuver next to her ear. “We have a lot to discuss.”

She nods but her attention never sways from the band.

Dejected yet still clinging to a sliver of relief, I slip out of the green room. Back in the main room, I take a breath and realize the crowd has more than doubled in size. The first person I see is Jacob, my workout buddy from my apartment building, who bumps my shoulder and thanks me for the invitation.

Across the way, I spy my parents and make my way—slowly—to them. “You look verra nice, Callum.” Mam straightens my bow tie, even though I’m sure it was fine before.

“Thanks, Mam.”

“What a turnout. Your great-great-grandpa would be so verra proud,” Dadaidh adds. “As I am.”

“Only trying to live up to the bar you set in Europe.”

A bunch of executives who flew over from Scotland with my parents surround us, congratulating me on my hard work. They express their appreciation for the building, and remark with awe about the cask room.

Yvonne brings over a string of reporters from various industry publications. I give different, prepared quotations to representatives from *Whisky*, *Whisky Advocate*, *Malt*, *Irish Whisky*, *Whisky Flavour*, and *American Whisky*. Not to mention local papers. I’m even escorted over to a corner with video cameras set up and *NewsTime* anchors waiting.

I walk through the room, buoyed by the high spirits—not all of which were spurred by the whisky, even though I receive several compliments on our beverage. I coudnae ask for a better launch. My only worry is if UC worked through whatever was going on in the green room.

A familiar face appears in the crowd, and my stomach curdles. *Ewan*.

I’m stalking in his direction when the lights dim and the events director summons me to the stage. It’s time to honor my duty, and perhaps rub it in my old schoolmate’s face. As I approach the steps, I scan the crowd for Quinn, but she’s nowhere to be seen. Bet she’s still in the green room with UC.

Maybe I still can tell her face to face about my family history.
I hope.

On the stage, I take in the enormity of the crowd assembled. People are sandwiched in every crevice of the distillery—smiling and laughing and enjoying themselves. As it should be.

I place my hand on the microphone. With any luck, the one Bennett soon will make sing. Taking a deep breath, I say, “Halò!” I raise my hand. The cacophony from the house only grows. Wow.

I try again. “Hi there.” When the noise level lowers somewhat, I continue, “On behalf of the best Scottish whisky ever to hit this shore, I want to welcome you to Moray Distillery here in New York City!” Clapping and shouting greet me.

While I wait for the outburst to quiet, I scan the floor. Still no Quinn. *Thank God.* I dive into the deep end. “Well over one hundred years ago, my great-great-grandfather perfected the recipe in your glasses today. From there, my great-grandfather shared it with his friends in the Highlands. Then, his son—my grandfather—brought Moray Whisky to the United Kingdom. During his tenure, my father brought it to mainland Europe. And today, I’m bringing my family’s recipe to you here in America.” More shouts erupt.

My gaze continues scanning over the crowd, still minus my girlfriend. I breathe a sigh of relief. “I hope you fall in love as much as my family has with this golden liquid.” I hold out my glass. “This elixir incorporates the smooth notes of smoke and apple. There’s an undertone of seaweed and brine to it, which adds a hint of the salty sea found steps away from my homeland in the highlands of Scotland.” I raise my glass high into the air. “To Moray Whisky!”

“Here, here.” The chant lifts me even higher.

“It’s my honor and pleasure to introduce you to an amazing band, who has graciously agreed to perform here tonight. About a year ago, a sudden loss rocked their world. Here, tonight, they’re going to show you how to pick yourself

back up, brush yourself off, and start anew. Untamed Coaster is my absolute favorite band. When I was asked who I wanted to highlight tonight's event, I didn't hesitate to name them. I have to admit, I was shocked when they agreed. I have it on good authority, though, they're even more amazing than ever." *Please let this be true.*

From the corner of my eye, Quinn's sexy body in her knockout black dress joins the crowd. While the crowd claps, I wink at her. She gives me the thumbs up and I know two things. One, UC's back on track. Two, and most importantly, *my secret's still safe.*

"It's now time to enjoy the awesome musical talents of Bennett Hardy, River Sullivan, Cooper O'Shea, and Pierce DeLuca, together with—for the first time ever—Tristan Lambert. Otherwise known as Untamed Coaster!"

Noise, louder than before, rises up as the lads rush onto the stage. Before each one goes to their instruments, they give me a fist bump. Bennett's the last one to arrive and I hand him the microphone, relieved whatever happened in the green room has been resolved. Into it, he yells, "How about a huge shout of appreciation for our host, Callum MacMurray!"

He brings me in for a hug. Into my ear, he whispers, "Go enjoy. We're going to make you proud."

He slaps my back and I float off the stage. *They're* going to make *me* proud? What universe am I living in?

Bennett addresses the crowd. "Hi everyone! We're Untamed Coaster, and we're very excited to be here with you tonight. Please give us a beat of grace as this is our first performance in a year. We know Darren Hilliard's rocking with us." He swallows. "How about we start at the very beginning? Want to take it 'Upside Down'?" Río clicks his drumsticks together four times, then the hard-driving music starts.

Each note pushes me to confess to a bewitching woman in black. It's time.

Chapter 21

Quinn

UC's finally on the stage, with my cameras catching every angle. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I'm able to take a full breath.

No one here knows about the near breakdown Luke averted in the green room. Thanks to their manager, UC was able to pull it together. Bennett's reference to Darren up on stage was no accident. In order to move forward, they need to remember their former keyboardist is always with them.

I steal a bottle of water from a nearby table. Straight whisky still tastes like lighter fluid to me, much to Callum's disappointment. I search the room for him and find him near the stage. The look on his face when Bennett greeted him up there was priceless. I must tease him about being a fanboy.

I listen to UC as they start their first number one hit. The vocals are as smooth as ever, and the music is flawless. Luke really worked wonders.

"There you are." My sister hip-checks me.

"Paige! Jesse!" I give her and her husband a hug. "How are you enjoying the party?"

"My gosh, this place is fabulous. I love the cask room." My sister points to the back, where the drinks are stored in massive oak casks.

"The whisky is pretty damn good, too," Jesse adds.

My nose crinkles. I hold up my bottle of water. "This is my choice, although if you have to drink it, I guess Moray is the

best label. When you mix it with tea, it's delicious though."

My brother-in-law shakes his head. "Don't let your boyfriend hear you say that. I'm sure his great-great grandfather would roll over in his grave."

What's he talking about? Why would Callum's ancient ancestor care if I like whisky or not? "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Didn't you hear his speech up there?"

"I caught the tail end of it. I was in the green room with Untamed Coaster for most of it." The band continues toward the bridge of the song, flawless. "They were having a hard time before they had to perform."

Paige turns toward me. "They sound amazing. What was going on back there?"

I lick my lips. "I think it all came crashing down on the band. It was as if the past year hadn't happened, and they started fighting. Glasses were thrown. Almost came to blows, actually. Their manager stepped in and reoriented them to their new reality."

"Wow. Sounds intense," Paige notes.

"It was." I sip my water, garnering a dirty look from her husband.

On the stage, UC transitions into their next number one, "Make Me Feel It." Around me, people clap and jump. Callum is about halfway to me. "He looks so hot in his kilt tuxedo."

Paige giggles. "I've heard true Scotsmen don't wear anything under their kilts."

I shimmy my shoulders. "He's a true Scotsman."

Her mouth drops open. "No way. You lucky duck. He's one fine specimen."

I nod, flashes of him making love to me wash through my mind. Not to mention how he takes care of me afterwards. "You don't know the half of it." Paige brings her glass to my bottle.

Jesse grumbles, “I don’t want to hear this.”

Both my sister and I throw our heads back and laugh. The music flows through me, transporting me into a different plane. UC sounds even better than they have during any rehearsal. On stage, they look like they’re having an incredible time, too. Luke’s talk performed miracles. I look around the room, and it seems like I’m not the only person who thinks this. Happiness at how much they’ve overcome flows through my body. Even though I’ve been an outsider looking in, I share in a slice of their victory.

Paige and I bop to their music, shouting out the lyrics with everyone around us. Large hands pull me backward into a hard body I know well. My hand comes up and caresses his. “Callum.”

Could this day get any better? UC is playing like never before, and I’m at a fantastic party with my super sexy boyfriend in a *kilt* plus my sister and her husband. I turn around in his arms. “In case I didn’t tell you this before, you look unbelievably hot in your tux.”

He grins, his trimmed beard enhancing his hotness. “Nae. You’re the most bonnie of all.”

My arms entwine around his neck. “I assume that’s a good thing?”

He kisses me. “The best. And I happen to be in love with you.”

“Not as much as I love you.” We hug.

Remembering we have an avid audience, I step back from his embrace and introduce him to my sister and her husband. Like the outgoing Scot he is, Callum handles the introductions with ease.

He brings my hand up to his lips and kisses it. “I hope you dinnae mind, but I need to steal this lass away from you for a wee bit. I have to introduce her to my parents.” He runs his thumb over the back of my palm.

With a wave, we begin our trek across the room, excitement at meeting his parents buzzing through my body.

“This is going so well, Callum. Your bosses must be thrilled.”

His gifted tongue peeks out from between his lips. With the knowledge he’s commando under his kilt, I debate pulling him into the green room for a quickie. After all, UC has another five songs to go. *You’re here on a job—the rockumentary needs you.* I quash my wayward thought, no matter how enticing.

“We need to talk before you meet my parents.” He glances throughout the room. “Let’s go to my office.”

My boyfriend must have the same idea.

He adds, “I want to discuss something important with you.”

Oh. My. Is he going to propose? Is that why he’s acting so weird? Yet, I’m here because of UC’s performance. As much as I want to hear his proposal, I can’t leave. “I really can’t disappear from the party until UC leaves the stage.”

His shoulders slump. “Fine. You’re right. We can enjoy their performance. Afterwards, though, I’m hauling you into my office.”

I giggle. “It’s a deal.” Someone taps him on the shoulder and he turns. I wonder if he’s hidden the ring in the fur bag around his waist?

UC shifts into another one of their songs, and the crowd claps in time with the beat. So many people come up to Callum, I can only imagine how the top executives at Moray Distillery must be inundated. My boyfriend did a great job with this party.

An older couple approaches us. He looks like a more mature version of Callum, so I know immediately they must be his folks. My suspicion is confirmed when my boyfriend stands tall and says, “Quinn Walker, please let me introduce you to my parents, Isla and Lachlan MacMurray.”

I receive hugs from both of his parents. “Wow. The family resemblance is strong with the MacMurrays.”

In a similar blue, green, and black kilt tuxedo as Callum, the older gentleman slings his arm around his son. “Aye. ‘Tis a cross we bear.”

My laughter joins theirs. I can’t imagine growing up in such a loving family, but maybe I’ll soon be joining it? My eyes stray to the fur bag around my boyfriend’s waist, wondering if the ring he’s hiding in there comes from his Scottish heritage. My right hand covers my naked left one.

“So, lass, Callum here tells me you’re with the band up there.” His mother indicates the stage.

“Not quite. I’m creating a documentary about their comeback.” At her frown of non-comprehension, I explain, “Their original keyboardist passed away last year. This is their first performance since.”

Her hand flies in front of her face. “Ach. How horrible.” She listens to them. “Truth be told, this isn’t my style of music but they’re good. I like their sound.”

His father agrees. “Me too. Good choice, son.”

“Thanks, Dadaidh.”

Dadaidh. Must be a Scottish word for father. Sounds lyrical.

“You’ve done the family proud. Your great-great grandfather is looking down with a smile, fer sure.”

His father’s comment is unusual—and reminiscent of something Jesse said. I ask, “Was he in marketing too?”

“No way.” Lachlan chuckles. “He would be shocked to see what his little recipe has wrought, right Callum?” He looks at my frowning boyfriend.

Who snatches my hand. “We need to talk.”

I shake my hand free while his father’s statement repeats in my mind. “His recipe?” My brows pull together as I process what he said. What Jesse said earlier. The room around me blackens. “Your family *created* Moray Whisky?”

“Of course, my dear.” His mother answers my shocked question.

I blink several times, trying to assimilate this piece of information about the man who I thought was an open book. Callum reaches out for me again, but I take a step back.

My body shakes. My *honest* boyfriend kept secrets hidden about his family from me this entire time, just like Daddy hid me from the world. History truly does repeat itself.

A man wearing a kilt approaches Lachlan. “Excuse me for interrupting, Your Grace. Can you . . .”

The man continues talking, but I can’t process anything. Not only is Callum’s family the founder of this distillery, but he’s also *royalty*?

Chapter 22

Callum

Shite. Shite. Shite. Damage control. NOW. While Dadaidh's assistant talks his ear off, I reach for Quinn again, but she won't have any of it. With a body stiffer than ice from the River Dee, she sidesteps away.

I lean forward. "Please. Let me explain."

Her eyes slant. She hisses, "Which part? The fact you *own* this distillery or you're *royal*?"

"Listen to me." He rakes his hand through his hair. "At first, I thought if you knew, you'd look at me differently."

"You sound exactly like Daddy." Her arms cross her body.

Ignorant of our tête-à-tête, Dadaidh addresses Quinn. "I'm sure Callum has told you all about how his great-great-grandfather Arran MacMurray dedicated himself to perfecting the recipe that's become Moray Whisky."

"As a matter of fact, he hasn't."

Da gives me a quizzical glance. "Oh, well, please allow me to share the tale. Arran tinkered with a whisky recipe for years until he was satisfied with the results. Soon the word got out and people from the village—even farther away—came to enjoy it."

I try to mentally give him the hook, but he keeps on yapping.

"Then, at the turn of the last century, the Prince of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland visited our little village of Elgin. While there, he fell verra sick. Arran and his

wife offered him a place to stay and nursed him back to health, mayhap with the help of a wee dram.” Both he and Isla smile.

They’re the only ones.

Dadaidh continues, “Anyway, when the healthy Prince returned to London—complete with a couple of bottles of the whisky, mind you—the King was so grateful he summoned Arran to Court and bestowed the title of Duke on him.” He chuckles. “‘Twas the King himself who gave the whisky its name. He wanted everyone to remember the County of Moray as the place where the golden liquid saved his son.”

Reading my girlfriend’s stricken expression—without understanding why—Mam places her hand on Quinn’s unyielding forearm. “It’s more of an honorific title, not a true dukedom with land and duties. In Scotland, we don’t pay much attention to such ridiculousness anyway.” When Quinn remains silent, Mam continues, “For us, the title passes down from generation to generation, but that’s about it.”

For the first time, Quinn turns to me. With eyes filled with accusation, anger, and hurt rolled up in one, she murmurs, “You’ll be a Duke?”

This is what she took from Mam’s explanation? Ignoring my parents and the rest of the people around us, I say, “This isn’t how I wanted the story to come out. I’ve been tryin’ to tell you about this for a week now.”

“This is why you wanted to go to your office before?” She glances down to my sporran for a brief moment.

“Aye.”

Mam touches her shoulder and Quinn’s head swivels. “In truth, we forget about the title most of the time.”

Trying to be helpful, Dadaidh adds, “Aye. Only my executive assistant refers to me as ‘Your Grace.’ Everyone else calls me Lachlan.” He pauses. “Or worse.” A belly laugh sounds, almost louder than UC’s music.

“I can’t imagine.” She addresses her comment to my parents, although her tone conveys the depth of her pain. At the beginning, my omission was a well-honed self-defense

mechanism. I shoulda told her when I realized she isn't a gold digger, but the time never was right. I have to get her away from my parents and go somewhere quiet and explain myself.

My palm touches her stiff shoulder. I lean toward her ear. "We need to talk."

Her throat bobs on her swallow. Without turning her head toward me, she replies, "Seems like you missed your opportunity."

I'm about to grab her by the waist and physically remove her from the room when Dadaidh asks, "So tell us about your family, Quinn. Are your parents here to support your big day? Can I meet your father?" His head turns in the room as if looking for a man resembling my girlfriend.

Shite. Can this day get any worse?

