

THE CURVY GIRLS' BACHELOR AUCTION

WIN A DATE WITH A

Highlander

KATE TILNEY

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ONE

ALICE

“Well?” I spin around in front of the full-length mirror for my two best friends to give me their reviews of my date night outfit. “What do you think?”

“Well, Alice...” Wendy purses her lips. “It’s... really cute.”

“So cute,” Whitney agrees.

“Your boobs look amazing.”

“Voluptuous.”

“And your legs have never looked better.”

“Like butter.”

I halt mid-spin and throw out my arms to keep from stumbling over. Blinking several times, I focus on a spot on the wall just like my teacher taught us to do back in ballet class. It takes me longer than I remember to re-establish a sense of balance. Then again, the last time I set foot in a ballet studio, I was still learning that one plus one equals two. It’s hardly a wonder I’m not as light on my feet twenty years later.

Centered at last, I turn my attention back to my friends. “Why am I sensing a ‘but’ in all of this?”

Wendy blinks in surprise. “I wasn’t about to say but.”

“No butts from this corner either.” Whitney makes an ‘X’ over her chest. “I promise.”

I narrow my eyes at the pair of them. “Really?”

“We swear.” Wendy darts a sidelong glance at Whitney, who gives a short nod. “However...”

“Oh man.” I groan and flop down on my bed, reaching for the hard seltzer on the nightstand. I’ve been nursing it for the last half hour while my friends help me prepare for my big date tonight. “I knew there was a problem. You think it makes my ass look big.”

“What?” Whitney shakes her head. “No way.”

“You think the color washes me out.”

“It’s not that,” Wendy says. “You look amazing in it. We would tell you if that wasn’t the case.”

“Right, I’m sure.” I roll my eyes and sip from the can. The bubbles dance on my tongue, like champagne. I wish this was a glass of champagne. I adore champagne.

But if I’d popped open a bottle of sparkling wine, I probably would’ve had a couple of glasses, which would go straight to my head. I want to have my wits about me. Especially tonight.

It’s my first date in a while. A long while. And I’m already worried enough about not saying something completely stupid that it’ll keep me tossing and turning all night while I think about all the things I should have said instead.

Or maybe I’d have a piece of lettuce stuck in my hair, and I wouldn’t find out until I got home.

Like I need that.

It doesn’t matter that this is a date I won at a bachelor’s auction to raise money for a local children’s hospital. I still want to make a good impression.

And right now, my friends aren’t exactly giving me the encouragement I need to feel like that’s possible.

“So what is it?” I set the hard seltzer aside and sit up. “What’s the problem with the dress?”

“It’s not a problem,” Wendy says.

“Definitely not a problem,” Whitney agrees. “It’s just...”

“Just what?”

Wendy sighs. “It’s plaid.”

My brow furrows. “And?”

“You’re going on a date with a guy from Scotland.” Wendy perches on the edge of my bed. “A highlander no less.”

“I remember. I was at the bachelor auction too and read his bio.” I tilt my head to the side. “So what? Do you think a plaid dress is too on the nose?”

“But it’s not just the dress.” Whitney looks pointedly at a bakery box on my dresser.

I narrow my eyes. “I’m bringing a treat from the bakery.”

I thought it was a nice gesture to bring something from my bakery. Especially since we’re meeting for a private tasting at his whisky distillery. I figured he’d share something he made with me, and I’d share something I made with him.

What better way to get to know your date for the evening?

“What could possibly be wrong with that?” I ask.

Whitney picks up the box and opens it. “It’s shortbread. That’s not something you’ve ever had on your menu before, which means you made it especially for him.”

“He’s from Scotland.” I lift my shoulders. “I figured it was a safe bet that he’d like shortbread.”

“Plaid. Shortbread.” Wendy shakes her head. “You’re not seeing the problem with this?”

“What? Is it too cute?” I roll my eyes. “What’s wrong with being themed?”

“It’s not an issue of cuteness or theme. It’s just...” Wendy places a hand on my knee. “I thought you didn’t want to do this anymore.”

It hits me. Their reason for concern. “You think I’m changing myself to make him like me.”

“Not necessarily,” Whitney says a little too fast. “We just want to... make sure that isn’t what’s happening here.”

“That’s not what’s happening.” I cover Wendy’s hand and hold out my other to draw Whitney closer. “I thought it would be fun to go with a theme. You know, since all of the auction dates are themed in the first place.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am. Honestly.” I squeeze both of their hands. “I’ve learned my lesson. I’m never changing myself for a man again. Never.”

There’s really something about a man in plaid.

That’s the first thought that pops into my head when I set foot inside the tasting room to find Ritchie Campbell waiting for me. He’s wearing a plaid shirt that hugs his broad shoulders and upper arms.

My second thought is: More red-headed guys should have beards. Especially when they look as good in them as Ritchie does right now.

“Halo!” He flashes me a warm smile that sets my heart pounding immediately. “Ye must be Alice.”

He steps out from behind the room and strides toward me with a walk that practically screams confidence and swagger. I’m so struck, I nearly drop the bakery box in my hands.

“Yes.” I inwardly cringe, sounding breathier despite all of my intentions of being calm and in control of myself. “You must be Ritchie.”

His light blue eyes crinkle and his smile grows even brighter. “Just so.”

He captures my free hand in his to shake. The warmth from his smile and palm seem to flow straight from him and into my chest.

Wow, he's... so hot. So charming. Was he this handsome and charming the night of the auction?

Yes. He was. There's a reason I'd set my sight on him when Wendy's boss instructed me to bid on and win a date with one of the bachelors—his treat. Even from my seat in the ballroom, his strong physique and easy manner had struck a chord with me.

That and the fact that I've always had a thing for guys with sexy voices. And they don't get much hotter than Ritchie's rich brogue.

Releasing my hand sooner than I'd like, he ushers me toward a table that has been set for us. As we make our way, I take the opportunity to survey my surroundings, taking mental notes to share with my friends later.

With tall wood-panel ceilings and a mixture of stone walls with a large fireplace in the center, Ritchie's tasting room looks more like a rustic lodge in the Highlands than a bar. Even the green trees and hills outside the windows seem to transport us thousands of miles and an ocean away.

Proper gentleman that he is, Ritchie helps me into my seat. As he settles into his, that warm gaze of his is back on me, stirring all kinds of feelings inside.

“Ye hev me at a loss, Alice. Ye ken aboot me already. Fit dae ya dae?”

My heart flutters. I'm not entirely positive about what he's said or asked. But I love the way he says my name. It comes out sounding more like “a lass.” That's a hop, skip, and jump away from him saying I'm bonnie or calling me Sassenach.

I know, I know. That's technically a name for someone from England. But show me a woman who has seen or read *Outlander* who doesn't fantasize about being called Sassenach by a hunky Scot just once in her life.

I'll wait.

Shrugging I give a contented sigh and lean back in the seat with a smile playing on my lips.

Ritchie's brows knit together, and I realize my response probably wasn't the appropriate one for whatever he asked.

"I'm sorry." I bat my eyelashes, and they briefly stick. The manufacturers apparently went a little heavy on the adhesive on the fake lashes I put on for the night. I squint my eyes, resisting the urge to rub my eyes and smudge the eye makeup I spent way too much time applying.

My furious eyelash batting only makes his brow furrow more deeply. The poor man probably thinks I'm losing my mind. Or going blind.

Forcing my eyes open, I plaster a smile on my lips. "What did you ask?"

He studies me for a moment, then shakes his head. I've apparently passed the vibe check.

"Fur work. Fit da ya dae?"

Oh. He's asking one of the most basic of questions when you meet someone new. Duh.

"I'm a baker. I own a bakery."

His expression brightens, and he leans toward me. "A baker? 'Ats incredible. Cakes? Biscuits?"