My girlfriend stammers, "He, uhm, well, he's in publications."

Needing to head off this line of questioning, with much reluctance, I leave Quinn's side and approach da. In a low voice, I whisper, "Her father is Ogden Hansen, of VOW-cubed Media fame."

UC starts to play "Crushing Blow."

My father's blue eyes meet mine. He blinks three times. "I've heard this name before. Where was it?" He taps his lips.

Positive he has no idea about American headlines, I return next to Quinn, who looks like she's ready to bolt. I place my hand under her elbow. "Please. Give me a minute to explain."

She doesn't have time to react when Dadaidh's booming voice captures our attention—and that of several people standing nearby. "I remember where I heard his name. Your father is *the* Ogden Hansen, the one who's in prison waiting for a trial they're saying is going to be bigger than Enron?"

Fuck.

Chapter 23

Quinn

At Callum's father's outburst, every molecule in my body freezes.

Even though UC plays their most recent hit, it's as if I can hear a pin drop.

Circles of people around us turn to stare at me.

I've spent my entire life being sneered at for not having a father. For the first time, I'd take the mocking over this notoriety. Rather, infamy.

My whole life is upended. Everything I've believed about Callum was fake. He lied to me about his connection to this distillery. Conveniently forgot to tell me he's royalty. His father announcing my parentage to every listening ear in the building is icing on the cake.

A very ugly, disgusting confection.

If I pitched a documentary about my life at this moment to producers, they'd reject it as being too far-fetched.

Callum touches my arm again. In his Scottish accent that I used to think was charming, he says, "Flopsy."

My nickname. The only one ever given to me. The one I cherished as something special. My stomach revolts.

Bolt.

Without giving him or his parents so much as a glance, I take off. Weaving my way through the crowd at a hurried yet still normal pace—because no one will accuse me of running

scared—I meander blindly through the room. I need to get to the green room, take my things, and get the hell out of here. Documentary be damned.

I don't notice UC playing the revised version of "Crushing Blow," with Tris's added embellishments.

I refuse to notice the multitude of fingers pointing at me.

I can't notice the press jockeying for my attention.

My singular goal is the green room. Trusting my camera crew is catching the best footage of UC, I spy the door. So many people block my path, but I don't stop. With direct intent, I punch in the door's passcode and slump against the wall.

Banging doesn't permeate the fog in my brain. *Get out.* I need to shove my computer and notes into my bag and flee, but my body can't move from the wall. My breath comes in small pants, so I focus on deepening my inhales and exhales.

More pounding on the door, this time followed by, "It's Paige. Let me in."

My sister's voice seeps through. Hand on the door handle, I confirm, "Only you."

"Yes."

I open the door a crack. She slips in and closes the door behind her. "Talk to me, Quinn. What happened? You're shaking and you're white as a ghost."

"I." My hand flies in front of my mouth. I can't formulate a sentence. Instead, I spit, "Callum." I shake.

"Sweetie, let me help you into a chair." When we're sitting across from each other, she runs her hands up and down my arms. She repeats, "What happened?"

Words break free in a rush. "Paige, it was awful. I can't believe it. I thought Callum was taking me away from you and Jesse and bringing me to his office to propose—my guess was he had an engagement ring in the fur pouch thingy across his crotch. Did you know he's not wearing anything under his

kilt? Nada. Well, the Scotsman was not taking me to his office for that reason. No siree.” My jaw clamps shut.

“You’re scaring me here, sis. I’ve never seen you like this before. Even when things were going sideways on ‘New York Views,’ you always kept your cool.”

“Such crap didn’t affect me personally.” My eyes slam shut. “Oh shit. This will affect you directly too.”

“What? What will?”

I take a deep breath. “Callum doesn’t work for Moray Distillery. It’s his family’s business.”

“Oh, sis. I know. I thought you knew, too.”

My overheated system can’t take any more shocks. “What? How?” I swallow. “How did *you* know when I did not?” She tucks her hair behind her ear, her tell she’s trying to think of the best way to say something. “Out with it.”

“I assumed you were aware and simply didn’t mention it to me. When Callum took the stage to introduce Untamed Coaster, he introduced himself. Said he’s the fifth generation to carry on the Moray Whisky tradition.”

This nugget sinks into place in my exploding world. “He announced this to everyone in attendance?”

She nods. “It’s why I thought you knew.” Her head tilts. “How didn’t you hear his speech?”

“Because I was here, in this very room, while Luke pulled the band off the ceiling.” I thrust my arms akimbo. “They were in full-fledged meltdown mode.”

She sits back. “Oh. You’d never know it by how they’re performing tonight. They sound great.”

My lips move upward for a moment. “I’m glad.”

“So, you were gobsmacked to find out Callum owns the distillery rather than simply works for it?” Her choice of verb makes me giggle. At least until I realize I’m laughing, then it stops. She grins. “Made you laugh.”

“Not anymore.” I shut my eyelids and inhale. Opening my eyes, I continue, “There’s more. A lot more. Did Callum also announce he’s royalty?”

Paige’s eyes bulge. “Like a prince or something?”

“No. Well, I guess sort of. His father’s a duke.” I don’t let her respond, rather plow forward. “And the Duke announced to the world that *my* father is *your* father.”

She works through my final pronouncement. “Oh shit.”

“About sums it up.”

Her gaze bounces throughout the room. “Maybe no one heard him?”

My laugh this time is derisive. “Believe me, they heard. You should’ve seen the stares and points and gapes after Lachlan’s loud statement. Half of whom, I’m sure, are reporters. Callum invited the whole freaking press corps to this shindig.”

Her hand flies to her forehead. “This is bad.”

“Agreed.” My heart rate picks up as my anger flies free, overshadowing my shock. “I’ve spent all my life being Daddy’s dirty little secret, only to have it blasted to the world by a Scottish duke.”

“We have to remain calm. We don’t know who heard Callum’s father’s statement, if anyone truly did. You could be blowing things out of proportion.”

“You didn’t see the people’s reactions. Believe me, if anything, I’m understating them.” Again, the prick of tears stings. Swiping my fists over my eyes, I will the anger to take hold. “He lied to me about his role here. He concealed being royalty. Daddy never claimed me to you or the world, and Callum didn’t trust me with his own family truths.” My hand lands on top of my bag. “I’m done. I refuse to be another man’s covert plaything.” I move to the table and shove my computer into the bag.

“What about your job here? With Untamed Coaster?”

I wave my hand. “The cameras will capture their performance, and I’ll edit it from the office. I don’t need to suffer through this any longer.” Double-checking the workspace, I shove my notebooks into my bag as well. I get to my feet.

“How do you want me to handle the fact you’re my sister?”

Her question penetrates and I slump back into my chair. “Oh, God. I didn’t think beyond myself. How Lachlan’s announcement affects your whole family as well as mine.”

Her eyes round. “We need to find out if anyone else really did hear him.”

My pulse, which had kicked down, speeds up again. “Paige, I’m sure they did.”

“If that’s true, I need to reach out to Mum—my brothers.”

Her slip of the tongue lodges deep in my heart. Lachlan not only exposed my secret, but Paige’s as well. In one moment, he ruined two families’ lives. Her mother’s been on the lam since she found out about me, not contacting any of her children. What will this do to her?

Paige reaches for her cell as a text pings. She steals a glance. “It’s Jesse. He wants to know where we are.”

I get back on my feet again. “Tell him.”

Her thumbs tap on the screen.

“We have to strategize elsewhere, though, as the walls are closing in here.” I can’t catch my breath.

A knock on the door sounds. Paige asks, “Jesse?”

“Yes.”

She opens the door to let her husband into the room. But he’s not alone.

Chapter 24

Callum

I stand next to Jesse at the threshold to the green room, my back to the stage. From the mic, Bennett says, “Thank you for your kind welcome back. We have one more song to play for you, and it’s new. It was previewed in a little video we released about tonight’s launch party.” He chuckles. “Well, with over a million views, my guess is you might’ve seen it. The song’s called ‘Take a Ride with Us.’” The power ballad starts playing, which I ignore. The only person I want to talk with is standing in front of me.

“Flopsy.”

Jesse turns to me. “That’s how you’re opening, dude? Seriously?”

Ignoring her brother-in-law, I take a step toward the woman who’s shooting daggers at me from her brown eyes. Her sister jumps in front of her, hands on hips. “You should go.”

Ignoring Paige, I direct my plea to my girlfriend. “I have to talk with you.” I wait a beat. “Please.”

With sharp movements, Quinn adjusts her computer bag across her body.

I try again, “I yelled at Dadaidh. I can’t believe what he said. And so loudly.”

My girlfriend turns to her sister. “See? I told you Duke Lachlan outed us to the world.” Paige sucks in her breath.

Shite. I didn't realize Dadaidh ruined her life too. With everything crumbling around me, I choose my only option—come clean. “This isn't how I expected tonight to go.”

Quinn laughs, the sound harsh. “Makes two of us.”

From the stage, UC finishes up their new song and my guests clap their approval. I need to return to the stage and thank them for playing at our launch. I need to interact with the audience. I need to honor my responsibilities to Moray Distillery, but all I want to do is make things right with my girlfriend. Can I even refer to her with this title any longer?

I try again. “After you left, Dadaidh explained he was taken by surprise by your father's name. Apparently, there was a news story about VOW-cubed in his hotel room right before they left to come here. That's why it was top of mind.”

“Wonder how many more stories are going to be filed because of him.” She turns to her sister and they embrace.

I shake my head. “Nae. You cannae leave. We have to talk about what happened.”

Venom spews from her entire being. “*Nae. I dinnae* have to talk with you anymore. You had your chance, and you failed.”

This cannae be happening. It's as if my whole life is slipping through my fingers without purchase. I do the only thing I can and block the exit.

She takes a step toward me. Reaching her full height, she orders, “Move.”

“Nae. I wanna talk.”

“This again?” She expels air from her mouth. “In case I'm not getting through this thick Scottish brain of yours,” she pokes my forehead. “I never want to see you again.”

In the main room, the crowd goes wild as UC finishes their set. *Get on stage.* While I'm distracted, Quinn springs into motion, pushing past me, out the door, and into the ballroom.

Bennett yells, “Thank you so much!”

I'm frozen in place. Do I do my duty—as I have my entire life—and thank UC for their phenomenal performance, although I don't have a clue how they did?

Nae.

My feet follow hers out the side exit. “Quinn. Stop.”

My order is met by her body coming to a screeching halt. In slow-motion, she turns to face me, her nostrils flaring. “So you remembered my real name? Guess it makes sense, since you told *The Duke* my real parentage. What's next? You tell me you were the one who made the whisky recipe and not some ancestor of yours?”

I latch onto the least explosive thing to come out of her mouth as I come toe-to-toe with her. “Nae. Arran really created the whisky ages ago.”

Her foot taps. “How nice. You told everyone in attendance about your great-great-grandfather creating the recipe, but not me. You have a warped sense of what it means to love someone. Even I, who's never had love in my life, know better.”

I place my hands on her shoulders. She tries to step backward, but I keep her in place. Her mouth works fine, though. “You do *not* have permission to touch me ever again. Do *not* stop by my apartment. Do *not* blare your stupid music, or I won't bang on the floor but call the super. I never want to see you again as long as I live.”

“Quinn. You dinnae mean what you're sayin.” I grasp onto my last support. “I love you.”

“You have some way of showing it.” She spins on her heel. Over her shoulder, she spews, “Ewan had the right idea about you all along, didn't he?”

Her spiteful words hit their mark, and I suck in my breath. By the time I've recovered my wits, she's halfway down the block. I bellow, “Come back to me!”

Her response? She waves her arm above her head and doesn't stop moving. Away from me.

How could tonight have gone more sideways? The woman I love doesn't want to talk with me ever again. Dadaidh unknowingly gave away her biggest secret. My chin falls to my chest. I only kept my family a secret so she could get to know the authentic me. When she found out, she reacted the exact opposite way from Fiona—like I knew she would. Instead of turning into a gold digger, Flopsy accused me of ruining her life.

Dadaidh's outburst replays.

Oh God. Did I?

My chest constricts.

Yvonne appears in front of me, waving her hands. "Callum? Callum? What are you doing out here? The events director just got off the stage thanking Untamed Coaster for providing such excellent music at our launch since you were nowhere to be found."

I lift dull eyes to her. "Thanks."

"'Thanks.' That's all you can say? What the heck is going on with you? The Moray Distillery needs you inside, shaking hands, and talking up the whisky. Not hiding outside. What's wrong with you?" She ushers my silent, pitiful shell back into the party.

Where it's as if a bomb exploded.

The DJ spins good tunes, but that's the only thing right with this picture. Once people spot me, I'm bombarded by press. Not asking about my family's whisky. Not even talking about Untamed Coaster.

None of the anticipated questions about the launch.

These questions come one on top of the other. "You seemed pretty chummy with the daughter of Ogden Hansen. What can you tell us about her?"

"What is the name of the woman now known as Ogden Hansen's love child?"

"Do you know who the brown-haired beauty's mother is?"

From across the room, Ewan toasts me.

How did a party celebrating the introduction of the best whisky in Scotland turn into a feeding frenzy for the tabloids?

If only Flopsy would've listened to me outside. We could've talked this all out and strategized about how best to tackle the press. Maybe even involved her half-sister. But no. Damned American, had to go and be all pig-headed and storm out of here. Moray Distillery's launch went sideways because I left the building, chasing someone who I thought I loved—and loved me back. She's worse than any gold digger. She's a drama queen.

She fucked with my head, pretending to care for me. *Callum*. For the first time in my life, I thought she was falling for me rather than what my family name could bring her. Quinn knew I couldn't run a washing machine but didn't care. She claimed to see something in me, inside me, worth pursuing. Hell, she even said she loved me. Yet when she learned about my family, she reigned down the sins of my fathers upon me, in a weird role reversal.

All my limbs turn rigid. Guilt smothers me. How am I any better than her father?

“What can I do to help?” Angus leans into my side. “I've been fielding all sorts of questions for the past half-hour.”

I face my assistant—my lifelong friend. I need to lean on him. “I'm not sure what we can do, but we need to bring everyone's attention back to Moray Whisky.”

He nods. “I'll get the servers to pass another round.” Angus disappears into the crowd to carry out our idea.

More journalists press questions into my face. “What can you tell us about Ogden Hansen's illegitimate daughter?”

My spine bristles. “Perhaps if you did not know about her before tonight, there's a mighty fine reason. Ever consider that?”

A feminine hand tugs at my arm and I try to pull away, but she's persistent. I swing toward the offender. Mam gives me a

look I know too well, silently warning “Make one more sound and you’ll regret it for the next week.” I purse my lips.

“Excuse me, lasses and gentlemen,” she addresses the crowd. “I need a moment with my son.”

If she were pulling me by my ear, this trek into my office wouldna feel any worse. When we’re inside the room, she snaps the door closed.

“Callum Ian MacMurray. What is going on out there? Everyone’s talking about your girlfriend, who has conveniently disappeared. Explain yourself.”

If only I could. I open my mouth but can’t get out a word. Dadaidh enters the room. “Son. You need to do something to fix this launch. If it were me—”

How rich. *Now* he wants to take over the launch? Over the pounding in my temples, I shout, “You were the one who blabbed about Quinn’s father and set the piranhas in motion.”

Ignoring my parents, I return to the lion’s den.

Chapter 25

Quinn

I roll over in an exquisite bed, covered with white sheets boasting at least a two thousand thread count. The decadent, oversized bed would be a luxury at any other time. Today, not at all.

Last night, when I turned the corner away from the Distillery, my body started shaking so uncontrollably that a woman asked me if I needed to go the hospital. Without responding to the nice lady, I blindly entered this wonderful hotel. Rather, for anyone else, this would be a wonderful hotel. For me, it's a refuge. A sanctuary from hell.

Once inside my room, I took a bath and ordered a bunch of new clothes be delivered from the gift shop on the first floor. So what if they think I'm some sort of hooker, doing tricks and needing new clothes? Don't care what's on my body so long as I was able to throw away the damned black dress I wore last night.

I toss off the fluffy comforter revealing an oversized hotel T-shirt. Despite the early hour, I better check in with Gary. Even though I ducked out during the tail end of UC's performance, the camera crew caught everything. Or so their texts told me. Talk about being blessed to have a good team—they stood up even when I wasn't capable. After re-reading their messages and getting the skinny on the bars the band visited last night to celebrate their return to the stage, I do my job and call my boss.

“Heard the party was a big success last night.”

“Yes, UC slayed it. We got lots of great footage for the rockumentary. We can safely say they’re back.” My voice is flat, even if my words seem upbeat.

“Perfect. Exactly how we wanted this to go down.” He pauses. “Will you be coming into the office today to work on the editing process?”

“No. I need time to process.” Not about UC, but rather what’s going to happen with my life since Callum’s father exposed my father. However, since Gary’s not mentioned anything, maybe the fallout was limited to the party?

“Understood. Take as much time as you need to put everything right in your mind. I’m here for you.” He hangs up.

For the first time, I consider the possibility the duke didn’t ruin my entire life when he outed my father. Maybe things aren’t as dire as I assumed last night? Although, Gary’s final statement reeked with compassion.

Even though I want to know, I also don’t. I force myself out of bed and go into the bathroom. A half-hour later, showered and dressed in a pair of yoga pants and another new NYC sweatshirt, I sit at the table. Time to find out if there’s any fallout.

Opening my laptop, I click on the browser and type “Moray Distillery Launch Party.” A full page of results come back in under a split-second, crushing any hope I had of keeping my parentage on the down low.

The main headline reads: *Quinn Walker is Ogden Hansen’s Secret Baby*. Much farther down the screen, bold letters proclaim *The Return of Untamed Coaster*. Only when I click to the next page and scroll way down do I see an article entitled *Launch Party Celebrates a New Whisky Brand*. Shit. This is worse than I feared. UC 2.0’s appearance didn’t even get equal billing with my salacious news.

What am I going to do? How should I handle this? Jackie will know. After all, this is her business. I press my sister’s contact.

“You couldn’t have given me the scoop?”

Her first comment hurts my heart. “I wasn’t the one who blabbed my truth to everyone, Jackie. You know I never wanted this to come out. If I had a change of heart, I obviously would’ve asked you to write it.”

“Have you read these articles, Quinn? They make Ma out to be some sort of Jezebel who seduced your father.”

“Do they name her?”

“Oh yes they do.” She takes a breath. “I’m also included in this exposé, plus your other family, of course.”

Trying to get some positive information, I ask, “What do they say about you?”

“Nothing of note. I’m your half-sister, no relation to Ogden, even though he ended up paying for my schooling. They did find out that tidbit.”

I wince. “Sorry. I never meant for this to come out.”

“How the hell did it?”

I pull the phone away from my ear at her high-pitched tone of voice. When she’s silent for a couple of beats, I reply, “Callum’s father. He asked about my father, and I sort of stumbled answering the unexpected question. Callum stepped in and told him the truth. Apparently, his father had seen a segment about VOW-cubed on the news. He remembered Daddy’s name and made a ruckus about it at the party.” I shudder remembering the stares and questions hurled in my direction following Lachlan’s unexpected pronouncement.

“So your boyfriend’s father told the world who your father is. Some sort of poetic irony in that.”

Poetic justice. I don’t correct her as—after all, Jackie’s the paid journalist between us. “Whatever. What do you suggest I do to combat this?”

“The only thing for you to do is to sit down with me for a real interview. This is your *Spare* moment, and you’re Prince Harry.”

Even though she can’t see me, I shake my head. “I don’t want this. I never wanted to do this.”

“Looks like you don’t have a choice.” She clicks a couple of times on a keyboard. “When do you want to meet? I mean, I can draft up an article on my own, but it’s probably better for us to sit down.”

Never. “I guess the sooner the better?”

“Smart move. I’ll put you down for tomorrow. We can meet at Ma’s, as she has a stake in this article as well.” I agree and she adds, “This will be perfect timing, actually. My interview with Ogden is in a couple of days.” She clicks off. My sister—not one for idle chit-chat.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think Daddy’s relationship to me would come out publicly. No thanks to my *former* Scottish boyfriend. Now it’s plastered on every news site imaginable, Jackie’s right. I need to take control.

My first order of business is to check in with Ma. I can stay there overnight so we can be ready for the interview with Jackie tomorrow. With wobbly fingers, I call a car service to take me to Westchester. On the ride, I pass a theater playing sci-fi movies and give it the New York middle finger salute.

When we finally turn onto Ma’s street, a bunch of vans are parked on both sides. I lean forward to my driver. “What’s going on? Is there a fire?”

“No, ma’am. I don’t see any fire trucks.”

What could be causing such a commotion in Ma’s quiet neighborhood? The closer we get to her house, the more people appear. Logos for news stations become visible on the trucks and I recognize who is here. Reporters. Wanting Ma’s story.

Crap. They must’ve dug up her address. They probably have mine as well. Can this day get any worse?

“You can stop over here.” I direct the driver to pull over to a neighbor’s house, about five doors down from mine. “I’ll get out and walk the rest of the way.”

Clearly relieved he doesn’t have to navigate the maze of people milling around my mother’s house, he stops at the end of the road and I grab my computer bag, having left everything

else at the hotel. Head down, I slip behind of one of the neighbors' yards. Like a thief, I run between the houses from backyard to backyard, thankful for my knowledge of the neighborhood from my time growing up on this street.

Next to Ma's house, the door swings open and a woman wielding a rolling pin yells, "Get out of here!" She slashes the air with her weapon, her housecoat flapping around her.

"Mrs. Goldberg, it's me." I turn toward her, lifting my chin.

She adjusts her glasses, rolling pin still in the air. "Quinn. Is that you?"

I look both ways, happy the woman's voice hasn't tipped off the reporters as to who's back here. "Yes."

"Well, thank goodness." The wooden cylinder lowers. "Your mama's been inundated with reporters all day. I caught one back here once and ran him off real good." She raises the rolling pin again. "I'm glad you're here to spend time with your mother. It's no one's business who your father is."

All the pent-up tension releases from my body at her bald assertion. *If only the rest of the world were so kind.* "Thank you, Mrs. Goldberg." I speed walk to my old house.

Finally at the back door, I rap on the window since I left my key in my apartment. The last thing I need to do is surprise Ma inside her own house anyway, given my brief conversation with Mrs. Goldberg. No telling what sort of bodily harm she could cause. Ma may be small, but she's tough as nails.

The lace curtain covering the backdoor quivers. "Quinn?"

I nod. "It's me."

Ma unlocks the set of locks Daddy had installed when we moved in and opens the door. Before I can even enter the house, she wraps me in an uncharacteristic hug. "How's my girl doing?"

Keenly aware the door remains open, I step back and re-lock everything, setting the alarm for good measure. "I'm holding up. How about you?"

She opens her arms wide. “I’m great. Did you see all of the reporters out front?”

My computer bag slips to the floor. Need to decipher Ma’s reaction. “They were hard to miss.”

She rushes to the living room and pulls back the curtains, naming the various reporters out front. “Not only local ones, either. Big national stations are here, wanting to talk with me.” Using her hand, she claps it over her chest, the curtains fluttering into place. “Can you believe it?”

What’s going on? Ma can’t be happy for all this attention. Has she had some sort of mental breakdown? In a lower tone, I ask, “You do know why they’re here, don’t you?”

She straightens to her full, diminutive height. “I sure do. You were at some fancy party last night and told everyone you’re Ogden Hansen’s daughter. I’m so proud of you.”

She tries to pull me in for a second hug, but I sidestep her. Raising my hand, I ask, “That’s not how it went down at all. Where did you get your misinformation from?”

“I woke up to my phone ringing off the hook. My friends called to tell me my relationship with Ogden went public. Of course, I hopped on the internet right away and gobbled up all the stories. Everyone now knows who I am to the amazing man who is your father.” She catches her breath. “Thanks to you, my dear, dear daughter.”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t responsible for the leak. Reporters overheard a private conversation.” Thank you, Lachlan.

“Don’t worry. It’s not important *how* the story was unearthed, honey, only the fact it was. I’m free after all these years. Your father kept me quiet, but even he can’t stop this train. Especially since he’s—” She breaks off. Returning to the window, she pushes the curtain back again. “I’ve been holding out for the biggest stations to show up before walking out and giving an interview. How do I look?”

I blink in the face of her distressing excitement. For the first time, I focus on her attire. She’s wearing one of the fancy

cocktail dresses Daddy bought for her about three years ago. It's a deep purple sheath dress ending above her knee in a sexy, but not in-your-face, way.

Time to get her off the psycho train. "You can't go out there wearing this dress."

A frown mars her perfectly made-up face. "Doesn't it look nice?"

"It looks fantastic, Ma. But that's not the point. You can't walk out there as if this is a routine, run-of-the-mill day. It's anything but."

"Sweetie, I know you think the secret about your father coming out is a tragedy. It's not. Doesn't it feel fantastic to finally be rid of the burden I unknowingly placed on you at birth?" She picks up a tube of lipstick and walks over to one of the mirrors hanging on the wall.

She's acting as if this news is a welcome happenstance, removing some unjust weight from my shoulders. In a sense, I guess she's not wrong—she *did* give me a father who had another family he presented to the world.

However, I know Ma too well. This isn't a selfless act on her part. No. She's delighting in the fact she's finally free to tell the world she had Ogden's love child. Gain the spotlight for herself. Nick a slice of the glory, as she sees it. I've spent my entire life hearing recriminations about how Daddy took his other family to some exotic locale, or how Daddy went out to dinner at some swanky party with New York City's elite, or how Daddy spent the summer in the Hamptons while we had to go to some shitty beach on Long Island. Never once did she ask my feelings about all this.

My back goes ramrod straight. How *do* I feel about Daddy and his other life? For some reason, I never was jealous of the high-end things he did with them or the over-the-top public appearances. No, I was envious of the time his other kids got to spend with him. The daily dinners in their dining room. I imagined them laughing together while Ma was crying in her bedroom after another night where he promised to come over but didn't. The birthdays and holidays they spent together with

him versus the couple of hours here and there he cut out for us. Which did fuel Ma's happiness for a while. Part of me was thrilled when he came over, gave me my gift, and took Ma out for a night on the town, because she would be happy for at least a week. Those were the best times. Not for the gifts he always brought, but for the temporary reprieve of the clouds over the house.

The shame of growing up without a father has been snatched from my shoulders, replaced with people wanting salacious details out of prurient interest. They're not interested in who I am, rather what information I can share about being "the other family." I want to revert to anonymity and be judged on my accomplishments rather than my parentage.

On the other hand, today is Ma's ultimate revenge. She'll be in demand for interviews, journalists wanting to know all the intimate details between them. The fact his other wife disappeared and Daddy's in jail and unavailable for comment will allow her to drive the narrative. It's hard to blame her. She was Daddy's hidden mistress my entire life—before, if you count the time prior to my birth. She has her own agenda, and it's steeped in payback.

"Ma, you shouldn't do this."

She presses and releases her lips together several times. "Do what, dear? Tell the world my story? How I've been living for decades as Ogden Hansen's lover?"

Why does she refer to him like that? Sounds like a sordid historical romance novel. I try to step back and assess the situation with my documentary director's bent. A woman who's lived in the shadows for nearly thirty years comes forward to claim her rightful place in society. Her story can end in one of two ways. Either she'll be touted as an ingenue and invited to all the parties by people who really want to get to know her and find out what called to Daddy, or she'll become a pariah. The latter seems more likely. Right now, she doesn't even rank as an outcast. If she embraces this story with open arms, everything will change. She may have to move. Change her name. Never be allowed to see Daddy—well, it's not like she's on his approved list as it is.

I need to make her see the possible consequences of going forward with this. “Have you considered the repercussions of granting an interview? You could be marked with a Scarlet ‘A’ and run out of town.”

“I appreciate your concern, but it won’t happen. Especially with you by my side.” She links her arm in mine.

If I thought my life was upside down when I woke up this morning, I’ve just plummeted into crazytown. “No. I’m not going to go out there. Neither should you, but this is your decision. These reporters don’t care about us. They only want more fodder for the VOW-cubed rumor mill.”

“Honey, whether or not we grant them interviews, they’re going to write about us. Might as well give them the truth.”

Her statement brings me up short. She’s not wrong. It doesn’t matter whether we give them information or not, they’re going to feed the rumor mill with stuff they hear from our neighbors, friends, even long-lost schoolmates. Or simply make it up. Everything I’ve worked for will be stripped away. Gary will fire me for being the story rather than filming another’s. *All due to one oversized Scottish royal*. My stomach clenches so hard I double over.

“Quinn!” Ma puts her arms around me. “Are you alright? Talk to me.”

After several tries, I catch my breath and swipe the perspiration off my forehead. The design on the rug dances before my eyes. I sway. Ma’s body comes into contact with mine, which steadies me. “Let’s sit.”

She directs my body toward the sofa where the white cushions greet me. Ma pats my knee. “I’ll go make you some tea. You always liked tea.”

With her in the kitchen, I center myself and the pieces fall into place. Callum. Lachlan. Daddy. Each of these people—who professed to love me—well, not the duke—has contributed to the disaster in which I’m mired. Callum lied about his family the same way Daddy forced me to do all my life.

Jackie's offer to do an interview with me tomorrow bubbles to the surface. Perhaps this is the best possible off-ramp? After all, she is my sister, despite how challenging our relationship has been through the years. And Daddy did pay for her college as well as the nicer things in our lives.

"Here you go. I made it just the way you like it."

"Thanks." Ma hands me a steaming hot mug. *Like Callum did for me so many times.*

Ignoring the sting of tears, I blow on the hot liquid and take a taste but am barely able to swallow. Ma made me black tea, not my English Breakfast Blend. It's full of sugar and no milk. *At least Callum prepared it my preferred way.* I place my mug on the coffee table.

She rubs my back. "There, there. Are you feeling any better?"

"Not really," I answer honestly, even though I am feeling stronger. My blood starts to pump hard again, rather than the sluggish way it had been moving through my veins. Irrationally, I dwell on the fact Callum knew my tea preference after such a short time while my own mother does not. I jump to my feet and pace around the living room.

Ma sighs. "I want to make a statement."

I turn to her. "I know you do. However, I think it's best if you join me for the interview with Jackie tomorrow. She'll be able to write our official story. I'm sure she'll get it right."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes." Perhaps waiting a day will let things die down a bit. Or they could ramp up even more. In either case, Jackie should be our spokesperson. I trust her. *More or less.* With such explosive facts, what choice do I have?

"Fine." Ma stands. "We'll do this your way. But if I don't like what Jackie writes, I can still talk to one of them." She hooks her thumb toward the sidewalk.

She doesn't trust her own daughter? How am I part of this family? My mind wanders back to the party, and the tight-knit

Scottish clan who stood around me. Prior to the detonation Lachlan caused, I enjoyed being around them. Seeing how a normal family works rather than my dysfunctional one. Above all, the love among the trio was palpable. *I'd longed to be one of them someday.*

That night, in my childhood bedroom, I count the stars on the ceiling I stuck there when I was a pre-teen. Tomorrow's going to be a big day. I get to tell my side of the story.

As will Ma.

To *Jackie*.

I turn over and punch my pillow. This whole mess is Callum's fault. No one else's. He lied to me about who his family is and what his role is at the distillery. Bigger still, he conveniently forgot he's royalty. He's a liar wearing a kilt tuxedo. Who put me in this position, hounded by the press at every turn. *He needs to pay.*

I sit up. While I don't want to hear his accented voice, he needs to know exactly how I'm feeling. What he did to me. I pull up my text app.