"That's right." Remembering myself, I reach for the box. "I actually brought along something to share with you."

I open the box and offer it to him. "Please, try one."

"Oooh." He reaches in and takes one of the buttery treats. He takes a small bite and makes a few more sounds of pleasure that feed the building attraction inside of me. "Jus' lek ma nans."

I think that's a good thing. "Well, I'm glad you like them. I wasn't sure if you'd be more of a cookie—or, biscuit—kind of guy or if you'd rather have cake." I frown. "Would you rather that I'd brought a cake?"

"Naw. I must confess, Am no' normally wan for sweets." My disappointment must show on my face, because he quickly

adds, “But ye’ve a heid fer bakin’. Am much obliged fer yer sharin’ it wi’ me.”

“Yeah, well...” My cheeks flush, and he finishes the piece of shortbread, no doubt to be polite. “You have a great place here.”

He smiles at that, then goes on to tell me about his family’s business and his decision to move to Seattle a year ago to set up an American branch.

As he tells me more about his short time here setting up everything, I find myself growing more familiar with his burr. While the effect of its sexiness on my racing heart doesn’t wear off, I no longer have any question about what he’s saying. Everything sounds perfectly natural. And soul-stirring.

“Listen to me going on and on.” He gestures to the table of glasses between us. “You came here to sample my wares. We had better get around to it.”

“Please.” I straighten up, tingling with excitement. “Where should we start?”

“This one here is our original single malt, aged 12 years.” He hands me one of the tasters. Our fingers brush against each other, and I resist the urge to giggle at the fresh flutter in my belly. “It’s been passed down for generations. I don’t mind telling you that there is a wee bit of heaven in a glass.”

I eagerly take a gulp.

And nearly choke.

“Wow.” I gasp for breath, blinking back tears. “That’s... wow.”

He takes a drink of his own and smiles. “Knocks the breath right into you, doesn’t it?”

Trying my best not to let on just how painful I found that drink, I nod. “It certainly does.”

“Care to try another?”

I wince inwardly but plaster a smile on my face. “Definitely.”

I push my empty glass to the center of the table and listen as he explains the next sample we'll be tasting. As he talks about notes and proofs, I swear I can feel my throat catching on fire at the thought of drinking any more of that.

If Wendy and Whitney were here, they'd tell me to speak up. It occurs to me, in the interest of saving my stomach and taste buds.

But as I watch the excitement play across Ritchie's face and hear the excitement in his tone, I find myself more at conflict with myself than ever.

Especially when he catches my stare and winks. My belly flips, and I clench my thighs together instinctively against the needs suddenly pooling between them.

An evening with this man could be a big problem for me and my resolution to stand firmly on my own two feet. As myself.

TWO

RITCHIE

It's impossible to tear my eyes away from the beautiful woman seated across from me.

And not only because she looks like she's just eaten an entire bag of sour candies with every sip of whisky she takes.

Alice, my date for the evening, is quite simply beautiful. She has long brown hair curled in soft waves that fall over her shoulders. The dress she's wearing, which is like an oversized flannel shirt, hugs her curves. It's a shame we sat down so soon after her arrival.

I wouldn't have minded taking a longer gander at her.

And she's wearing a most attractive shade of red lipstick that makes her lips look like a heart whenever they pucker. Which seems to be happening a lot during this whisky tasting.

She's not the only one affected tonight. My tongue has grown so thick and heavy in my mouth, it's a marvel I still have the power of speech. As it is, my accent has grown even more dense than the stew my nan used to make on cold winter nights.

Only, that's not on account of the whisky and everything to do with this woman.

A woman who I'm ogling like a fine barrel of whisky. Which she probably wouldn't care for. The ogling or the whisky.

I should make an effort to get to know her better.

“So, Alice.” My heart flutters when her eyes raise to meet mine. “Have you lived in Seattle long?”

Her lips curve into a small smile. My heart hitches again. “I was born and raised here.”

“So you must know all the best local haunts.”

“It depends on what kinds of haunts you’re looking to find.” She purses those lips of hers. Feck, she’s going to make me incapable of speech if she keeps that up. “If you’re looking for the best hiking trails, I’m afraid I’m hopeless. If you want to know where to hire a plane for skydiving or the best place to go deep-sea diving, I won’t be able to help you there.”

“I’m not one for jumping out of planes.”

“But the fishing and the hiking?”

I lift a shoulder. “Those are the kinds of things I like to do with my mates. I wouldn’t expect you—or anyone—to do something you didn’t enjoy.”

Her shoulders relax a little. “That’s good.”

“What kinds of things do you like to do? That is when you aren’t bakin’ up a storm.”

“Well... I like music.”

“What kinds of music?”

“It depends on my mood.” She gives a light laugh that sounds like music to my ears. “I have different playlists for whatever I’m baking.”

“Oh really? So you have one for biscuits and one for buns and another for cakes?”

“Exactly.” She beams at me, and I’m momentarily left stunned. As if I’ve just looked directly into the sun.

“I have a fair number of playlists myself. For hiking. For fishing.” I grin when she briefly pulls a face. “But I have them for other things too.” I lean forward, eager to know more about this woman who has so captivated me. “What was your first live concert?”

We each cover our first concerts, our best concerts, and the one concert in history each of us wishes we could travel back to hear. She tells me she played the oboe growing up, and I admit I know my way around a bagpipe. Only, I promise to never make her listen to me perform because it's not my strongest skill.

The more we talk, the more I see her relax. And the more she relaxes, the more I find I like about her.

“That’s a fetching dress you’re wearing.”

Her cheeks grow a delightful shade of pink. “Thank you. I... I like your shirt too. Is it your family’s tartan?”

I can’t help but chuckle. “I hate to disappoint, but this here is just a regular old shirt. Bought here. At a Target no less.”

“Oh. God. Right.” She scrunches up her face. “That was a stupid question.”

“There are no stupid questions when two people are getting to know each other.” Wanting to re-establish the ease that we’d just found—and not wanting to put her through the torture of drinking more whisky in the name of politeness—I offer to take her on a tour.

Looking relieved, she agrees.

“Just give me a moment to lock up the front door. We’re closed for the evening, but I wouldn’t want anyone to come in and surprise us.”

She nods and reaches for her purse. “You can leave that behind the bar if you like.”

“Oh, great.”

She flashes me that stunning smile of hers again. I have to blink twice before I have the power to move again.

Once the door is locked and I have her purse tucked away, I take her hand in mine to help her to stand. Even though it isn’t strictly necessary, I rest my hand on the small of her back as I guide her through the building.

It takes more concentration than usual to remember the basic script of a tour. But Alice doesn't seem to mind when I trip over the occasional word. She just keeps showing me that smile of hers

I'm so distracted by the fragrant floral scent coming from her, I trip over the cinderblock propping the door open to the barrel room as we step in.

It slams shut before I can make a move to grab it open.

"Well, shite." I give Alice a sheepish grin. "This is a rather embarrassing turn of events for our date."

Her brow furrows in an adorable way that makes my heart hitch. "How so?"

"That door only has a lock on the other side." I swallow hard, not wanting to alarm her. "And both of our phones are out there. Correct?"

She nods. "That's right."

"I stupidly don't have anything beyond a two-way radio in here. And, besides, there's no one else here to hear us reach them. At least not till the morning."

She continues to stare at me, her tempting lips pursed to form a heart. If I didn't feel so badly about the situation we've found ourselves in, I'd let myself get lost in the depths of her bright eyes or the way her hair falls in waves over her shoulders.

Or the way the deep V of her dress's neckline draws the eye to her ample curves.

Suddenly more than a little uncomfortable in my trousers, I shift my stance and think of standing under an ice-cold shower-head.

I'm just starting to go off-script with my fantasy—imagining a certain woman stripping off her plaid dress to join me under the shower to help me keep warm—when Alice suddenly gasps.