This will be my final communication with you, you Scottish fraud. The fact you hid your family roots to me—after I came clean to you about mine—is unforgiveable. Did you think I couldn't handle the truth? Did you get some sort of perverse pleasure out of knowing I thought you worked in the marketing department rather than owned the whole distillery? I hope you got a good laugh out of it, because that's all you'll ever have of me again. Your disgusting whisky has launched. Take your royal ass back home and don't come back. I won't miss you.

I re-read my text, correcting typos. With a “good-bye, asshole,” I press send and collapse onto my twin bed.

Getting rid of two hundred pounds of Scottish male should make me float above the sheets. But here I am, still ensconced

deep in my bed... feeling empty and alone. Wishing his muscular arms were holding me tight. Wanting him to whisper sexy things in my ear. Turning me into a happier version of myself.

Was my text too harsh? I reach toward my cell but memories of his lies compel me to leave it on the nightstand.

I cry myself to sleep.

Chapter 26

Callum

My mobile pings. *Maybe it's Quinn, giving me another chance?* Immediately, my guilt makes me quash the thought and I ignore the text. I screwed up big time and don't deserve her.

I do, however, read yet another article about the launch. Rather, the big public announcement stating Ogden Hansen has another family who he's been hiding away for decades. I swipe to the next article and am greeted not with her family's surprise outing but rather the triumphant return of Untamed Coaster. My mobile hits the bed.

Instead of focusing on the negative, I turn my attention to the one part of the evening that didn't suck. UC played amazingly well, even better than in the viral video. Their music was tight. They interacted with the crowd, even played a new song. Despite everything swirling around me, I did send a basket of Moray Whisky to their hotel as a thank you. If nothing else, perhaps we gained five new American connoisseurs. Six, if you include their manager. Not the thousands we were gunning for, but beggars can't be choosers.

My mobile pings with the reminder I haven't opened my text message. Against my better judgment, I tap the messages app. Yup. From Quinn. Delete. If my inability to tell her who my family is taught me anything, it's I'm not worthy of her.

Time for me to get my head out of my arse and figure out how to save what was supposed to be Moray Distillery's big launch in the United States. The headlines scream about Ogden Hansen's secret family and the return of Untamed

Coaster. Somewhere near the bottom of most of the articles was a brief mention of whisky.

I need to do something—fast—to right this sinking ship. My family deserves this. Arran’s recipe requires I do so. Standing, I toss on a Moray Distillery polo shirt and enter the main area of the suite to meet my parents. The only good thing is I’ve crashed with them and haven’t had to return to my apartment.

“There he is,” Mam greets me with a kiss and a hug, which I can barely bring myself to accept. Dadaidh joins us in the living room, and we leave for the hotel’s restaurant for breakfast.

Once seated, Dadaidh says, “Mam and I had a wonderful time in New York City yesterday, but we’re sorry you couldn’t join us. Throughout our travels, we talked about how proud we are of you. You did a fantastic job with the launch.”

I shift in my chair. How could they be proud of me when we only made a blip in some of the news reports? “I cannae understand how you’re proud of me. I failed.” For want of something to do, I clutch the water goblet and chug.

Following my outburst, we sit in silence until our server takes our breakfast orders. Not a hearty one like in Scotland with haggis and sausages, but a good one for America, consisting of pancakes and bacon.

“Callum,” Dadaidh begins, blowing on his coffee. “Tell us why you don’t think the launch was a success?”

I fiddle with the handle of my mug. “You read the articles about the party. There’s hardly a mention of our whisky, and it’s even more rare when they include our brand’s name. I don’t understand how you think this was anything other than an abject failure.”

Mam places her hand over mine. “Have we ever told you about our big launch in Paris?”

Confused at the change in topic, I reply, “Aye. You wouldna let me attend since I was in secondary school, but you relayed every detail when you returned. How it was held

in an old hotel in the heart of Paris. How well attended it was, and how everyone loved our whisky.” Remembering this story only makes me feel more of a loser with our launch here. Why did I even try to live up to the bar Dadaidh set ages ago?

Mam coughs, and my parents exchange glances. She replies, “Your memory is sharp. You remember every tale we told you back then.”

Tale? My eyebrows pull together. “What are you saying?”

Dadaidh licks his lips. “Moray Whisky’s first introduction in Paris wasn’t the way we told you, son. We dinnae want you to worry, so we embellished it a wee bit.”

“As in,” Mam adds. “We made the Paris launch sound slightly better than it might have been.”

The server comes and drops off our breakfasts, but none of us dig in. I toy with my fork. “You told me a story so I wouldna worry?”

“Exactly.” Mam tastes her pancakes, adds syrup, and samples again. “We believed in the family’s whisky and knew it would catch on in Europe. And it did. Took us a few more trips and parties before it took off.” She takes another bite of her breakfast.

“Aye,” Dadaidh swallows his food. “As in two more years.” He laughs. “I think I went to more parties those years than I ever had in my entire life, before or since. One big splashy event, Callum, cannae make people abandon their preferred drinks. It takes hard work and repeated efforts. Your first entry was amazing. You had a packed house, a great band, and lots of press. You’ll build from here.”

My world, already upside down with the loss of my girlfriend, tilts more. “I cannae believe you fed me a tale about Paris.” I swallow. “The next thing you’ll say is the expansion to Spain wasn’t a straight shot either.”

Mam wipes her mouth. “Well, no. By then, Paris had adopted our whisky, so Spain was an easier sell. I think it took maybe three parties to get the Spanish distributors on board, right Lachlan?”

“Aye. The initial introduction is the most difficult.” His coffee mug touches his lips. “Hopefully, you can understand how excited we are for all your hard work here in New York City. You picked the most difficult market to enter, and you did it.” He lowers his mug onto the table. “Give it another few parties, and you’ll wear the success Mam and I already believe you to have.”

Their revelations about how hard it was to introduce Moray Whisky to Paris swirl in my head. The end result, however, is our family’s whisky has been touted across Europe for almost two decades. I do find a sliver of solace that it took a few tries to find its footing over there.

“Well, it’s true the party was packed.” Cannae lie about this. Whether they remember our whisky is a different proposition. Between Dadaidh’s revelation about Quinn and UC’s return, they might have forgotten about our liquid gold altogether. I shovel my last pancake into my mouth.

“How are sales?”

Mam’s question brings me up short. With everything going on with Quinn, I actually don’t know. “Let me look.” While they finish up their meals, I click into Moray Distillery’s accounting app and check our sales figures. My mouth purses.

I look up at both my parents. “Well, the numbers aren’t as bad as I feared. We have a fair amount of orders.”

Dadaidh raises his coffee mug to me. “See? Well done, son.”

I continue reviewing the reports. While orders aren’t as high as we had estimated, these numbers are approaching respectable. *Not nearly as high as Ewan’s American blend respectable, I bet.*

Mam says, “As you follow up with your distributors, more orders will come in. When does the ad campaign start?”

“Next week,” I reply. Our director of marketing’s strategy was to bank on word of mouth from the launch, such as it is. Once the ads hit publications and the airwaves, more orders should be made. “Should bolster our sales, too.”

“Aye. As I told you, we’re proud of you, Callum. You took over the reins of our Scottish distillery and brought it all the way to the New World.” He claps me on the back. “Well done.”

The server appears and Dadaidh asks, “Ye dinnae have Moray Whisky, do you?”

She taps on her screen. “We have a bottle.” The server doesn’t raise an eyebrow at the early hour, she merely asks, “Can I get you a glass?”

“Aye.” Mam holds up three fingers. “Three.” When the server leaves to retrieve our drinks, she leans forward. “See. The hotel bought a bottle. When it’s low, they’ll order more. It’s how it all starts.”

“I’m shocked they have it at the bar.” The server reappears and distributes our tumblers.

Mam picks hers up. “To the MacMurray clan. May we never be without a dram and forever have love in our hearts.” The final part of her toast twists deep in my chest. Our glasses clink and I force myself to take a sip.

“Speaking of love, how are things with your lass? We missed her yesterday.”

Dadaidh’s question is overlaid with guilt. We all know it, so there’s no point in calling him out about what happened again. My own guilt requires I keep my reply short. “We’re done.” I tap my glass on the tabletop.

“Oh no, Callum. She seemed like a very nice lass. I liked her spunk, and how she looked at you. I don’t believe you’re over. Give her a little more time, and things will be right as rain. Dinnae forget I have her Scottish Breakfast tea in the room.”

Mam’s words aggravate my already battered conscience. I remember telling Quinn she would prefer this tea to her English one. Because Da clearly feels guilty enough, I take refuge in bravado. “Nae. I’m moving on.”

With whom? No one. Who could compare with her bright smile and witty retorts? Her love of old movies and dedication

to her craft puts her in a class all by herself. If falling head over arse for a lass means she'll leave me with my kilt flapping in the breeze, I'd rather skip love altogether. Yeah, I don't believe this either.

Stop thinking about her.

My parents nod at each other and Mam leaves for the ladies' room. This is the first time I've been alone with Da since he broadcast Quinn's business, and we settle into an awkward silence.

I take another sip of our whisky, tapping the glass on the table. "I promise Moray Whisky will make a name here. I'll keep pushing for more ad promotions. Perhaps in another year or two, we'll have a foothold in New York City." If I can survive living in the same city as Quinn for such a long time. Maybe I'll start looking for another apartment. However much it costs to break my lease, it'll be worth it.

"I have nary a doubt, Callum. You bring honor to the MacMurray name."

"I dinnae do it alone, you know. The team here has been brilliant." Angus, especially. I should do something special for him.

"You picked them, put them together. Another feather in your cap, in my opinion." He dips his finger into the empty glass and brings it into his mouth, savoring the final hint of the whisky. "You've done a fine job with the business end. But your Mam was right about Quinn. I want you to get her back."

My spine stiffens. It's not like I could snap my fingers and she'd come running back to me. I shake my head. "Not possible."

Dadaidh presses forward as if I hadn't spoken. "I was the one who messed up her life. She can't visit my sin on you."

What an ironic turn of phrase. All her life, Quinn's been on the receiving end of her father's sin, now I am in a similar position. I need to let him off the hook, at least partially. "Nae. I failed first by not telling her of my connection with Moray Whisky. She was blindsided when she found out." I slam my

eyes shut, trying to purge the expression on her face out on the street from my mind. Of course, another failure.

He nods. “Cannae argue with you there. Still. I shouldn’t have run my mouth off like I did about her father. All I can say is I was caught up in the excitement of knowing the American’s name.”

Again, my fault. “I should’ve told you about her family. It’s such an integral part of her life, but one she’s had to hide.”

“Poor lass. I cannae imagine how it would be if I had to hide my roots.”

“That’s the biggest difference between home and here. In Scotland, it would be much more difficult to hide such a truth. In America, though, they want to know about your merits, not your ancestors.”

“You know better than me.” He pulls out his mobile. “I feel badly. Can you give me her number? I want to make amends.”

My response is swift. “Nae. I told you before we’re through. You cannae sweet talk her into coming back. Let her go.” Like I have to do. *Am I telling Dadaidh or myself?*

Mam returns to the table and our meal ends. They ask me to join them on an afternoon tour of the famed Madison Square Garden, but I decline. “I need to go to the office and check on things. I’ll meet you back in the suite before you leave for the airport.”

Dadaidh hugs me. In my ear, he whispers, “Remember, son, everything worth having is worth fighting for. And I’m not simply talking about whisky here.” He claps me on the back and they leave the restaurant.

At Moray Distillery, I survey the space, which looks as if the launch never happened. *Ironic*. Even though it’s Sunday, I congratulate the crew for their excellent work as they finish their cleaning tasks. At least their smiles seem genuine.

Sitting at my desk, I pull up various reports that confirm our launch fell below all expectations. I thought our forecasts

were reasonable, but the numbers prove me wrong. I toss the paperclip I'd been mangling.

"Knock, knock." I'm greeted by Angus standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing here? It's Sunday, if you haven't noticed."

He sits in the guest chair. "I stopped by to check up on my boss."

My gaze bounces to my computer. "You know me too well. I couldn't stay away." I swivel my chair to look out the window. "Probably should have this time."

"I know the launch didn't go as well as we had hoped. Still, the people who were here enjoyed the whisky."

"And UC." I return to face him, my voice dropping. Apropos of nothing, I add, "Quinn." *How will I ever get her out of my mind?*

He asks, "Did you know about her father being the notorious Ogden Hansen? Or were you as surprised as everyone else?"

"I knew. It's caused her so much pain throughout the years, which she's working through. She's only recently connected with her half-sister Paige, and met most of her side of the family."

"So the entire Hansen family knew about her?"

"Yes."

"That's good."

When he doesn't continue, I prod. "Why is it good?"

"Because they've had time to assimilate it, and probably have a plan in place to counteract the bad publicity."

Counteract? My blood turns to ice. What if her father's other family somehow tries to turn the tables on Quinn and blame her and her mother for his double life? This could devolve into something even worse. My hand's on my mobile before I realize what I'm doing. *I'm the last person she wants*

to hear from. I release the mobile and move my hand onto my lap. “She’ll be fine.”

Angus leans forward. “Think so? Her da’s a major magazine publisher who—I’m guessing here—fabricated rumors to sell issues, and then sold even more by printing the ‘other side.’ He’s an expert at manipulation.” He crosses his arms. “Quinn’s merely a film director.”

“Her father’s in jail. Not like he can direct VOW-cubed to run an ad, much less a major offensive.” Yet the magazines are still on the stands. What if they take it upon themselves to ruin her life?

Remorse envelops me. I kept my family from her, but no one else was impacted. I’m more or less responsible for Dadaidh announcing her father’s identity to the world, and she is suffering as a result. Catching my breath becomes difficult.

Angus’s mouth opens and closes several times. Finally, he says, “I’m going to say it whether you want to hear it or not. I like Quinn. I like her for you. I like how you acted around her. She’s not another Fiona.” He stands, placing his palms on my desk. “Fight for her, man.”

How can I do this when she doesn’t want anything to do with me? Frowning, I get to my feet. “I’ll take your suggestion under advisement.” My eyebrow arches. Something I learned from football—play offense but never forget the defense.

“Mark my words—Moray Whisky will make a name for itself in the United States. Untamed Coaster will hit the top of the charts again soon. Quinn Walker will survive this, since she’s the definition of a survivor. It’s your choice whether she does it alone, or with a man who loves her at her side.” Declaration over, Angus turns on his heel and walks out, slamming my door closed.

I collapse into my chair. He was right about Quinn being a survivor.

Now I need to figure out how to survive without her.

Chapter 27

Quinn

I enjoy the blissful silence of my apartment. My worry about seeing *him* has been unfounded, as I've been in our building for a full week and nothing. Not even a peep of UC music comes from the floor below. Good.

Ignoring my half-eaten sandwich, I sit at the kitchen island and review my notes for the rockumentary. Footage from the party is the only remaining piece for me to review, but it can wait. I need to finish assembling the other pieces to support my hook—five hurt men trying to figure out how to get back to where they were, in an unfamiliar vehicle. In my mind's eye, I fast-forward the scenes portraying their struggles and ending with their triumphant return at the party. I identify one missing piece and try to make it fit into the puzzle.

My cell pings with another alert. I set them up for my name when I worked at *Renovation TV*. Ever since the party, they've been going off like firecrackers, yet my inner masochist prevents me from turning them off. I go to erase it from my screen when the title catches my eye. "From the Inside Out: Petra and Quinn Walkers' Story." Jackie's article hit. I approved every word in this story yesterday, as did Ma, so I don't need to open it.

Our side is now out into the world. After days of speculation, I finally have my own voice.

Gary offered to create a memoir for me, but I shot him down. I said everything the world needs to hear in my interview with Jackie. I want to go back to being a

documentarian. I stare at my notes, but my concentration goes wonky.

Getting off the stool, I walk over to the television and turn it on. *NewsTime* appears, it's "Breaking News" chyron touting the "Tell All Story." Ma may be a guest, but as with Gary, I turned everyone down and have no desire to see how our side is depicted. I hit my DVR and start Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. For some reason, this psychological horror film about an unhinged son calls to me.