"You mean"—she shakes her head—"we're going to be stuck in here overnight?"

“I’m afraid so.” I step toward her, ready to offer comfort in the way of an arm around the shoulder, or better yet a hug. But when she turns to pace, I pause. “The assistant manager won’t be in until near eight.”

“Shit.”

I wince. “This will probably make you late for opening the bakery.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” She waves off my comment. “I already have a couple of staff members covering for me. They won’t even know I’m missing until noon.”

“We shouldn’t be here that long.”

“Good.” My eyebrows raise at how quickly she says that.

I can’t help but be a little offended. I know this is hardly an ideal date, but it’s not like she’s stuck overnight with a monster. I can be a proper gentleman when I put my mind to it.

Then again, considering the way she’s pacing, maybe it’s not personal. Maybe she has a fear of closed spaces. Or she has to use the restroom.

“I hope it won’t be too much of a hardship for ye.”

God knows it’ll be a hardship for me if I can’t get better control over my thoughts. I don’t want to scare the poor girl, just because my body seems to be crying for her.

THREE

ALICE

What. A. Disaster.

Okay, not a disaster in the sense of a forest fire or landslide. Those are true disasters. But keeping a friendly distance from Ritchie is going to be difficult—if not impossible—if we're going to be trapped in this room overnight.

Racking my brain for ways to keep the tone light and easy between us, and to keep myself from slipping back into my old habits where men are concerned, I pace back and forth down the aisle of barrels.

Right, so first things first. I need to set some rules for myself. And then I need to find a way of relaying those rules to Ritchie in a way that won't make me seem like I've booked a one-way ticket on the Crazy Train.

The first rule, obviously, is that we need to not drink any more alcohol. Drinking more alcohol will only lower our inhibitions. And if my inhibitions are lowered, well... It's best not to go down that route.

That shouldn't be a problem. Ritchie probably doesn't want to dip into his reserves knowing how much each barrel could fetch on the market.

For my part, I'd rather starve than live off the whisky.

The second rule, we need to come up with some sort of activity to distract ourselves. A friendly activity that doesn't

involve holding hands or rubbing our bodies against each other.

My panties nearly pinged right off my body when he placed his hand on the small of my back earlier.

I can only imagine what would happen if I found myself flush against his undoubtedly strong chest. Or if his hands were to happen to graze my hips...

I pause mid-stride for a moment and take a deep, cleansing breath.

“Ya doin’ okay there?” Ritchie calls out.

A tingle runs up my spine at the sound of his burr. I instinctively shiver. “Fine. I’m fine.”

I take a few more breaths to feel just a little more fine.

Okay, back to the second rule. We need to come up with a safe activity. Something that doesn’t involve touching. Maybe we could play a game or something. Nothing sexy like strip poker—assuming there’s a deck of cards around here. But something that will pass the time.

Maybe Ritchie will turn out to be one of those super competitive types who doesn’t like going up against a woman. That’ll be a surefire way of cooling both of our libidos. Heck, we’ll maybe be mortal enemies by the time the night is over.

As for the third rule, well, that’s easy. No. Kissing. That should be pretty easy if we follow the first two rules.

If we don’t stick to those rules, then there’s a good chance I’ll lose my heart to this man before the night is over. And I’m not in a position to lose my heart. If I do... Disaster.

Nodding to myself, I turn to share my plan with Ritchie and run straight into him.

“Whoa.” I press my hands to his chest, which is a mistake.

I suck in a breath as my fingers touch the hard muscles lying under his flannel. He grabs my waist to keep me from falling over. As I give a shaky breath, his grip on me tightens ever so slightly.

He swallows hard before releasing me and taking a step back. “Are you alright there?”

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention to where I was walking.” I take a long, deep breath in through my nose before releasing it slowly. “I think we should set some ground rules if we’re going to get through the night.”

He nods. “Good thinking. I have a few things that might help us as well.”

“Oh.” My brow furrows. “What kinds of things?”

Ritchie shows me to a fridge where there are a few bottles of water along with some meats, cheeses, and fruits that are used for charcuterie boards. Then there’s the supply shelf, where there’s an assortment of paper goods, including toilet paper.

His ears turn a shade of pink that’s a little too adorable for my resolve to stick to my rules, as he points to a tiny bathroom that can generously be described as rustic.

I nod, feeling more comforted to know these basic cares are covered. It also helps to know he’s been thinking about that instead of trying to come up with ways to make me fall in love with him.

“So, about your rules for the evening?” he asks.

“Well…” I take another deep breath. “I think it would be best if we didn’t do any more whisky tasting. You know, so we don’t dehydrate.”

His lips twitch, and my heart thuds a little faster. “We definitely don’t want to dehydrate.”

My gaze lingers on his lips for just a little too long. It’s really too bad I’m off kissing for the moment. Because he has really great lips.

I sigh. “Second, I think we should come up with some sort of way to keep busy.”

His eyebrows shoot up, and I quickly add—before he can get any wrong ideas. “Maybe there’s a game of some kind to keep us entertained.”

“A game...” He strokes his chin, and my own fingers itch to see what his whiskers might feel like. “I think I can come up with something for that.”

“Good.”

“Was there another rule?”

Yes. But how do I say it without giving too much away? “I... I think it would be best if, for the rest of the evening, we think of this less like a date and more like... survival.”

He stares at me for a moment, and I wait for him to say I’m being ridiculous. Or, worse, for him to say that’s no problem because he doesn’t see me that way.

“Alright.” He nods. “The date is over. We focus on survival.”

I release a breath. “So we’re agreed.”

“We’re agreed.” I start to walk away but he stills my departure by gently taking my arm. “Just one addendum if you don’t mind.”

“What kind of addendum?”

“The date is over unless you change your mind and say it’s back on.” He releases his hold on me. “Until then, we’ll just be friends.”

FOUR

RITCHIE

Alice pulls her arm back and flings a pencil down the aisle. It falls well short of my own pencil, which I tossed moments earlier.

“Oh,” we both call out at the same time. Hers is more of a groan and mine a cheer.

All in all, tonight hasn't turned out so badly. While I thought our date was over after the door closed behind us—and she insisted we call it over—the past couple of hours have been fun. After she suggested doing something friendly to entertain ourselves, I put together an improvised version of the Highland Games.

While we didn't have cabers or rocks to throw or a real rope to tug, I improvised. Right now, in our version of the caber toss, we're throwing a couple of pencils. And, just like with the shoe-lace tug of war, I've won.

“It's not fair.” She shakes her head. “You're bigger and stronger than me. Not to mention you're a highlander, so you've had lots of practice.”

“That's not very sportsmanlike of you.”

She rolls her eyes at me, and I bite back a smile.

“Come on.” I reach for a tennis ball that oddly enough was back here. “Let's see who can get this in the basket the most times.”

“Fine.” She reaches for it. “But I get to go first.”

“As you like.”

Our fingers brush, and Alice jolts back. Nearly tripping over a dolly.

“Whoa.” I reach for her, wrapping my arms around her back before she can fall over.

She grabs the front of my shirt, and we stand there in each other’s arms, both of us breathing as hard as if we’d just run up a mountain.

And while I know she said the date was over, I can’t help but feel the need to pull her even closer. Without thinking, I cup her chin.

“Hey,” I stroke her bottom lip. “Are you okay?”

She nods slowly, her breaths coming in quick succession.

“Would it be terribly un-survival like if I gave you a kiss right now?”

She moistens her lips, drawing my attention more closely to her sweet mouth. “Probably.”

“Would you be willing to take a chance?”

Her head moves up and down, but it’s all the agreement I need. I cradle her cheek in my hand and lower my lips toward her.

When they touch, it’s like a bolt of lightning shoots through me. With a groan, I press my lips more firmly against hers, savoring the feelings the stir inside of me.