Janet Leigh's shower scene scream sends its usual terror pinging up my spine. Following it, though, my mind wanders into muzak. *I wonder if Callum has seen this American classic yet?* In disgust, I shut off my television.

I walk over to the window overlooking the street. This is the same view *he* has. Swiping the tears away from my cheeks, I turn away and go into my bedroom. Where shadows of past trysts with the Scotsman haunt like lingering ghosts in *Psycho*.

My cell beeps, this time announcing a text. I check and it's Paige.

PAIGE

Meet me at Vinnie's Place

Should we really be seen in public now?

PAIGE

Fuck em!

Can't argue with my sister's logic. I wash my face and reapply makeup and because I might be nuts but not stupid, I order a car service to take me door to door. Emerging onto Seventieth and Fifth Avenue, I ensure my hat is pulled down. Its oversized brim usually protects me from the sun, but today I'm hoping it fends off the unwanted paparazzi. It does the trick. Once inside Vinnie's Place, I approach the hostess stand where Shelby smiles at me.

"Happy to see you back here, Miss Walker. Mrs. Dimon's already seated, please follow me."

Something to be said for having a place where we meet on the regular. Shelby doesn't ask any questions, nor does she look at me with pity. Rather, she escorts me to a table tucked behind a pillar. When I arrive, Paige gets to her feet and pulls me in for a long hug.

Once seated, with my hat on an extra chair, Paige starts, "I'm so sorry about how all this is playing in the media."

Our server sets down waters and we order something stronger. "I guess it had to happen sooner or later. I was lucky I got a quarter of a century of privacy." Ma got more. No need to pour salt into this gaping wound.

"We got a few months' jump on the news." Our drinks are delivered—a Mexican mule for her and a glass of red zinfandel for me. After she takes an approving sip, she holds up her left hand and her diamond sparkles at me. "Jesse's been amazing through all of this. The fact he was Xander and Theo's friend before we got together means he's able to talk with them on a different level."

"I'm glad you're banding together." I taste my wine, which seems off. Maybe if I had food in my stomach? I haven't been able to eat more than the half sandwich in days. I mull over her last statement. "Actually, Theo called me earlier. We had a rather nice conversation."

Her brown eyes light up. "That's awesome."

My finger traces the rim of my wine glass. "It's hard because he's with my half-sister's archrival, but I think he's

starting to see me separate and apart from Jackie. He even told me he was sorry how this is playing out in the press. Said he blames Daddy, not me.”

She lowers her head. “What was he like? With you? I mean, Father treated us like soldiers to be seen and not heard. When we weren’t paraded into some public event, we were expected to keep our heads down and mouths shut.” She smiles. “Of course, Ryder had the hardest time following the rules, especially since he was obsessed with baseball from the cradle. Kiefer was the studious one. Theo, though.” Her head shakes. “His temper was fierce, inflamed by Father.” Her gaze—the same color brown as mine—asks me a million more questions her lips did not.

“Daddy was absent pretty much all of the time. He would show up a few times a month, always with a gift for me.” I hold up my arm. “Like this bracelet. He gave this to me when I landed my first job at *Renovation TV*.”

Her hand reaches out and examines the jewelry, then she opens her purse. A second later, she holds up a matching bracelet and drops it onto the table. Guess my gift wasn’t so special. A sudden desire to rid myself of everything Ogden Hansen takes hold of me, so I take mine off and dump it next to hers. It’ll make a good tip for our server.

Paige gazes at me. “What did he do when he came to your house? Did you have dinners together? Play board games?”

In my mind’s eye, my old daydreams of him doing exactly this with his other family surface. In my fantasy, they’re playing Monopoly, and he’s teaching his eldest son how to turn a house into a hotel.

I shake my head. “No. Never. He’d bring dinner with him or take Ma out to a restaurant. I never was included, except for my birthday. I thought that was the best time, as we’d all go out, including Jackie. We’d sit together, and I’d pretend we were a family. Invariably, though, his phone would ring, and he’d have to leave. He would kiss us all.” I try to forget how Ma would cling to his broad shoulders. “Before he left, he’d leave a stack of money on the table and order us to have a

great time on him. Then we'd order a big dessert and join with the servers as they sang 'Happy Birthday' to me."

Paige describes her experiences. "We'd always have our birthday dinners catered at whichever house we were staying in. Since my birthday's in February, we'd be at our apartment here in the city. Mum always had cupcakes, with a special candle for the person celebrating." A wistful smile crosses her lips. "Yeah, we haven't had cupcakes for at least seven years, since I was in high school."

This is the first time we're sharing stories of our family lives and it feels . . . good. Not adversarial, more like "what was he like with you?" Turns out, I seemed to have gotten the nicer parts of our father while they lived in the lap of luxury amid all the elites. I've always felt sorry for myself, yet now, I can see neither one of us had green grass.

"Father spent most of his time in the office, so Mum raised us."

"We didn't have a choice." I play with my fork and decide to go for it. "Why do you call him Father?"

"It's all I've ever known. My older brothers all call him Father, so I followed suit. Why do you call him Daddy?"

"It's what he told me to call him." My forefinger taps my chin. "When I was young, he used to stop by our house in New Jersey. Sometimes several days in a row. He'd take Ma out to a party or a fancy restaurant—I thought he was her friend. When I turned five, he showed up on my birthday and gave me a wrapped box. Ma told me I could open it, and it was a snow globe. I ran over to him and gave him a hug to say thank you and that's when he told me he was my father." He bopped me on the nose and said, "Call me Daddy." I don't think Paige wants to hear this part.

"And to call him Daddy," she supplies.

Guess I was wrong. I nod.

Our nachos are delivered, but neither of us makes a move toward them.

I decide to go for the truth, considering it's been in short supply in my life lately. "Despite everything, I'm happy to have gotten to know you. You're nothing like I imagined, yet everything at the same time. The fact we're friends means the world to me."

"I couldn't have said it any better." She picks up a chip. "To us." I laugh and join her funny salute. When nothing but the dregs of our nachos remain, I ask a question that's been nagging me for a week. "How's your family going to respond to the world knowing about me? And Ma?"

She licks the chili off her fingers. "We're not. We're leaving it up to Father. As far as we siblings are concerned, we gained another sister. Well, I sort of corralled the boys into agreeing with me." She gives me a triumphant grin. "Mum's gone, so she doesn't have a say." Her mouth twists.

"I'm sorry for the part I played in causing her to leave."

She sighs. "When I confronted Father about your very existence, I was out of my mind with anger, hurt, and jealousy. However, when Father mentioned Petra's name, Mum lost it. After all, while he hid the fact he had another daughter from us, he *cheated* on her with your mother. From what you're telling me, they had a loving relationship spanning decades, and not some torrid affair."

My heart races. I never considered it from this angle. "I'm sorry."

"I am, too." She wipes her mouth.

A text message arrives on my phone. I check the screen and do a double take, my eyes blinking. Paige must've noticed my response, because she asks, "Bad news?"

"No." I shake my head. "Not at all. Unexpected. But it goes along with our conversation." At her tilted head, I barrel forward, "It's a message from Ryder." Her brother closest to her in age. My half-brother. "He says, 'I read the article in *Truth Tellers*. Paige speaks highly of you. I'd like to get together when I'm back in town.'"

She raps on the table. “See! I told you my brothers are warming up to you.” She affects a fake pout and crosses her arms over her chest. “Maybe they want to trade in their baby sister for a different model.”

I laugh at her outrageous statement. “I don’t know. I certainly can’t renovate and decorate an apartment like you can.”

“There is that.” She tucks her short hair behind her ear and orders me to respond to Ryder, which I do with a quick text. “Now you’ve heard from both Theo and Ryder. I’m sure Kiefer will contact you soon.”

I met her oldest brother briefly at her wedding. He seemed reserved and walked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. I don’t share Paige’s optimism about us becoming friends. Hell, I don’t think this term ever will be applied between any of my “brothers” and me. Better disabuse her of this notion.

“I won’t be surprised if it never happens, and you should prepare yourself for it too. I think the best I can hope for is an unsteady truce.”

“I’m holding out hope.” She drags a piece of chip through the remains of the toppings. “Okay. Enough of this heavy. I want to know how the super sexy Scot begged for your forgiveness.”

“He didn’t. Rather, he tried, but I wouldn’t let him. We’re through.” I drop my napkin onto my plate, remembering my final text to him. Which has gone unanswered.

“But at the party, Callum was so attentive to you. When he came looking for you, both Jesse and I thought he was being sincere.”

I wave my hand. “He lied to me. About who he is. Pretty fundamental to one’s being, don’t you think?”

In a small voice, she replies, “You lied to me.”

A lump forms in my throat. In an equally small voice, I reply, “I did tell you. Eventually.”

“He announced his ancestry on the stage at the party. It wasn’t his fault you weren’t there to hear it.” Her hand clasps mine. “Don’t you see? He wasn’t hiding it. Maybe he needed a little extra time to figure out how to come clean to you. Because he loves you.”

“Even if you’re right—which I’m not conceding—he never told me about being royalty.” My voice jumps a register. “Royalty!”

“That does sound bad. But in order for you to decide whether you can forgive his lapse . . . you need to hear him out.”

“No.”

“But—”

“I said no. Case closed.” I shut my eyes so as not to send daggers through hers. Or beg her to place the call.

She huffs, “Fine. I’ll respect your wishes.”

With care, I open one eye, then the next, confirming my sister appears sincere. In a rush, she adds, “How about considering Callum didn’t want his family’s successes to be revisited upon him in a negative way? The opposite of our situation, but still a heavy burden.”

I squint at my sister. “Are you done?”

“I believe I’ve said my piece.”

It takes all my willpower not to scream out in pain for how much I miss him. How empty I’ve felt since the party. I shore up all my defenses. “And here’s mine. Never, ever mention his Scottish name to me again.”



The weeks drag by. Following many late nights and early mornings at the office—after all, what else do I have to fill up

my time?—I finished the initial cut of the rockumentary. Despite the chaos swirling in my life, I'm proud of my work. The film clocked in at a tad under two hours, the perfect length. The only missing piece is the final title. I've used a placeholder for the time being.

My finger hovers over Dropbox, which I finally press. Ready for my boss to see the full fruits of my labor, I send him a quick text to let him know it's ready and waiting for his review. In my humble opinion, my first documentary is epic.

While the film isn't finished by any means, the bulk of my work has been completed. I'll need to incorporate Gary's suggestions and then send it off to Luke for him and UC to review and approve. Then it's final edits and one last approval from Gary, the producers, and the other top executives at DocuStudios before it's passed off to our marketing team for distribution.

I want to shout from the rooftops that I did it. Maybe I should call Paige? Nah, I don't want to intrude on her alone time with her new husband. She has promised to come to the rockumentary's premiere, though. Which will cause another layer of hysteria in the press, who are practically foaming at the mouth as no one from VOW-cubed has responded to Jackie's article.

During our last conversation a few days ago, Paige gave me the inside scoop about our brother Theo and cousin Xander being the ones to discover the "new evidence" against Daddy and his partners touted by *NewsTime*—an extra set of books at the cabin where Paige held her wedding reception. My brain is too muddled to contemplate what this could mean beyond the fact it casts the trio in an even worse light, if even possible. No, I need to let Paige be.

Maybe I should call Jackie? Nah. She's too busy soaking up all sorts of kudos for her article about Ma and me. Since she was required to disclose she's my half-sister, her profile raised tenfold. She's even appearing on both entertainment and news shows as a type of special pundit. There's even buzz about her receiving another Jenkinson Award for her work, which she's eating up. At least she gave our side of the story.

In the article, Jackie also included her interview with Daddy during which he admitted he's my father, so there's that. The press has been swarming around me like sharks, only diverted today thanks to some unfortunate scandal involving a pro ball player. It'll be better if I leave her to her work.

Without permission, my heart begs for me to reach out to my Scottish neighbor but I shut such nonsense down without mercy. It's of no consequence how thoughts of him invoke a pathetic yearning from the depths of my soul.

In my hand, the cell rings and, grateful the decision's out of my hands, I pick up. "Hi, Ma." For better or worse, she's been the only constant in my life. Daddy certainly hasn't been here, and Jackie's—well, Jackie.

"Quinn. I just finished up an interview on *In the Know*. Or was it *Let's Dish*? Whatever, they're all blending together. One of the reporters asked me a question about you which hit me hard. How are you holding up?"

She's concerned about me? This is new. Considering I've had enough dishonesty in my life, I decide to go for the truth. "It's been hard, but I managed to throw myself into work." My back straightens. "I finished the rockumentary today."

"You did? That's awesome, honey. Congratulations."

An unknown warmth spreads throughout my body. This woman has never been one to dole out praise indiscriminately, and I soak it up like a sponge. "Thank you. It's not done yet, but I've done the first pass and sent it to my boss."

"I can't wait to see it." Rustling comes through the receiver. "Sorry. I needed a lozenge. Are the reporters all over you, too? Before this all started, I wanted to be in the limelight. After these couple of weeks, I'm starting to see Ogden's wisdom in keeping us out of the headlines."

She's changing her tune. Still. "We're in them now."

My bitter tone must've reached her. "I know. This isn't how I wanted things to go. For you or for me. The only saving grace is you're no longer a child."

“I guess there’s that.” She is right, though. I do have more coping skills than I would’ve had years ago.

She clears her throat. “Quinn, I want to say I’m sorry for all this. While I wanted to come clean to the public for years, you listened to your father and remained steadfast against it. You were right. Reporters don’t want to know anything about the real me. Or you. They’re only looking for salacious gossip about my trysts with Ogden, how he kept us hidden, and my feelings about his wife and other family. They don’t care about our love. Worse, they don’t believe it.”

While she’s talking, I flip a manila folder on my desk. Her revelation feels like the start of a new understanding between us. “They only want a juicy story to increase their ratings.”

“I’m getting that. Ogden warned me, and you’ve always been tight-lipped. Anyway, I wanted to check in with you.” Someone says something to her, and she sighs. “I have to go to another interview, Quinn. I love you.” She clicks off.

I’m stunned at her final words to me, which I’ve only heard a few times in my lifetime. Perhaps it’s taken this awful mess to turn a corner?

After a few moments, the need to keep working pounds at the back of my head. I have to fill my time before facing the press outside. I glance around my office, which is a mess. *I can clean it up.* I dive into filing and piling and tossing.

As I’m in the middle of the important decision about how best to save my receipts for tax purposes, my phone rings again. Not Gary, but the next best thing. I answer, “Hey, Luke. How are you doing?”

“Everything’s good with us. We’re settling back into our own places in LA. How’s my favorite rockumentary maker?”

I laugh at his creative title for me. “I’m doing great. I actually just finished work on the film. Hope to have it over to you by next week or so.” Assuming Gary likes it and doesn’t want me to redo the entire thing.

“That’s great. We’re stoked to watch it.”

“I hope you like it.”

“Of course we will. It’s about our favorite subject matter.” He chuckles. “Hey, I called for a reason. We have another new song. While you didn’t catch its creation, we thought you might want to roll it over the credits or something?”

“Very cool. What’s the name?”

“We’re calling it ‘Refocused Destiny.’”

Without even having heard the song, I already know it’s going to be fantastic. “I like it.” I tuck the tax receipts into a folder and put them into a drawer. “How did this song come about? Was it Tris’s idea again?”

“Nope. Believe it or not, this one was a true joint effort. I was sorry the cameras weren’t around to witness its development. The guys have never created a song as a collaborative unit before.”

For the first time since a stupid Scottish man trampled over my life, an upbeat heat radiates throughout my chest. It takes me a second to recognize the unfamiliar feeling—happiness. UC is coming together in a new and unique way. “I’m beyond thrilled to hear this.” I choose my next words with care. “Do you like it?”

“If I’m honest, which I can be since it’s only you and me on this conversation, it’s—”

He stops talking. I brace myself for his unvarnished assessment, the heat throughout my body already dimming. I was hoping the band had turned a corner.

He clears his throat. “The best song UC has ever put together. By far.”

I collapse into my office chair. Eyes closed, I reply, “I’m so happy for them. Since the day at the rock wall, I knew they would make a triumphant return and reclaim their spot at the top of the charts.”

“I’ve been hoping for this ever since Darren passed. I truly believe he’s watching over us.”

“I’ve dedicated the rockumentary to him.”

Through the receiver, I hear Luke suck in his breath. In a strangled voice, he replies, “Thank you.”

I give him a second to process. “Even though he isn’t in the film *per se*, he was with us every step of the way. I felt it was right to honor him.”

“You have no idea what this will mean to the guys. I won’t tell them, though. I want them to find out when they view the film.”

Our conversation ends, after which I receive an mp4 file with their new song. Since it’s already eight, I download it onto my phone. I’ll listen to it at home.

Home.

I guess it’s safe enough to go there this early. My next priority will be to look for a new apartment. This one is too claustrophobic. And memory filled. I need to find one without international residents. Or at least none from the British Isles.

When I get home, I make a beeline for my bedroom and take off my work clothes, opting instead for a pair of jeans, socks, and an oversized UC T-shirt, sans bra. My pink bunny slippers remain in my closet, where they’ve been since the party.

I enter my living room where I connect my phone with the television in order to get a much richer sound for the new music. With a glass of red zin in my hand, I press play. Reclining against the cushions on my sofa, I allow the new sounds to envelop me.

“Refocused Destiny” will top the charts. Own them. This new song is unlike anything I’ve ever heard musically. Bennett’s voice is smoother than ever, and is supported by the rest of the band at various times. It’s haunting yet uplifting, moving yet spirited. I’ve come to love the rest of their repertoire, but this is the embodiment of UC 2.0. My battered heart is full.

When the song comes to a conclusion, I’m wearing a smile wider than the Brooklyn Bridge. I can’t wait for the world to hear this. I crank up the volume and hit “repeat.”

Chapter 28

Callum

I approach my building, wishing I were back in Scotland. At least there, finding a new flat doesn't require you to sign over your first born, your first year's wages, and your vacation hopes for a decade.

Until then, I enter the mail area and open my box. Bill, junk, junk, junk, bill, junk, junk, catalogue (which equals junk in my opinion), letter. Tossing the junk into the convenient garbage can, I flip over the letter to see who it's from.

Rather, *to*. Quinn Walker.

My entire body constricts. I've done well over the past weeks to avoid her. Gave up on doing laundry and re-hired the service. Changed my schedule so as not to coincide with hers. Yet the mail fates decided to toss this nugget at me.

"Remember son, everything worth having is worth fighting for." Dadaidh can keep his wisdom to himself. It's impossible to fight for a phantom.

In my apartment, I toss the mail onto the island and pour myself a dram. After weeks of hard work, it seems as if Moray Whisky is gaining a toehold into a small corner of the New York City market. Following the launch, we reassessed and decided to move forward in a less splashy way. Considering our anticipated tidal wave was more like a trickle, what other choice did we have?

We niched down, focusing our efforts on local bars and clubs. Inviting small groups into the distillery for tours and tastes. Even had a YouTuber film his experience with us,

which is scheduled to air next week. Small steps toward a major goal. A marathon and not a sprint. At least we're making some progress.

Moving the bills into their basket, I stare at the letter. I need to return this to the office for them to put it into the correct mailbox. Since the launch, *she's* been splashed all over the news. Her sister published a long article about their lives growing up as hidden Hansens, which continues to garner interest. Their mother, Petra, has been on the interview circuit. Jackie's on television at least once a week as well. Of course, as soon as I see her long silver hair, I change channels.

Because she's not Quinn.

The clock strikes nine. The danger zone, when my longing for Quinn multiplies. I flip the letter over and over, remembering all our happy times as a punishment for my transgressions. Quinn in her pink bunny slippers. How she laughed. Imitated my Scottish accent. Made me feel accepted for who I am rather than who I'm related to. *I shoulda told her about my family's connection to the distillery up front.* Hefty price tag.

Abandoning her letter on my island, I collapse onto the sofa. Some music from above fills my living room. It's the first sign she's still in the building. The wisp of a smile crosses my face, knowing we're sharing the same air again. Which I quash.

Still, my ears prick at the song she's playing. I've never heard it before, but I like it. It's familiar, yet not.

The music plays again, only much louder. Bennett's tenor voice cuts through my ceiling causing me to sit ramrod straight. The band must've sent her a new track.

All these things combined have to be a sign. The letter, the music, the news segments. Everything points me toward reconciling with her. Or at least making one final effort.

God, I miss her.

The song continues. My need to see her becomes undeniable. She has to be as miserable as I am. We said we

loved each other, which can't simply vanish. It hasn't for me.

It's time to fight for the lass. *Because she's worth it.*

I rush into my bedroom and strip, then put on my kilt tuxedo in record time. She loved it at the party, especially when her wandering hand snuck up my thigh to my bare arse. The music from above continues to play on repeat. I've even started to learn some of the lyrics.

With her letter in one hand and the box of Scottish Breakfast tea Mam insisted I take at the hotel in the other, I stop at the mirror to confirm my beard is in proper form, then climb the stairs. Outside her door, I stand on her welcome mat for an entire song. The greeting, "Hello from the Other Side," urges me on while also mocks me.

She's worth fighting for.

I can do this. I knock on her door and hold my breath. Wait. No reply.

Undeterred, I pound on her door again. My arm drops to my side. She has to answer her door. She has to. Maybe she can't hear me over the strains of UC?

Forming a fist, I beat on her door with all my might. My patience is rewarded when the locks tumble, announcing their opening.

I stare at the floor as my body starts to buzz.

The door swings open. The first thing I see are her feet in socks rather than her bunny slippers. Inhaling, I raise my gaze up her body, ending on the scowl she's wearing. She places her hand on her hip. "Where's my pizza?"

She throws my initial ask of her back into my face. The sense of irony is so Quinn.

This is my moment. Go big, Callum—or return to Scotland. Alone. *Not an option.*

I straighten my vest. "I heard you playing my favorite band and had to come up here to introduce myself." I extend my hand and barrel forward. "Halò. My name is Callum Ian MacMurray, the only child of Lachlan and Isla MacMurray.

For nearly two centuries, my family has owned a whisky distillery in Scotland, founded by my great-great-grandfather Arran MacMurray. I'm here in America since I just launched our whisky label here. It's called Moray Whisky." I gulp air. "Oh, and my father currently holds the title of duke but it doesn't mean anything in Scotland. I'm not royalty or anything." I hold up her letter. "This was put in my mailbox by mistake."

She doesn't make a move toward the envelope, yet I have the sense she's processing my every confession. I blather, "I'm sorry I don't have any pizza, but I did bring you this tea." I lift the box of Scottish Breakfast tea. "I would really like to take you out on a date to get to know you." My mouth clamps shut.

I've said my piece. There's nothing more I can add. Ball's rolling in her end zone. *Please pick it up.*

Silence between us extends, underscored by UC's new song. The track starts again from the beginning. She reaches out and plucks only her letter from my hand. "Thanks for bringing my mail. It was unnecessary." She turns and tosses it onto the side table at the entrance to her apartment.

Don't leave. Don't leave. Don't leave.

Hand on the door handle, she remains facing the interior of the apartment, unmoving. Her body shudders.

The desire for her to accept my date is palpable. At least from my perspective. *Say yes.*

After an eternity, she turns to me, tears welling in her expressive brown eyes. "Nice to meet you Callum Ian MacMurray. I'm Quinn Walker. You might have heard my name in the news recently, since my father is Ogden Hansen."

My muscles weaken to the point where I'm unsure whether they'll continue to support my body. The twinkle in her eyes shocks me forward. I kiss her hand. "Flopsy."

Her response is immediate. "Outlander."

Another time, I'll tease Sam Heughan for this nickname. But not now. I squeeze her hand. "I promise to watch black and white films forever with you, Quinn Walker." While I

breathe, I'll hold out hope of converting her into a sci-fi buff as well. The struggle will be its own reward. *Last declaration*. "I huvnae stopped loving you, and I never will."

Her cheeks turn a sweet shade of pink as one lone tear overspills her eye. She opens the door wider. "Would you like to come in and hear Untamed Coaster's newest song?"

"I'd love to."

Inside her apartment, the familiar surroundings provide a gratifying comfort. One I never thought I'd feel again. She takes the box of tea from my hand, pops into her kitchen, and retrieves a bottle of Moray. "A wee dram?"

Although she hasn't returned my declared affections, my mind jumps ahead. Past the turbulent times ahead with the fallout from her being uncovered as a Hansen. Beyond the successful incorporation of my family's whisky into American households. To when we both come home from a long day at work and share our days over our favorite beverages—tea for her (with a shot of the golden liquid) and my family's recipe, straight, in my glass. Surrounded by our bairns.

For the here and now, though, she hands me a glass as UC's song replays. This moment will be forever etched into my heart. I'm surrounded by music I love, drinking the beverage I love, with a woman I love above all.

I touch my glass to her mug. "To a new beginning."

She raises her tea and samples the Scottish nectar, making an appreciative noise low in her throat. "Wow. This is good."

"So much better than the English stuff." My lips rise in a lopsided grin, to which she smiles in return.

She lowers the mug onto the island and her chest expands on her inhale. "I tried to cut you out of my life, but I couldn't. Even when you weren't here, you were. I was beyond mad when your father announced who mine is, but the truth is I'm sort of relieved my secret's out. I hope Paige's mom returns, but other than that, transparency is a good thing. It's freeing. As I'm sure the fact I didn't know about Arran MacMurray's role in your life freed you to be your genuine self." Her hand

brushes my tux. “Your kilt made its way into my heart and I don’t want lies to ever separate us again.”

Her declaration spurs me to expose my shame. “I feel beyond awful for what went down with Dadaidh. I shoulda been the one who told you everything about my family. I shoulda warned my parents about your father before the launch. I keep beating myself up over every misstep and missed opportunity I had with you.”

“I—”

Abandoning my tumbler on the island, I place my hand on top of hers. “No, hear me out. I lied to you by omission about my family because back in Scotland everyone knew my family’s heritage, which turned me into a target. For gold diggers. One particular lass even got me to purchase a medium Prada Nappa-leather tote bag with topstitching for her before I figured out I was her meal ticket.” Her mouth drops open when she connects the dots to her own bag. I don’t let her interrupt. “Ever since then, I’ve kept mum about my heritage. Please know I didn’t lie for any other reason than for you to get to know the true Callum. I promise to always be honest with you from this moment forward.”

Tears stream down both of her cheeks. “You’re forgiven. I love you, too. I tried to stop but couldn’t.”

To the strains of UC’s amazing new song, I pull her into my arms and cup her cheeks, using my thumb to wipe the tear tracks away. “My gorgeous, strong, amazing lass.”

My mouth descends on her lips. Our kiss ignites within seconds. Soon, her fingers slip inside my kilt and touch my bare thigh. With a groan, I open my stance, giving her better access to the part of me weeping for her touch.

Her hand wraps around my hard cock and glides over its entire length. I bend my knees and tug her shirt over her head. I almost cry when she removes her attention from my body, but when she attacks the buttons on my vest, I breathe a sigh of relief. I assist in unbuttoning my shirt and soon it joins hers on the floor.

“I thought kilts were easy access. How do I get you out of this?”

“Later.” Too impatient to show her the intricacies of my kilt, I strip her naked in seconds and shove her against the wall. I make quick work of taking off the sporran, but not before removing a condom from the pouch—I had hopes, but no expectations—and roll it onto my straining erection. Lifting her leg around my thigh, I thrust into her warm channel in one fluid movement.

The back of her head contacts the wall. “Fucking perfection.”

Her cry echoes my thoughts, causing me to grunt in agreement. “You’re mine.” I drop my lips down her throat and end up sucking on her nipple while my hand kneads her other boob.

My body rocks against hers, which is caught between mine and the wall. I pound into her, my mouth finding itself attached to her neck.

“Yes.” She runs her hand up and down my back, ending on my arse. With jerky movements, she lifts my kilt until her palm contacts my bare skin.

“Lass.” With our naked chests rubbing against each other and her hand pulling me deeper into her body, I’m lost in the amazing experience of Quinn. I ramp up my movements with her against the wall, but she doesn’t seem to mind. My balls pull up. “Come for me.”

No sooner are the words out of my mouth than she clenches around me. Two more pumps and she comes with a scream I’m sure the people on the floors above can hear. I don’t care. Roaring, I follow her over the cliff with my next thrust.

Panting, I force my entire weight against her, which pushes her farther against the wall. I release her leg and she lowers it to the floor, but remains pressed up against me. I nudge her hair away from her sweaty forehead. I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight. “You’re amazing.”

She giggles. “I was thinking the same thing about you.”

I bend down, wrap both of her legs around my waist, and carry her into the bedroom. Where I worship her all night long.

As she lays sleeping in my arms, I acknowledge Dadaidh was right. *Everything worth having is worth fighting for.* Tonight, I gathered my courage and laid my feelings bare. Willed her to accept my apology and allow us to start over. I'll forever be grateful she agreed to try again.

I kiss her forehead. My lass isn't merely worth having. She's priceless.

Epilogue

Quinn

The big day is here. Tonight came much later than I had anticipated, with making changes required by Gary and DocuStudios' proper, not to mention the band's, Luke's, UC's publicist, and their label, Platinum Records. The list goes on and on. I lost count of the number of revisions after fifty. But it's done. Tonight is the red carpet premiere.

Wearing my bra and matching black thong, I retrieve a hanger from the closet. Which is located in our apartment—my lease came up for renewal two months ago and I moved down one floor. In the physical sense only. Living with Callum enhances my world beyond imagination.

In fact, his entire family has been a blessing. Ma and I continue to make inroads with our relationship, but it's been his parents who bring me pure joy. I think back to the conversation I had with his parents the morning after Callum and I made up. Lachlan had FaceTimed my boyfriend, who pulled me into the frame and told them we were back together. Lachlan had stumbled all over himself apologizing for his part in the press debacle. His explanation rang true about being amazed at knowing Daddy's name from the television and not realizing the direct impact his words took on my life as well as that of Paige and her brothers.

“You're forgiven, Lachlan. You couldn't have known the full extent of what you'd stumbled into about my father.”

“Ach, lass, I still feel terrible.” He bowed his head. “When my son brings you to Scotland, I promise to share a wee dram and a tug.”

“Dadaidh!” Callum shouted.

With the same blue eyes as my boyfriend’s, the man on the screen raised his hands. “What did I say now? I only invited Quinn for a whisky and some fish ‘n chips brought in by the tugboats.” Callum and I laughed for hours about this little gem.

Shaking my head, I return to the present. “Should I wear this one?” I hold up a dark blue lacy dress and turn toward my boyfriend, who’s held me while I cried, supported me while I screamed, and has been the most amazing partner ever.

“Nae.” He enters his closet, returning with the most gorgeous gold dress I’ve ever seen. It’s floor-length with a V neck and cutouts at the waist. “You should wear this one.”

“Outlander. It’s beautiful.” My hand traces the crystals sewn into the material, adding an unexpected shimmer when the light hits it at the correct angle. I wrap my arms around him. “Thank you.”

He gives me a kiss that ends much too soon. “We don’t have time to repeat this morning’s performance, but I promise to make it up to you once you wow everyone with your rockumentary.” He grins. “I cannae wait to see you in this.”

“I’m so lucky to have you in my corner.” I steal another kiss, then take the hanger. “I better change my underwear, though. Don’t want to have the black showing through.”

While he watches, I strip naked, enjoying the growl coming from the depths of his soul. I select a light tan alternative and hold the set up. “Think these will be okay?”

He barks, “Put on the damn knickers.”

“Don’t have to get so testy about it.” Laughing, I do as he requested and smooth the gold dress over my body. The cutouts are placed at just the right spot so as to give the illusion I’m commando. Unlike my boyfriend, who’s putting the finishing touches on his kilt, I am not. “Need any help?”