She gives a sigh of her own. My hold on her tightens and I press myself more firmly against her.

Still stroking her smooth cheek with my hand, I slide my tongue over her bottom lip. Urging her to open her mouth to me. She does. And when our tongues meet, and I get a full taste of her, she’s sweeter than anything else I’ve ever tried before.

Better than any other woman I’ve kissed.

Better than anything she might bake.

Better even than my family's recipe.

It's a taste that's uniquely Alice, and even more intoxicating than the liquor stored in these barrels.

I slide my hand to Alice's backside and she jumps. I pull back, desperately wanting to take the kiss deeper but not wanting to move too quickly.

"I still need to take my turn," she says.

I nod, releasing my hold on her even though my body is screaming to pull her even closer.

She grabs the ball and pulls her arm back. I step aside to give her more room. It's the wrong thing to do. She turns to look at me just as she launches her arm forward.

The ball veers far from its target. And there's a loud thud followed by a crash as items fall off the shelf a few yards from us.

A shelf covered with lightweight materials but tools that could also cause harm.

I don't think. I act.

I grab Alice around the waist and push her back against a wall of barrels. Clenching my eyes shut, I wrap my arms around Alice. I turn my body into a shield against whatever harm might come our way.

As the world around us sounds as if it's falling apart, it occurs to me that there would be worse ways to die than with this woman in my arms.

FIVE

ALICE

Everything around me disappears. Everything besides the man wrapped around me like a cloak. Keeping me safe and warm from the world.

My heart thunders in my ears, and my breaths come in short, quick gasps. So short and quick, it's a wonder I don't pass out. I'm vaguely aware of the barrels pressed against my back.

I'm hyper-aware of the woodsy scent and heat emanating from the muscular chest my hands and face are flush against.

Still keeping me wrapped in his protection, Ritchie shifts his head.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his lips close enough, I can feel his warm breath tickling the back of my neck.

I nod, the side of my head rubbing against his chin. The whiskers on his face make a delicious friction with my hair that creates even more sparks around us.

But the sparks don't matter. My actions—because I was so distracted by Ritchie—do.

I could have killed us. With my poor grip and even poorer aim. I could have hurt or killed one of us. Probably Ritchie first, since he threw himself over me as a human shield. There would have been nothing I could have done to get him help until the morning.

By then, it could have been too late.

A shiver runs down my spine.

“Are you cold?” He adjusts his grasp on me so he can rub my back from my shoulders to the bottom of my spine. Another shiver runs up it. This one is delicious and dangerous. “I might be able to find a fire blanket in here.”

A fire blanket. To use in case of a fire. Just another disaster I probably could have created for us because I have zero chill around this man.

I shake my head and take a few deep breaths to keep my voice from trembling when I say, “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry?” He pulls back a little then. His brow is furrowed, and he cups the side of my cheek. I can’t resist leaning into his touch, even though I don’t feel deserving of his comfort. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“But I could have hurt y—one of us.” A fresh wave of guilt washes over me. “God knows what damage I did to this room and your inventory.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that.” He nods toward a metal shelf in the corner. “A pile of toilet paper rolls fell over. They’re fine.”

My eyes widen as I survey the damage. Sure enough, the wrapped rolls are lying in a pile on the floor, along with a clipboard. That must have been the biggest culprit behind the ruckus.

“I’m sorry about the mess.”

“It’s fine. Accidents happen.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And I’m the *eejit* who had the bright idea to have us tossing things about the place.” He grins down at me, and my heart skips a beat. “You’re okay. I’m okay. That’s all that matters.”

He strokes my cheek. This time, his gentle touch stirs something besides guilt in my belly. His gaze drops to my lips. I unconsciously slide my tongue over my bottom lip. My heart is set to racing again.

This time, it's not from fear. Well, not from a fear of dying. It's a fear of wanting to kiss him more than I want to breathe. Which is just the kind of thinking that usually gets me into trouble in relationships.

“Alice.”

My belly clenches at the way my name rolls off his tongue. “Yes?”

“I'm gonna kiss you again.”

I nod. But even as my brain screams for me to stop. To remove myself from his arms and put some distance between us. My body and heart tell my brain to shut up. And I move even closer to him.

His lips brush against mine. Once. Twice. He slides his hands down to stroke the sides of my hips as he kisses me a third time, this one lingering, stirring a desire inside of me I've never experienced quite before.

My breath catches in my throat, and I can't move. I barely breathe. I'm completely spellbound by this man.

He leans back and scans my face. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?”

I'm no doubt flushed and dazed. And there's a better-than-good chance I cried off my fake eyelashes and mascara.

When I scoff, he shakes his head. His strong, firm hands tighten their grip on my hips. “You are. You're a bonny lass. Make no mistake.”

He called me a bonny lass. Mark that off on my date with a highlander bingo card.

It's enough to shut my brain off once and for all.

With a light sigh, I crush my mouth against his. My hands slide behind his head, my fingers delving into his thick, cropped hair.

He groans in approval, angling his head to deepen the kiss. My tongue welcomes him enthusiastically. I press my body as

hard against him as I can. My breasts grow heavy with need. Desperate and aching for his touch.

As if he can sense my need, he slides a hand up to cup my breast. A moan from deep inside of me escapes, and I press my chest forward, silently encouraging him to continue his exploration of my body.

He obliges me. Massaging my breast in his hand, sliding his thumb over the sensitive, hardened tip of my nipple.

“Yes.” I arch against him, clenching my eyes shut as the passion inside of me builds to the point of no return. “Keep going.”

He chuckles low in his throat. It rolls out of him and through me. I wriggle against him. Desperate for more.

“Please,” I whisper, tearing my lips from his. “Please. Touch me until I can’t think anymore.”

He rubs his cheek against mine. The whiskers scratch against my skin, and my need grows even more. He presses hot, open-mouthed kisses along the line of my jaw and down my throat.

As he does, he continues to caress my chest. He pushes his hips against mine. I can feel his desire pressed against my belly. I move my hips against him, mimicking the act that is soon to follow.

The act I can’t wait to follow. Even though I know I’m in complete danger of losing my head over this man.

He lightly sucks the sensitive skin along my décolletage. “You taste so good.”

His lips and tongue move lower. His hands release their grips on my hand and breasts. Sliding up and down along my slides. He leaves a trail of goosebumps and tingling skin everywhere he touches.

Ritchie traces his tongue along the plunging V of my neckline. I gasp again, tightening my grip on his hair.

I can feel his lips grin against me. “You like that?”

“Yes,” I breathe out.

“You want more?”

“Yes, please.”

“Your wish...” He flips open the top button of my dress, proving the flannel shirt-style ensemble was the right choice for this evening. He runs his lips over the freshly exposed skin. “Is my...” He flips open two more buttons, moving his lips even lower. “Command...” Another button comes loose, and another. He pulls the dress apart, sliding it over and off my shoulders to pool around my hips. “And pleasure.

Pushing aside the lace of my bra, he leans down to rub his tongue over my nipple. I cry out and arch against him. He sucks the nipple into his mouth. I make sounds I never knew I could make before.

He’s not finished driving me wild with desire. Bracing one hand on the barrels, he makes a path down my belly. He slides it under the fabric of my dress and my underwear.

His fingers move through the spray of curls at the apex of my thighs. We both groan as he slides his fingers along my seam, finding the source of my desire. He circles a finger around my clit. I nearly come apart on contact. I push my pelvis against his hand.

“Feck me.” He releases the nipple and presses his lips in wet kisses across my chest. “I bet you taste amazing.”

As much as I’d love for him to find out right now, there isn’t time. The pleasure pulsing inside of me is already reaching its pique.

Gripping his hair again, I tug his lips back to mine while his fingers guide me to release.