His face raises in my direction. “Holy shite. I knew the dress would look good on you, but wow. You’re gonna command more attention than UC tonight.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re my boyfriend. Believe me, all eyes will be on the band. I’m only the director.”

He affixes his sporran. *Wonder what goodies he hid in the fur pouch today.* In the past, there’s been condoms, his cell phone, ChapStick, and even a vial of lube. My cheeks heat, remembering how he used it in a particularly inventive way. I stuff my feet into my strappy sandals.

Stepping forward, I pick up his shirt and help him button it. Of course, I dot his chest with tons of kisses before it’s secured. He makes quick work of his vest and tucks his family’s dagger into his socks. Or whatever they’re called. He’s told me several times, but I still refer to them as socks and a dagger.

“Are you ready to win over the world with *Untamed Coaster Unleashed?*”

His saying the title sparks a chain reaction of mini-explosions in my veins. It’s really happening. My first documentary is being unveiled tonight for the entire world. I’m damn proud of all the hard work I put into creating it, but the men of UC are the ones who deserve all the praise. They pulled together following Darren’s shocking death and came out stronger, as witnessed by the charts featuring their two new songs at numbers one and two. For the second straight month.

I pick up the matching Tory Burch clutch Callum purchased for the dress. “Yes, I’m ready. I want the world to appreciate how hard UC’s worked to find their footing again.”

He kisses my cheek. “I’m sure they will after tonight.” His hand skims over the bag and he mumbles, “So much better than the Prada.”

After he shared his connection to another Prada bag, I gave mine to Jackie. No room for outside negative vibes to intrude on our relationship. I sweep the room before we leave to make sure I haven’t forgotten anything. On the bed, Jessica Rabbit holds court while a framed *Braveheart* poster leans against the

wall. Callum refuses to hang it up—unless, he says, it’s in the bathroom.

Donning a smile, I pass through our living room filled with happy photos of us and join him in the hallway. While he locks up, I stand on our doormat, which reads, “Ceud Mìle Fàilte”—Gaelic for “A Hundred Thousand Welcomes.”

The limo pulls up to Radio City Music Hall, the locale Gary selected for tonight’s big premiere. We bandied about other music venues, but this building’s art deco decor and storied history of hosting the biggest names in the music world won DocuStudios over. My pulse picks up.

Lacing his fingers in mine, my boyfriend kisses my hand. “I’m ready to show the world what my love is capable of. Even without her bunny slippers.” With a giggle, I follow him out of the limo, marveling at how my outlook on life has changed given my love connection with Callum.

A massive crowd lines the red carpet. Flashes go off, quasi-blinding me for a moment. Callum takes my arm and leads me past a wall of people until we reach the area littered with reporters. My least favorite part.

News about Daddy still dominates the headlines, considering the trial’s scheduled soon. I finally sat down with Gary and apologized for what my father did to him. Surprisingly, he didn’t paint me with the same criminal brush as he does my father. Not for the first time I thank everything holy he’s in my life. Plus, my boss made it clear no questions will be fielded regarding my family tonight, yet queries are still screamed about VOW-cubed. I don’t flinch at them, but don’t acknowledge them either.

We stop to speak with the entertainment reporter for *NewsTime*. Holding a long, skinny microphone, she says, “Thanks for joining me, Quinn Walker, the director of the film on everyone’s lips. What are you most excited for people to learn about Untamed Coaster at tonight’s premiere?”

Grateful she stuck to the script of allowable questions, I respond, “I hope people will be able to see behind the mystique of the band and get a true sense of who the guys are

and what they've been through in order to reach where they are today. They suffered and almost imploded when Darren died. Their work ethic and love for music sustained them throughout."

The reporter turns the mic to my boyfriend. "For those of you who haven't met this Scottish hunk, this is Callum MacMurray of Moray Distillery fame. I understand you're providing the whisky for tonight's gala."

I warned Callum he might get questions, but he didn't believe me. My boyfriend smiles and I swear the reporter swoons. *Get in line, sister.* "Aye. As you'll see in the rockumentary—" his gaze swings to mine for a brief second—"Untamed Coaster headlined our launch here in America. In the spirit of turnabout being fair play, they invited me to attend tonight and supply the drink."

Following Moray Whisky's launch party, Callum dedicated his efforts to small, niche markets. Within a month, things started to take off. Now, Moray is being hailed throughout the United States as the new "it" whisky. His company's had quite the challenge in keeping up with orders. I shift my weight between my feet, trying to keep from jumping up and down at his achievements. While he may be my biggest fan, I'm definitely his biggest cheerleader. He's even managed to change my opinion of his family's recipe.

Another reporter catches my attention and we move through the line, answering questions about the movie and what they should expect. Finally, we enter the building where a server hands us glass tumblers filled with Moray Whisky. Soon surrounded by Gary and the folks at DocuStudios, we chatter about the rockumentary.

Suddenly, the air charges. An excitement rushes through the crowd when UC enters Radio City. After everything they've been through, they deserve this attention. They've more than earned it.

Bennett swaggers over to us, giving Callum a fist bump and me a hug. "I can't wait for everyone to see your film. If

we weren't already sitting at number one, this would put us there. You're the bomb."

"I appreciate your kind words. I only put together what I witnessed in a cohesive format. You guys did the hard work." I sip my whisky. "I can't wait for UC's performance once the movie's over."

He nods. "We're all stoked. After being in LA for the past several months recording, it feels good to be back in New York City. Where we caught our second wave." His chin lifts at a couple of people around us, then he raises his tumbler to the ceiling. "Man, this is the best damn whisky."

He and Callum start talking between themselves like the old friends they've become. My boyfriend suppresses his inner fanboy, but I know he's not far from the surface.

Paige and Jesse join our group, thrilled to be here supporting me. I owe so much to my sister, who urged me to reassert myself into society with my head held high. She helped me navigate the circling sharks. Since my reconciliation with Callum, we double date often.

A second later, Theo and Jackie's nemesis, Amelia—a lovely woman—join us, followed by Xander and Madison, Ryder, as well as Daddy's partner Ward's daughter Chloe. Amazing how time continues to heal some wounds between me and Daddy's other direct and extended families.

Across the way, Jenna Westwood's sandy blonde hair catches my attention as she twirls the end of her ponytail around her fingers. I invited her tonight because she's inextricably tied to UC's renaissance, albeit not in the way one would hope—she was Darren's physical therapist. She stands off to the side, alone, but deserves to be here as much as anyone.

"Excuse me. I see someone I need to talk with." Everyone nods at me and I approach Jenna. "I'm happy you decided to come."

Her lips move upward in what appears to resemble the beginning of a smile. "Your handwritten invitation was

impossible for me to refuse.” She rubs her forearm.

“You’ll enjoy the film, I promise.”

She shifts her weight, eyes downcast. Jenna’s featured in the rockumentary in the beginning where we go over Darren’s death and interview each band member about how it affected them. Her story pulled at my heartstrings. She’d been assigned to work with Darren as he rehabbed his elbow fracture. When the need for intensive therapy ended, Jenna made trips to work with him on tour weekly, until he was deemed “cured.” Once their therapist-patient relationship ended, a much more personal one blossomed. I have always found it curious that such a shy girl was caught up in the rock star life, but from all accounts, Darren was smitten with her.

The original band members each commented about Jenna’s remarkable work with Darren. How she enabled him to return to the band in short order. His overdose changed everything. They don’t blame her for his death, but don’t have their arms wide open for her either. It’s like she’s a part of their past they don’t want to revisit.

Jenna glances around the room, then she stares at the floor. “Do you know when the movie should start?”

“Soon, I think.”

Her head bobs several times and my heart goes out to her. Coop described her as quiet yet vivacious, outgoing in a reserved kind of way. The shell of a woman standing in front of me can hardly be described using any of the positive descriptors. When she was interviewed for the documentary, we went to her workplace. In her scrubs, she gave a clinical description of what happened with Darren, his diagnosis, and recovery.

The only time I saw a glimmer of the vibrant woman who had been described was when we delved into her relationship with Darren. She made it clear his therapy had been completed before they got together, avoiding any ethical issues. Only when she shared memories of her time with the keyboardist did a fire alight in her grey eyes. Not a raging forest fire, more

like a lit match. Still, head and shoulders above the shell standing here today.

I want to help her the way Paige has been my rock since my parentage became public knowledge. This therapist needs someone on her side. Since I'm the only one standing here, I nominate myself. "I'd like for you to sit next to me during the showing."

Her eyes go wide. "No, no, no. I couldn't. I'll sit in the back." I complete her thought process—where she can slip out as soon as the opening credits roll.

The lights flicker. Gary announces it's time to find our seats. I wrap my arm around her shoulders. "I won't hear of it. You have a major role in this story and deserve to be in a place of honor."

I direct her stiff body toward Callum, who greets us with his usual open expression. "Hi, lass. I'm Callum MacMurray, Quinn's boyfriend." He extends his hand.

Jenna's chest rises and falls. Realizing she's trapped, she shakes his hand. "I'm Jenna."

Seeing she's not going to elaborate, and Callum will find out within the first twenty minutes of the film, I add, "Jenna Westwood. She was Darren's therapist."

Being the ultimate UC fan, he fills in the gaps. "Och, then you've had a rough time of it. I bet you'll gain a new appreciation for the lads once you've seen my girlfriend's movie." After I introduce my gathered family to the physical therapist, Callum states, "Let's find our seats."

God bless him, he doesn't question why I want her to sit with us but rather leads us into the massive auditorium. "This is as fancy as some of the theatres in Edinburgh," he comments.

"I can't wait to see them." Callum and I have talked about taking a trip to Scotland, but knew I had to get through my premiere first. Besides, the whisky biz has been keeping him busy here in the United States.

We're seated in the tenth row. Callum sits on the aisle, and Jenna is on my right followed by my newfound family members. Several attendees offer me preliminary congratulations before the movie even begins to roll. My debut rockumentary is about to be shown. I bounce in my seat.

Gary takes the stage and welcomes everyone to the initial showing of *Untamed Coaster Unleashed*. He introduces the band and Luke, their manager, who receive a standing ovation.

He concludes his speech with delightful remarks about me, causing a blush to rise up my neck. Callum leans over. "Thought I was the only man to put that color in your cheeks."

"For a very different reason, Outlander." I give him a kiss as the lights dim.

The auditorium erupts when a photo of Darren Hilliard rocking the keyboard at a concert comes into focus with the words, "In Loving Memory." Next to me, Jenna grips the armrest until the rockumentary begins in earnest.

I'm attuned to every laugh and cry and gasp and cheer throughout the next two hours. All of which occur where they were supposed to, which is a plus. They even shout when Tris adds his embellishments to "Crushing Blow" during the launch party. At the end, though, as the credits roll over UC's new hit, "Refocused Destiny," the audience surges to their feet.

They loved it.

They really loved it.

Tears streaming down my face, I rise and clap as UC takes the stage. Beaming at everyone, Bennett takes the mic. "Wow. That was something, wasn't it?"

More clapping.

"Big thanks to Quinn Walker, who put this all together." He puts his hand over his eyebrows. "Where's Quinn?"

I raise my hand, but Callum urges me to stand. Bennett points to me. "There she is! Thank you for this." He places his hand over his heart. "You're forever a member of Untamed

Coaster.” He and the rest of the band bow their heads toward me.

My palm flies in front of my mouth. “Oh wow.” I turn my head from left to right and realize everyone’s clapping *for* me.

Not the jeers of growing up without a father in my life.

Not the birthdays and graduations where an empty setting remained unused or abandoned halfway through.

Not the inappropriate questions of reporters wanting a scoop.

No. These are people celebrating *my* hard work. Appreciating *my* talents. Allowing *me* to weave a web around five men who rose to the pinnacle, suffered a devastating blow, and ascended again. I blow a kiss to the guys on stage. Bennett catches it in his hand and sends it back to Callum. My life couldn’t be more complete.

We retake our seats. A drumbeat marks the start of “Upside Down,” and they begin their set.

My boyfriend leans over. “Your film is better than a Hitchcock.”

I raise my eyebrow. “How about a Lucas?”

He winks. “Aye. Him, too.”

In the darkness, my hand slips under his kilt, savoring the feel of the coarse hairs on his thigh. Wishing I could go higher, but fearing an indecent exposure charge, I retrieve my hand. With a kiss to his cheek, I promise, “We’ll finish this later.”

UC starts playing their current number one. The song that played over the credits. It’ll always own a piece of my heart as it’s also the one that brought Callum back to me. They’re rockin’ it like I’ve never seen them before. Bennett even executes a crazy jump at the end as the theater goes black.

One of the roadies appears at the aisle next to Callum. “Excuse me, but can you come with me, Jenna?”

We look among ourselves. Protective of the shy girl, I’m the first to speak, “Why do you want her?”

“We need a physical therapist.”



Want to have Callum be your tour guide throughout Scotland?
[Download this FREE Bonus Epilogue today.](#) ~ and enjoy!!

Please stay in touch with me by [signing up for my weekly newsletter](#), which will arrive in your inbox every Thursday morning.

A Note from Arell

Dear Fabulous Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *SINFUL BEATS*, the first entry in the new Untamed Coaster series!

When I was writing *IDLE*, I knew Quinn needed her own story. And I also knew my heart was longing to write another rock star series ... hence her new job from reality show director to documentarian was born! The boys in Untamed Coaster surely caught her heartstrings (and I hope yours as well!).

Last summer, Big Mike and I took a trip to Scotland and I just *KNEW* my next hero had to be Scottish. I loved incorporating my experiences ~ and their accent ~ into *SINFUL BEATS*!

As usual, some of my own life experiences appear in *SINFUL BEATS* ~

- Moray County, Scotland, is the home of whisky! When I toured there, I had already decided upon using the name “Callum” and knew he had to be a whisky maker. On our tour, we went whisky tasting in Moray County and Callum was the lad who showed us the ropes!! He even gave me some pointers I used in the book. I hope I did him proud (he promised to pick up *Sinful Beats*, knowing he was the real-life inspiration behind Callum MacMurray).
- Lachlan MacMurray’s “duke” title without any responsibilities is one hundred percent fictional, I’m afraid. I do like to think a King would’ve bestowed such a title on Arran for helping his sick son though. When I was in Scotland, I was told they don’t really pay attention to such titles,

although Duke MacLeod of Dunvegan Castle (mentioned in the Bonus Epilogue) is a true Duke!

- In Scotland, they spell the word “whisky” without an “e.” However, in other parts of the world, it does have the “e.” We all felt switching it up in the book depending on where the alcohol was created would be weird, so I stuck to the Scottish spelling. Which means I changed the names of the whisky magazine titles mentioned in the book ~ all of them, in real life, have an “e.” Crazy!

- Quinn holds a special place in my heart, especially with her note taking! Some have accused me of taking notes on my notes in the past ...

Please stay in touch! [Subscribe to my newsletter](#) ~ or [join Arell's Angels, my reader group on Facebook](#) ~ or both!!

If you have any questions, feel free to [email me](#). I love chatting with readers!

Thanks for devoting your precious time to SINFUL BEATS. I hope Quinn and Callum's story encourages you to live life on your own terms!

All my love,

Arell

Gratitude

SINFUL BEATS couldn't have happened without so many awesome people!

I'm blessed to be surrounded by my husband, Big Mike, and my Mom, who both encourage my writing and support me no matter what. I know I'm lucky to have such a wonderful support system!

Quinn and Callum's story wouldn't be here without my fantastic team. Theresa Leigh of Velvetfire Press gave me wonderful plot ideas well before I even typed Chapter 1. Trena Lundin of It's Your Story Content Editing reviewed the first draft, which she chopped up and made so much better. Nancy Smay of Evident Ink edited my words with her unique flair. Virginia Carey and Roxanne Blouin proofed the final version. Then Jennifer of Romance Rehab crafted my fantastic blurb and Dee Garcia of Black Widow Designs created this amazing cover! BIG THANKS to these amazing women!!

My ARC Team is the best!! Big hugs for taking the time to read, review, and share SINFUL BEATS!!!

My Facebook reader's group, Arell's Angels, is my go-to place to hang out, check out hot photos, and simply just vent! Shout out to "Arell's Insiders" who post daily Angel Bites and keep the group rockin' with your wit and devotion. To all the Angels who participate in our Hotties of the Month, daily games, and general craziness ~ you make this journey so worthwhile (despite Facebook hiding our notifications)! Remember ~ there's always room for more Angels!

I'm so lucky to have met, in person and virtually, many wonderful authors who generously give advice, support, and friendship. Taylor DeLong, Libby Waterford, Mary E. Montgomery, Nicole Locke, Sophia Henry, Claire Marti, Lilly Wilde, Joslyn Westbrook, Jessa York, SH Pratt, Nancy Herkness, Stacey Wilk, JB Schroeder, Serena Bell, Brenda St. John Brown, Sylvie Stewart, and Hope Ellis simply are fantastic human beings. Please pick up their books when you get the chance!!

And to everyone who reads this book, *I hope Quinn and Callum show you the value of family.* If you enjoyed SINFUL BEATS, please share it with your friends and write a review.

Blessings,

Arell

About the Author

For as long as Arell Rivers can remember, she has been lost in a book. During her senior year in college, she picked up a romance novel ... and instantly was hooked!

Arell started writing her first book because the characters were screaming at her to do so. The story came out in her dreams and attacked her in the shower, so she took to the computer to shut them up. But they kept talking.

Born and raised in New Jersey, Arell has what some may call a “checkered past.” Prior to discovering her passion for writing romance, she practiced law, was a wedding and event planner and even dabbled in marketing. Arell lives with two adorable cats and a very supportive husband who doesn’t care that the bed isn’t made or dinner isn’t on the table. When not in her writing cave, Arell is found cooking in the InstantPot, working out with Shaun T, or hitting the beach.

Want to keep up to date with Arell? [Sign up for her newsletter](#). All new subscribers receive a special gift!



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Other Books by Arell

Untamed Coaster

A series following the rock band of the same name

Book #1: **SINFUL BEATS** (Quinn and Callum) (crossover from Sins of the Fathers)

Sins of the Fathers

A series about the children of 3 notorious businessmen

Book #1: **VICE** (short story, originally published as “Tinsel Bomb” in the 2021 anthology **TINSEL AND TATAS**)

Book #2: **ANGER** (Theo and Amelia)

Book #3: **PRIDE** (Xander and Madison)

Book #4: **IDLE** (Paige and Jesse)

The Hunte Family Series

A series about the dynasty created by rocker Braxon Hunte

Book #1: **OUT OF THE RED** (Brax and Sara)

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Book #1: **NO ONE TO HOLD** (Cole and Rose trilogy, part 1)

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Book #4: HOLD ON (series prequel novella)

Book #5: TAKE HOLD OF ME (Wills and Emilie)

Book #6: HOLD STILL (Ozzy and McKenna)

Book #7: HOLD ME: A ROCK STAR BOX SET (includes Books 1-4 plus a bonus novella)

IDLE

Want to learn more about Quinn's half-sister Paige and Jesse?

Read on to enjoy the first chapter of IDLE,

Book #4 in the Sins of the Fathers Series!



Paige

I need my independence.

My parents' apartment is a battlefield, and I can't wait to escape. So, when my brother's best friend asks me to partner with him on a home renovation reality show competition, I'm all in.

The fact that I'm wildly attracted to him and he seems determined to friendzone me is irrelevant. It's not like I need a new romance.

Or so I thought...

Jesse

I've been living someone else's life.

When my sister died, I fulfilled *her* potential. I never really focused on my own.

Until now.

With Paige's help, I have a shot at finally making *my* dreams come true. I know I have what it takes to be a great carpenter.

But do I have what it takes to keep my mind—and hands—off Paige?

Seems unlikely...

They're complete opposites with nothing in common but a little forced proximity, and an *incredibly* inconvenient attraction. Will competition bring them closer to happily ever after—or heartbreak?



IDLE

Sins of the Fathers Series, Book 4

Arell Rivers

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Chapter 1 - Paige

I wave at the hostess and breeze into the restaurant. Theo told me we were meeting at our “usual spot,” so I pass through the main dining room and make my way into the back section that's set up to look like an old railway car. Sliding the pocket door open, I slip into the room and am shocked to realize I'm the first one to arrive.

Pulling out my cell, I double-check the time. Should've stayed home and played today's Wordle, since I'm a full five minutes early. I tap my finger on my bottom lip, then drop my phone onto the table and wander around the room. The fake pull-down beds are a nice touch, although the oversized handles are way out of proportion.

Perhaps if I'm seated, a server will stop by and bring a breadbasket or something? I grab the back of an overstuffed chair and sit facing the doorway so I can see when someone enters.

Several people pass by, but no sign of my brother and his fiancée, or Xander and his. They foisted this meeting on me, telling me their friend needs help I'm perfectly suited to give, and now they're late? Even though they couched it as I was doing them a favor, I think it's more they want *me* to become what they consider to be a "contributing member of society." I huff. I'm happy with my life, thank you very much.

A tall guy with sandy brown hair stops outside the door. He has a perfect Roman nose and is wearing a suit, beneath which I can tell he's well built but not with the oversized bulkiness from a gym. He pulls out his phone and checks it, looks at the sign on the wall, and then directly at me. Bless everything holy. This man has the most unusually colored eyes I've ever gotten lost in. I'm drawn to explore their khaki depths when his gaze drops to the phone again, and his hand slides the door open.

I straighten my spine, deciding to remain in my seat, although I don the practiced smile that reels in most men. He enters the room, his head at a tilt. "Paige?"

He knows my name? *Who is this specimen? He looks like a man who knows how to make a girl sing. And by "girl," I mean me. And I don't mean sing either.* I rise. "Yes." He should be at my side in three, two—

The mystery man inclines his head to the right. "We're meeting your family in the next room over."

I can't help it. Everything inside me flags. Why does this god have to be the dolt my brother and "cousin" want me to meet about a stupid Renovation TV show? More importantly, strike one for his not crossing the room to me.

"Oh." With dragging feet, I follow him out of our "usual spot" and into a larger space. At least this guy has a nice ass. I stifle a snort. Jerk didn't even have the manners to allow me to enter the room first. Strike two.

Theo jumps up. “Paige! Jesse! I see you’ve met.”

“Yeah, she was sitting next door. Thanks for texting me her picture—that’s how I knew who she was.”

Kudos to my wonderful brother. *Not*. He comes over and gives me an embrace as if we hadn’t seen each other in weeks rather than a couple of days. But he’s a good guy. He’s let me crash at his place when I reach my limit with Mum and Father. Not to mention he filled out my college applications for me when I was otherwise occupied with my high school friends. I relent and return his big hug. But I do whisper in his ear, “Should’ve given me the correct room.”

He squeezes me. “Sorry, Little Bit.”

Dumb nickname. Although, truth be told, I do like to graze. A little bit of this, a little bit of that... I step back and stare into his chocolate brown eyes, slightly darker than mine. “Forgiven. Mostly.”

Hugs are shared all around. Amelia, Theo’s fiancée, and Madison, Xander’s fiancée, are super sweet, even though they share a baffling hard-nosed work ethic. Xander, my oldest “cousin” is the final person to approach me. Given our ten-year age difference, we’ve never been too close, but recent events with our fathers have brought us together. His dad and Father are best friends who started VOW³ Media ages ago, plus Xander’s uncle Ward. Since the FBI arrested all three of them at the Tinsel and Tatas Gala last winter, we’ve all been riding a hellish rollercoaster. Despite the circumstances, I’ve enjoyed getting to know my cousin.

Who messes up my pixie cut. “How are things going, Little Bit?”

I fix my hair and cross my arms, pretending to be annoyed at his use of my brother’s nickname for me. “Why can’t the family drop that pet name?” I skewer Theo with my gaze. “It’s all your fault.”

He throws his head back and laughs. I’m still jarred by how open and happy he is, thanks to Amelia’s influence. “You’re stuck with it, I’m afraid.”

“Dare I ask?” Jesse wades into the conversation. I’d almost forgotten he was here. I glance over to him. *Almost.*

“No.” I respond, causing the two dummies to chuckle.

Madison enters the breach. “Why don’t we all take our seats? Paige, you’re here,” she points to one chair. “And Jesse, you can sit next to her.”

Oh joy. At least he can help me into my seat. Not a chance in hell my brother or cousin would. I walk over to the spot Madison indicated and stand behind the chair. Jesse walks around me and pulls his own back and sits. *Seriously?* He failed the easiest items on my checklist in record time. Well, it’s not really a checklist, but that’s what my “cousin” Chloe—one of Uncle Ward’s daughters—dubbed my preconditions for someone to achieve boyfriend status with me, and I never bothered to rename her term. Besides, I’m not here looking for a date anyway.

With a huff, I pull my chair out and plop into it. If memory serves, *he* is the one my family wants me to help—hence today’s meeting. Good luck with that.

Unaware of my internal ire, Xander starts the conversation. “Madison and I got a text from Jesse, which led us to set up this dinner. Jesse’s looking for an interior designer to join forces with him for a new Renovation TV competition show. Since you already flipped a house in Brooklyn and have been looking for a fresh project, we automatically thought of you, Paige.”

As I expected, they want me to get a job—like them. I don’t need my brother and cousin meddling in my life. I’m an independent twenty-three-year-old. *Who lives with her parents.* Jesse drops his napkin on the floor and leans over to pick it up. My eyes roll. How much fun would it be to spend any amount of time with this good-looking Neanderthal anyway? Zero.

Back upright, Jesse takes a sip of his water. “Yes, that’s true Xander.” He looks around the table, his gaze finally landing on me. “I saw a post on their website that they’re casting a brand new show to take place right here on the High

Line. The pay's solid." His long index finger taps his glass. "Apparently, they've purchased an apartment building in need of renovation, which is what the show will feature. The teams—five of them—will be housed in an apartment there, which the network's already fixed up, like a lot of reality shows do."

Can this get any less enticing? This guy's actually suggesting that I move into some rinky-dink apartment on the *West Side* to live and work with him and a bunch of other strangers? Not my jam.

"It sounds very exciting to me," Madison chimes in. "I know you've been looking for a new place to flip for a while now, Paige. This opportunity is right up your alley." Her blue eyes pierce my soul. For some reason, out of everyone, Xander's fiancée has always unnerved me most. Maybe because she's so skilled at reading people.

I lick my lips. "Well, I—" I reach for my water goblet.

Jesse dives in. "Of course, simply agreeing to apply with me doesn't mean we'll be selected for the show. They have an interview process outlined on the website, which includes a request for photos of your work."

Is this a challenge? "I do have plenty of pictures of the house I flipped." I rub my hands on my napkin.

"And I can help you put together a great package," Madison oh-so helpfully adds. She started a PR firm about five years ago, at which Xander's been named partner.

"They'd be crazy not to accept you. A banker," Amelia points to Jesse. *He's a banker? What is he doing trying to get on a renovation show?* Amelia's finger moves to me. "And a Hansen. The other contestants don't stand a chance."

I better put an end to this farce. "I'm not sure I want to be on television. I mean, with everything going on with our fathers ..."

"That's the reason you have to apply," Xander jumps into the pregnant pause. "We need to clean up our name, and this would be great press." Madison turns her head, her scar

catching my attention for a fleeting moment, and places her hand on Xander's arm.

Xander's comment stops me cold. Could I save the family? What a novel concept. The server enters with our drinks and the first course. I'm sure Theo placed our drink orders—the only variable the restaurant allows—when he made the reservation. It pays to be members here.

Jesse picks up his fork. "I didn't order this, but it looks fantastic." Theo fills him in about the benefits of membership.

As I nibble on my kale and pear salad, Madison asks Jesse, "How are things going at Handmade by JD?"

Next to me, Jesse's Adam's apple bobs with his swallow. Damn. Why does such a jerk have such a masculine movement? I sigh into my napkin. "Good. I love working with my hands—"

Although he keeps on talking, now I'm focused on his hands. Which seem to be larger than normal. His fingers are long and tapered to perfection. I'm awash in thinking about how they could strum my body, if only he were a gentleman and not such a caveman. Maybe he'd be the first ...

Spearing a kale leaf, I tune back into the conversation. "So it's time for me to make a decision." Not interested in his life story, or even continuing with the farce of a TV show, I keep my head down and finish my plate. The guys talk sports while the women dive headfirst into wedding planning.

"And Halle said we need to choose a band once we get the location set," Amelia says.

When the two seem stumped, I hop in. "Have you thought about reaching out to TLR? I met their drummer, Dwight, at a club a few months ago, and he was cool."

"I don't think I want a big name playing at our wedding," Madison replies.

"Agreed," Amelia replies.

Shrugging, I sip the remnants of my Mexican mule, the tequila giving me the strength to suffer through the rest of this

meal. Halle, Xander's sister, is only one year older than me, but you'd think she was closer to twenty years my senior. That girl's had it going on ever since we were playing on the swings in Central Park. She's always been "in charge." If you needed someone to write your term paper, she could whip out a list of about ten people to choose from—and take her cut before turning over the name. No wonder she's grown up to be a high-powered wedding planner who has celebrities and musicians on her roster.

The main entrées are served—pasta primavera with spicy rice balls. This place never disappoints. While the others talk amongst themselves, Jesse leans over and murmurs, "Tell me the truth. Does trying out for the show interest you at all?"

My eyebrow raises. Seems Cro Magnon Boy is more astute than I gave him credit for. I give Theo and Xander a quick glance, but they're too involved with their meals, and their fiancées, to pay attention to us.

Still bristling over my brother and cousin's interference plus Jesse's lack of manners, I'm about to tell him to pound sand when what Xander said makes a forceful reappearance. I've always been the one the family saves—the reverse could be interesting. Although overwhelming. "I'm not sure."

"What would change your mind?"

He stares at me, the amber ring encircling his khaki-colored eyes giving me pause. "I need to think about this. I mean, with Father's notoriety, I'm not sure if I'd be a positive or a negative to your application. I certainly don't want to be the person everyone loves to hate on the show."

"I see your point. How about considering this as an opportunity to turn the tide for the Hansen and Turner names? You could show the world you're not your fathers."

How can such an unmannered man be so insightful? Last week when Chloe and I talked, she was in a tizzy over her lack of interviews. She's the only student in her graduating class who hasn't scored at least one interview, and we both believe it's because of the status of VOW-cubed.

Might I be able to change this? Seems an uphill battle. “I’ll think about it. When do you need my decision?”

He twirls the pasta around his fork. “Can you let me know, either way, by the end of the week?”

Three days. Reasonable enough. “Yeah.”

“Good.” His hand lands on his tulip-shaped pint glass filled with Guinness. “And please consider saying yes. You’re my last hope, and I need this exposure.”

No pressure at all. I trace my finger over the lip of the copper mug. “Friday.”

He wipes his hands on his napkin. “I think you’ll enjoy the experience if we’re selected for the show. Both Xander and Theo talk highly of your skills with your house flip.”

Now he’s laying it on way too thick. Sure, both of them came to see the house once I had finished it about eighteen months ago. But they didn’t come during construction, nor did they sit with me while I argued with myself for two hours about the size of the towel racks. Forget about the days spent trying to decide on the right tile for the kitchen backsplash. This Renovation TV show will only highlight how pretty everything looks at the end of the day. How about figuring out how to re-route the electrical or deciding on what pattern to use for the window coverings?

“I’ll get back to you.”

Jesse pulls out his phone. “Let’s exchange numbers. This way we won’t have to keep involving your brother or Xander any further.”

Makes sense if I were inclined to do the show with him. I doubt I will but recite my contact info anyway, after which I drop my fork. This entire dinner has taken far too much out of me.

“Who’s up for dessert?” At Madison’s cheery question, I sink back into my seat. When will this meal end?



[Read the rest of Paige and Jesse's story on Amazon now!](#)