As the pleasure consumes me, I move against him, crying into his mouth. He doesn’t let up as wave after wave of ecstasy races through my body. I sag against the barrels and his arms wrap around me while our tongues tangle with each other.

My senses return, or at least enough of them to be able to move again. I’m desperate to touch him. To stir the same kinds

of feelings in him that he's given me.

And to enjoy myself thoroughly in the process.

Releasing my grip on his hair, I continue to kiss him while my hands rove over his chest. I tug his flannel shirt out of his jeans and make quick work of opening each button. I push the material aside, biting his bottom lip as I splay my hands across his chest.

He gasps at my touch, making me want to touch even more of him. I move a hand down where his pelvis is once again pressed against mine. I slide it between us, stroking his cock through his jeans.

"Feck." He hisses, breaking off our kiss to rest his forehead against my shoulder. "That feels so good."

"I can make it feel even better." I unclasp the jeans and cup him through the thin material of his boxer briefs. "How's that?"

He gently bites my shoulder, sending a fresh ripple of delight through me as he presses himself against my hand. "So. Good."

"We can do better." I rub my jaw against his hair. My body and heart have long since overridden any thoughts of protest coming from my brain. "Do you have a condom?"

"In my wallet."

At my prodding, he reaches for it while I continue to stroke and tease him. With broken kisses and whispers of encouragement, we remove the rest of our clothes. I take the condom from him and slide it over him.

Cupping my bare ass, he lifts me up, positioning himself at my entrance. "Are you ready?"

"Definitely." I kiss his whiskered cheek. "I want to feel you inside of me."

With one long push, he enters me. I gasp and clutch his shoulders as he fills me to the hilt. Our mouths meet, sharing breaths and kisses as he thrusts into me over and over.

I feel that same wonderful ecstasy brewing instead as he angles his hips another way. I move against him, wanting nothing else but this passion that we share. Willing and eager to give up everything for it.

He increases his speed and his strength. It's enough to send me over the edge. I call out his name as he fills me again and again, finding his own release after mine.

Exhausted and sated, we seem to melt to the floor. But even in this, he protects me, cradling me in his arms while we catch our breaths.

It's only after my heart begins to steady, and my breaths grow more even, that my brain flips back on.

What have I done?

What I feel for him, what we've just shared, it's unlike anything I've ever experienced before. It's so intense. So consuming.

There were moments when I didn't know where I stopped and he began.

And that's... terrifying.

My heart and body are telling me to stop worrying. To just go with it. To enjoy what's happening. To do whatever it takes to keep this going.

It's those kinds of feelings that have my brain screaming to run. But, unfortunately, right now there's nowhere to go. We're stuck until the morning. Together. Alone.

This only means that the chance for me to fall harder—to lose even more of myself—is stronger. Especially if he keeps stroking my hips like this. His rough, work-hardened hand makes lazy movements over my skin. Rekindling the embers of desire he just satiated.

Just enjoy it, my heart says. You deserve this.

Do it again, my body adds. This time, you should be on top. Or maybe on your hands and knees.

But my brain—more loudly this time—says *No. Stop now, while you can. Before you're in too deep.*

I clench my eyes shut and ignore the tingling sensations Ritchie is stirring in my body. I force my breaths to become more shallow and even, hoping it'll seem like I'm asleep.

Ritchie's hand stills. Behind me, I can feel him lift up.

"Alice," he whispers in that brogue of his, even sexier now that it's soft and raspy. "Are you asleep?"

I don't respond, hoping my fake breathing will be an answer enough. Seconds pass. I can count each one thanks to my heart, still pounding in my ears.

Ritchie leaves my side for a moment, and I take the opportunity to curl up even more. My thoughts race as I try to come up with a plan for getting some sense of order and control back.

But before I can come up with a clear-cut idea, he's back at my side. He drapes a blanket over me, and curls up at my side, turning his shirt into a pillow for him and his chest into a pillow for me.

And while he strokes my back and I pretend to be fast asleep, I know that no matter how good or right this feels, there's no way it can last.

I'm just not strong enough.

SIX

RITCHIE

It's hard to say how long I've already been up as Alice stirs awake in my arms. But it's been time well spent, studying the way her long eyelashes fall on her smooth cheeks. Appreciating the way her arse feels pressed up against my cock.

Hell, even being all but strangled by her untamable mane of curls is a pleasure I never would have imagined.

But that's being with Alice. A pleasure in every sense of the word.

Her eyes open and she jumps in my arms.

"It's okay." I stroke her cheek with the backs of my fingers. "In case you're needing reminding, you're here with me in the barrel room of my pub. And if my guess is right, we'll be rescued in twenty minutes or so."

Her eyes widen. "Twenty minutes."

"That's right."

If I'm not mistaken, relief crosses her face. I try not to take offense. No doubt she isn't too comfortable after spending the night sleeping on the floor. I'd also guess she's probably looking forward to having access to a real loo and a proper meal.

"I grabbed us some breakfast."

“Breakfast?” She gives a light chuckle when I hand her a bottle of water and a bag of dried fruit. “You really do know how to treat a gal right.”

“Believe me, I can do better. You said you’re due at the bakery at noon.”

“That’s right?”

“What would you say to a proper breakfast?”

She chokes a little on the water. She waves off my help and wipes her lips with the back of her hand. Catching my stare, she tilts her head to the side curiously. “What?”

I shake my head. “It’s nothing. I was just thinking about the tasting last night.”

“Oh?” She pulls a face. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to finish.”

“Are you?”

She blinks. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s only, I got the impression you don’t much care for whisky.”

Her lips part in surprise. “Well... no. I mean... I... well... I” She gives a shaky laugh as her cheeks grow flushed. “How did you guess?”

“You mean besides the fact that you’ve grimaced every time you’ve had a taste?” I take the bottle and set it aside. With my free hand, brush my knuckles over her pink cheeks. “Call it a wild guess on my part then.”

She pulls a face. “I’m sorry. I hoped I would like it. And I don’t mean to be rude, but—”

“Hey.” I grip her chin. “You don’t have to apologize for not liking something.”

She meets my gaze for a few minutes, her cheeks flushing. “We should probably get dressed so we don’t scare your assistant manager.”

Though I'd rather risk it, she makes a good point. With more than a little regret, I help her locate her clothing and pull on my own.

Once we're both properly attired, I reach for her. She steps back, and my arms fall to the side.

She chews on her lips. "About breakfast—"

We both jump as the door opens. Andy, the assistant manager gapes. "Thank God. When I saw your cars in the parking lot and your things behind the bar..."

"We're safe." I give him a reassuring smile, even though my insides feel tightly coiled. Alice's tension is palpable. "The block just came undone."

I start to introduce Alice, but she slides past me. I tell Andy to hold on a moment and I follow her out. My nerves grow more frayed as I watch her hurriedly grab her things and make for the door.

"Alice."

She freezes and turns back. "Look, last night was... unforgettable."

My gut sinks. "Why am I sensing that's not such a good thing?"

"Look, it's nothing personal. But I'm... I'm not looking for a relationship right now."

"Okay." My disappointment is palpable. While I'd like to jump into this with both feet, I can understand her reservation. "We can take things slowly or—"

"No." She shakes her head. "I... I only agreed to do this date for the auction. I know last night I gave mixed signals."

"I'll say!"

"But, I'm not interested in a relationship." She gives me a sad smile. "I'm sorry. I swear, it has nothing to do with you. I just... I can't."

"But—"

“Please. I... I don’t think we should see each other again. Please respect that.”

Then she turns and leaves, taking a piece of me with her.

I don’t know how long I stand there watching after her. I’m half tempted to ignore her request, but I doubt that would do anything to improve my odds with her.

Alice says that it’s on her. That it isn’t me. I’m not sure I believe that. After all, if she wanted to be with me, wouldn’t she be with me?

“Feckin’ hell.”

I run my hands through my hair, no doubt making it look even messier than it already was after a night spent on the barrel room floor. With a most appealing woman curled up in my arms. A woman who doesn’t want me, no matter how much it had seemed otherwise at the time.

“Why couldn’t she just say that?” I grumble to myself. “If only she’d told me the truth, that she didn’t like me.”

Or, at least, that she didn’t like me in a romantic sense. No doubt her rejection wouldn’t have hurt so much. No doubt I would have been able to shake it off.

I give a short, humorless laugh. “Like hell, I would.”

No. Even if Alice had been completely honest and said she didn’t see a future with me, it still would have hurt like hell. A punch to the cock.

Because I... I like her.

More than I’ve liked any other woman I’ve met. The kind of like that leads to exchanging vows. To making a home—a life—together. To having a family. To watching each other grow old and gray. Loving each other till the last.

For a moment—a fleeting one, as it turns out—I thought that maybe I’d found the woman I’d have all that with.

I absently rub my hand over my chest. As if it will somehow ease the piercing ache in my heart that shows no signs of dulling.

An ache that has a name: Alice.

SEVEN

ALICE

“Earth to Alice.” Wendy snaps a finger in front of my face.
“Earth to Alice.”

I blink, suddenly brought out of my stupor while mindlessly mixing a batch of cookies. A batch of cookies, I now note, that have been over-mixed while I was lost in my own thoughts.

I’ve also apparently ignored both of my friends, who swung by to hang out with me in the bakery’s kitchen during their lunch breaks.

“Crap.” I turn off the stand mixer and remove the bowl.
“The batter has split. I’ll have to start over.”

Before I can dump the contents of the mixing bowl, Whitney places a hand on my shoulder. I pause and turn to my friends, who are both standing right behind me, and catch the looks of concern plainly written on their faces.

“Don’t worry.” I give them a tight-lipped grin. “It happens sometimes. It’s a little wasteful, but it’s not the end of the world.”

“We’re not worried about the cookies.” Whitney darts a sidelong glance to Wendy, who takes a step closer.

“We’re worried about you.” She presses my hand. “You’ve seemed... off the past few days.”

“I’ve seemed off?”

They nod in tandem.

“Ever since your auction date.” Whitney tilts her head to the side, her eyes slightly narrowed. “Which you haven’t told us anything about other than ‘it was good.’”

I shrug out of both their grasps and make my way to the sink. “It *was* good.”

“But it’s unlike you not to have more to say.” Wendy reaches my side again and turns off the water. “You had more to say about *my* date than you did about yours.”

“And I know you have plenty of thoughts about my date tomorrow, too.” Whitney takes the bowl from my hand.

“Yeah, well you both had more to go on. You fell in love with the guy you went on a date with”—I give Wendy a pointed look before shifting to Whitney—“and we all know you’ve been not-so-secretly in love with—”

“We’re not talking about my date right now,” she interrupts. “This is about you. Something must have happened on your date.”

“What makes you assume something happened on the date? Maybe I’m worried about business. Maybe my car is acting up. Maybe... my drains are clogged at home.”

Wendy’s eyes narrowed. “Are your drains clogged?”

“No.”

“How’s your car?”

I sigh, blowing my bangs off my forehead. “My car is fine.”

“And, let me guess...” Whitney motions toward the front of the store, which is bustling with activity. “Are you worried about business? Because from the looks and sounds of it, you’re going strong.”

“No, the bakery is doing well.” Honestly, it’s thriving. Plus, I’ve never had a better crew working with me. They’ve really stepped up the past few days while I’ve been a little... distracted.

Because I have been distracted. I know it. My employees know it. And, clearly, I haven't been fooling my friends either.

"Okay." I set the bowl down in the sink, bracing my hands against the edge. My head is facing down. "Something did happen on the date. Something—"

"Hey, boss."

"Oh, thank God," I mumble to myself, a sense of relief floods my veins.

All three of us turn to the doorway between the bakery and the kitchen where Tonya, one of the clerks working today, is standing.

"Sorry to interrupt," she says, glancing between all of us. She's sharp, and can clearly see she's probably interrupted something. "But you have another guest and I didn't know if you wanted me to send her back or if you wanted to come meet her."

Tonya arches an eyebrow. "I can also tell her you stepped out if you want to avoid anymore company."

I bite back the first grin I've felt in days. "Who is it?"

"She says her name is Nicole. She organized that charity auction thing you went to."

My humor slips away and I frown at Wendy. "Do you think your boss forgot to send his check?"

"No way."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive." She folds her arms across her chest. "I handled the money transfer to the charity myself."

"Then I wonder what..." Shaking my head at myself, I straighten my shoulders. There's only one way to find out why she's here. "Thank you, Tonya. Go ahead and have her come back."

"Sure thing, boss."

Neither Whitney or Wendy say anything. There isn't time for them to finish their interrogation before our unexpected guest joins us. Instead, Whitney feigns a keen interest in reading one of my grandma's cookie recipes, which I have framed and hanging on the wall. Wendy studies her reflection in the stainless steel counter.

A stylish woman dressed in a sleek shift dress and a smart blazer pokes her head around the corner. When she flashes a friendly smile, I recognize her from behind-the-scenes at the bachelor.

"Hi, Alice, it's great to see you again." She glances around the kitchen and her eyebrows raise. "I see a couple of other familiar faces as well."

Wendy nods and steps forward. "We met at the auction. I'm—"

"Wendy and Whitney, right?" She shakes each of their hands. "I didn't realize you all were good friends."

Apparently she's the kind of person who never forgets a face. I wish I could forget a particular face right now. It would make my life a lot easier.

Whitney explains how we all know each other from a tap dance class we all dropped out of after one session several years ago. While my friends make small talk with her, I take a few deep breaths to calm myself.

At last, Nicole turns to me. "I hope you don't mind my dropping by, but I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Why... why wouldn't I be okay?" I ask, ignoring the surprised looks from Whitney and Wendy.

"I was having a follow-up call with your date and he mentioned there was an incident at the distillery. He was worried you might have some lingering effects."

I shake my head. "I don't."

She studies me curiously. "If you're sure—"

"I am."

“Good.” She gives me a light smile. “I’m sure Ritchie will be pleased to know you’re okay.”

“Thank you for checking though.” I give her a plastered smile of my own. “Please feel free to help yourself to a couple of cupcakes or cookies from the case if you like.”

She’s barely out the door when Whitney and Wendy descend on me.

“Okay, you have to tell us what happened.”

With another deep breath, I explain what happened. About how the moment I was alone with Ritchie, I could feel the tell-tale signs of my old relationship habits kicking in. I tell them about how it was even harder to resist the pull when we were trapped in the barrel room.

About the fear that flowed through me when I realized I am still just as capable as ever of losing myself in a relationship.

“There’s always been a part of me that’s a little like this.” I give a short, bitter laugh. “My teachers used to tell my mom I was friends with everyone. I did it because I could mold myself to adapt to different groups.

“But it got worse in college. After...” I shake my head. “I had my first serious boyfriend. And... I was crazy about him. I’m not sure I’d call it love. Not real love, anyway. But I wanted him. And... you know the rest of the story.”

Wendy and Whitney share a look. They’ve been doing a lot of that lately.

“So you think this Ritchie was going to want you to change for him?” Whitney asks.

“No.” I shake my head. “He actually mentioned several times that he wouldn’t expect that.”

“So... what’s the problem?” Wendy asks.

“The problem is that I don’t know if I can trust myself with him.” A tear slips down my cheek and I wipe it away furiously. “I don’t know if I can trust myself. And... it’s killing me.”

Whitney rubs my shoulder. “You must really like this guy.”

“I do. And... I know I hurt him.”

“I don’t want you to do anything you aren’t ready for, but...” Wendy lifts her shoulders. “Maybe you should talk to him about this. Let him know what’s going on.”

I purse my lips. “Do you think I should?”

“Only you can decide that.” Wendy release her hold on me. “But we don’t want you to live with regrets. We’ll support you no matter what you decide.”

The next day, with my heart pounding, I push open the doors of the distillery. I look past the room full of people until my eyes land on Ritchie.

He moves with the same ease as the night before. But the smile on his face doesn’t look so sincere.

My heart aches at the thought that I might be behind it.

Then he lifts his gaze and meets mine. His mouth falls open and, steeling myself, I walk toward him.

He shakes his head. “What are you doing here?”

“Could we... Is there somewhere we could talk in private?”

EIGHT

RITCHIE

Guiding Alice into the barrel room, I fight the urge to pull her into my arms and kiss the breath out of her. To beg her to give me another chance.

Instead, I shove my hands in my jeans and keep my distance. She made herself clear the other day. I don't want to risk a well-deserved knee to the groin because I didn't respect her wishes.

She turns to face me, her dark eyes even richer than I remember.

I suck in a breath and clench my hands into fists in my pockets. "You can go ahead and take a look around if you like."

Her brow furrows. "What?"

"I assume you left something in here the other night." Though neither of us had much with us while we were trapped in here, there's every possibility she forgot a piece of clothing.

Like her bra or underwear. I have a sudden flashback of removing those articles of clothing while I loved her.

"Feck," I whisper under my breath, willing the throbbing in my cock to ease up before it gives me away.

"What did you say?" she asks.

"Doesn't matter." I shake my head and clear my throat. "If you tell me what you're looking for I can help you find it."

“I... I didn’t leave anything.”

“Oh.” I frown. “Was there something else you needed?”

Of course, there’s something else she needs. It’s not as if she’s here just to see me.

“There’s something I needed to say.” Swallowing hard, she takes a tentative step toward me. “Every time I’m in a relationship, I... I seem to lose myself.”

I start in surprise. I don’t quite get what she’s saying or why. But I’m anxious—no, desperate—to understand. “What do you mean?”

She tightens her grip on her purse, eyeing the doorway as if she’d rather bolt than answer the question. I don’t have to wonder what I’d do if she did. I’d go after her. If only to settle things between us once and for all.

She came back. That has to mean something. It might not mean everything I want it to mean, but it still means something.

She takes another deep breath. “Every time I date someone, no matter how new or serious, I... turn into someone else.”

“Who?”

“Whoever that guy wants me to be.” She releases a breath in frustration. “I dated a hiker, and I suddenly developed an interest in the outdoors, even though I am not a nature girl. I dated a banker, and I listened to hours and hours of financial podcasts, even though I didn’t understand a thing they were saying.”

She turns her gaze toward me. “That’s barely scratching the surface, but something happens to me when I get into a relationship, and I lose all sense of who I am. Then, when it ends—and it always does, because neither of us sees each other for who we truly are—I don’t just have a broken heart. I have an identity crisis.”

My heart aches again. This time, it’s not for my pain, but the ache I see so clearly written in Alice’s features.

She's not done baring her soul to me. "And... after spending only one night with you, I felt... so... much. Too much. More than anything I've ever felt for a man before."

My heart leaps in my chest at her confession. It's only held back by the knowledge of where those feelings led her. Away from me.

"It scared me," she whispers. The fear so evident in her voice tears me up. "If I could lose myself so completely with guys I only ever had lukewarm feelings toward, what would happen to me if I continued to be around a man who made me feel red hot? That's why I left. Because I was scared of my inability to keep myself from sliding into those old habits. Because I was scared of falling for you only to end up losing you and myself."

"Alice..." I take my time choosing my words. I don't want to undo the little progress we've made. I don't want to send her running again. "I don't want you to change for me."

"But you see, it's not you who makes me change. It's something inside of me. Something I'm still trying to work out in therapy. It's why I haven't dated in over a year." She shakes her head. "I know, this is a lot to drop on you after only one date. I know *I'm* a lot."

"Alice..." I take her hand. I can't help but smile a little when she doesn't fight it and wraps her fingers around mine. "I can't say I understand exactly what you're going through. I won't pretend I have the answers. But... I need you to know I get it a little."

"You do?"

I nod, sliding my thumb over the smooth back of her hand. "I say this without meaning to put any more pressure on you. But I like you. A lot. As you are. So much that there isn't a thing I wouldn't do to make you happy. Even if it's me bugging off."

She grins a little at my joke.

I take that as a good sign or at least a sign to keep going. "I can appreciate how scary it is to have those kinds of feelings."

To feel like your happiness is so tied up in another person. Especially a person you've only just met. To feel—”

I gaze down at our hands for a moment to keep my emotions in check.

“When you walked away,” I say at least, speaking slowly. Carefully. “It felt as if the sunshine had gone along with you. And I didn't see it again until I saw you walking through that door.”

I shake my head. “It's a lot. Hell, it's feckin' terrifying.”

“It is.” She releases a heavy breath. “So where does that leave us?”

“Maybe... maybe we could start by... being friends.”

“Friends?” One of her eyebrows arches up for a second. “You would be happy being friends?”

“I wouldn't say happy.” I squeeze her hand before she can pull it back. But she makes no move to do so. “But I'd be... content. Spending any time with you that I can.”

“As friends.”

“For now.” I raise our joined hands and brush my lips over her knuckles. “And maybe, over time, as we get to know each other better—as we are, not how we think we should be—we'll see where this can go.”

I press a more firm kiss on the back of her hand and lower it. She releases a soft breath that reminds me of our night together. My gut clenches, and I call on all of my powers of restraint.

I mean to keep up my end of the bargain. Even if it means taking loads of cold showers along the way.

“You would do that for me?” she asks.

“I would.” I gaze into her eyes, searching for those signs of fear and hesitation that have been there. I don't see them. I find something else. I'd call it... hope. “I don't want you to feel like you ever have to change. Not for me. Not for anyone

but yourself. Because, you are, exactly who you are at this moment, is without flaw.”

“No one is perfect. We all have flaws.”

“That may be. Yet somehow you are.” With my free hand, I reach up to stroke her cheek with the back of my fingers. She closes her eyes briefly and leans into my touch, setting my heart racing.

“No, that won’t do.” She opens her eyes in surprise and I smirk. “I must admit, you do have flaws. But they’re flaws I find charming.”

This time, both eyebrows raise high on her forehead. “You do?”

“Certainly. Even if your hatred of whisky is endearing. And we both know you can’t throw a rock for shite.”

She laughs then and, without a moment of hesitation, rests her head against my shoulder and releases my hands so she can wrap them around my waist.

I slide an arm over her shoulders, hugging her close though resisting the urge to squeeze the breath out of her.

“So you see, Alice, I see you clearly. I see that you may need more time. That you’ll want to take things slowly. But if what you say is true, and what you feel for me is anything like what I feel for you then yes. I’m willing to wait. We can take as long as you like until you feel ready.”

I give her shoulder a squeeze. “Because you’re worth it. You’re worth waiting a thousand years.”

She turns her face into my shoulder. “I don’t think it’ll take that long.”

I grin at her mumbled words. “I’m glad to hear that, Alice.”

She shivers, and I frown. “Are you cold?”

“No... it’s just...” She gives another little laugh and pulls back slightly. She glances up at me, her cheeks flushed. “This isn’t going to sound like the sort of thing a friend should say.”

“You can say it anyway. Friends don’t have secrets, do they?”

“I suppose not.” Her lips curve into a sweet smile that’s almost too tempting for its own good.

I shift my stance, holding my body more rigidly. I meant what I said. I’m willing to wait and be her friend for as long as it takes. But it’s going to be damn uncomfortable for me at times.

But I can do it. I will do it.

Then, as if to test my pledge, Alice’s eyes crinkle around the edges. “I love the way you say my name.”

My heart pounds a little too fast. “You do?”

She nods. “It’s... like you’re calling me ‘a lass’ and... well...” Her cheeks flush even darker.

With a groan, I rest my forehead against the top of her head and take a moment. A moment to hold myself in check. A moment to enjoy the feel of her in my arms.

“Thank you for understanding or, at least, trying to understand,” she says. “Thank you for offering me time.”

With the look she gives me, I know every second of patience will be worth it in the end. Call it hope. Call it faith. But I know, in my heart, this is the right path for us.

She’s worth it. We’re worth it.

EPILOGUE

ALICE

“Well?” Ritchie asks with a mischievous grin playing on his lips.

I take my time chewing the bite I’ve just taken, giving extra care to note the textures and tastes and the effect they have on my taste buds and stomach. Swallowing my mouthful, I tilt my head to the side in silent contemplation.

Haggis. A meaty concoction of sheep, onion, and a handful of other spices and mix-ins that I didn’t entirely understand as the gray-streaked man who owns the pub explained the dish to me. It’s a local delicacy, and I told Ritchie I wanted to try everything on our visit to Scotland.

Even if it goes over about as well as the whisky tasting did during our first date.

Ritchie arches an eyebrow when I still haven’t spoken. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Actually.” I smack my lips a couple of times. “It’s not bad.”

“Not bad?”

“I’m not saying I want to eat it for every meal.” I take another bite and nod along as I chew. “Or ever again. But it’s not bad. Especially if you don’t think about everything that goes into it. Or that it’s called a pudding.”

“Now about puddings...” He gives a good-natured chuckle. “Need I remind you that puddings mean something

completely different over here than they do in America?”

“No, I remember. I did go to culinary school.” I give him a pointed look.

“Fair enough, Alice.”

My heart flutters as it always does with the way he draws out my name to sound like “a lass.” It’s even more pronounced now than before since I told him how much I liked it.

“How’d you rate this against the other delicacies you’ve tried?” he asks.

“Below the Scotch eggs but above the Scotch.” I pull a face. “You aren’t going to tell your family, will you?”

“You mean will I tell my family that the woman who has stolen my heart has no taste for our life’s work?” He lifts a shoulder. “I’d hate to give a bald-faced lie if they asked.”

I roll my eyes at him to hide the fact that I’m actually really nervous about the prospect of disappointing his family.

Who would have guessed we’d end up here? True to his word, Ritchie gave me all the time I needed and waited patiently in the friend zone. Well, mostly in the friend zone. We may or may not have found ourselves making out during what were supposed to be completely platonic hangouts.

But eventually, after a couple of months, and with the blessing of Wendy, Whitney, my therapist, and—most importantly—my heart and head, one night I invited him over for dinner and told him that I was in love with him. While catching his breath between kisses, Ritchie said he loved me too.

We’ve been together ever since.

I’d be lying if I said every moment of our relationship has been easy. There have been instances when I felt myself slipping, or when I felt those old familiar pangs of fear returning.

But any time I find myself tempted to return to my old ways, I remember the mantras my therapist has taught me to say. I remember how far I’ve come, and that while my pasts

and traumas are part of me, they don't have to define how I'll live the rest of my life.

I remember that while I'm not flawless, I'm perfectly me. And I deserve to be happy.

Which I am. I stare down at the sparkling ring on my left hand. Ritchie slid it on my finger yesterday while we were on a tour of an old castle.

Once the barkeep leaves us to our meals, Ritchie lowers his face toward me. My eyelids flutter shut as his lips brush over mine. So lightly, it's almost like being grazed by butterfly wings.

"So sweet," he murmurs, his brogue thicker than ever. "You're so feekin' sweet."

I grin. "I thought you didn't care for sweets."

"I think we both know you've changed my mind on that score, *lass*." My heart thrums at the endearment and how it rolls off his tongue.

"Is that a fact?" I open my eyes to meet his gaze.

"It seems I can't get enough sweets these days." Ritchie strokes my cheek, watching me with adoration and contentment plainly written in his features. "I'll never get enough of them. Or loving *ye*."

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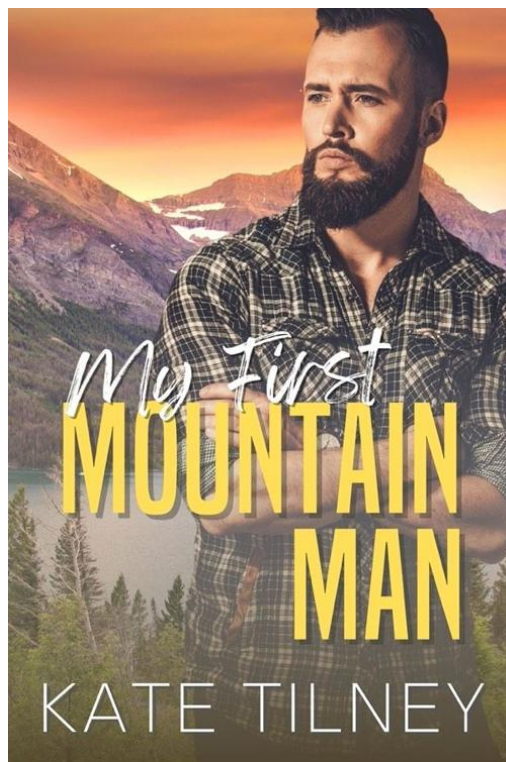
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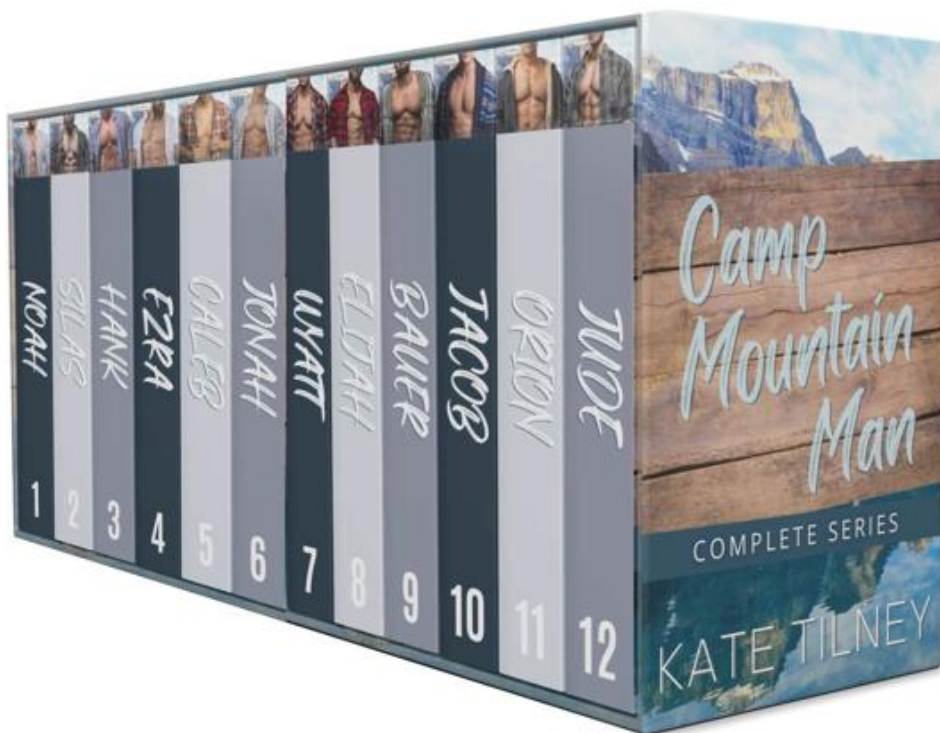
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