
OFF KILTER

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“I don’t know about this.” I look up and read the big sign over Boston’s hottest new pub—Kilting Around—as my friend Brodie opens the heavy door and gestures for me to enter. Nervousness takes up residence in my stomach as I step inside the busy establishment and look for a free table.

Honestly, it’s not the pub I’m concerned about—it’s quite lovely, actually—or the fact that there’s a rough, tough, tattooed guy in a kilt serving beer. It’s the business idea Brodie wants to run by me that has me filled with unease.

I point to the tatted-up server as he walks back to the bar. “Why are the guys wearing kilts?” I turn to Brodie, who also works here but has never mentioned having to wear a kilt before. “Do you wear a kilt too?”

Brodie puts his hand over mine and pushes it to my side to stop me from blatantly pointing. Oops. “Didn’t I tell you that?” I shake my head no. “The owner is Scottish, and we all

wear kilts.” He winks at me when I crinkle my nose in confusion. “To give a real Scottish experience.”

For the briefest of seconds, I consider what kind of Scottish experience Mr. Hot Scot in a Kilt over there might give me.

What the hell, Rachel?

Good Lord, the fact that I’m suddenly fantasizing about a man who looks like he might have committed murder ten minutes ago shows just how long it’s been since I’ve been touched. Divorce will do that to you. An almost hysterical laugh bubbles up in my throat. Yeah, I think I’m losing it.

Brodie stares at me, no doubt assuming I’ve lost my marbles and he should probably bail, instead of running his business idea by me. “Are you okay?” he asks, and glances around to see what’s holding my attention—and messing with my ovaries.

I pull myself together and smooth my hand over my skirt. “I guess seeing that guy in a kilt put me a little off kilter.” I laugh, like a damn fool. “Oh wait, now I get why this place is called Kilting Around.”

His brows knit together, and I’m pretty sure he’s figured I’ve finally gone and lost my mind. Okay, it’s true, I’ve been working too hard, trying to fight my way to the top in a male-dominated field, and take care of my son in a heritage house that’s fighting back—literally. This morning, the sink nozzle thought it’d be fun to break and spray water up my nostrils. I’m also pretty sure there’s an animal living in my walls. But that worry is for another day. When it finds its way free and tries to eat my face.

“Come on, let’s grab a seat at the bar.” I follow Brodie, and while I love his idea of creating a Dad for Hire business, I’m not sure it’s for me. Sure, my son needs a man’s influence in

his life—his own father is barely around and I'm not saying that's a bad thing—but do I really want to hire a man to teach my son life skills?

While I'm not sure about any of this, I'm going to listen to what Brodie has to say. A year ago, I bought the house near his when I moved from the city to Gloucester, back to the small town I grew up in, wanting to be closer to my mother and give my son Lucas a fresh start after all the bullying at his elementary school. Brodie's been a great friend to me, and after a hard life that he only ever hints at, he wants to start a business and give back. I want to help any way I can.

Brodie waves to Mr. Hot Scot in a Kilt, and gestures to the beer taps. While I don't usually drink in the day, it's hot out, and Lucas is in day camp, and well...I could really use a cold one. I admire Mr. Hot Scot in a Kilt's tattooed forearms as he pours the beer, and a little moan of appreciation, one I have no control over, spills from my lips as he slides the drinks across the counter to us. I reach for mine, and my hand connects with his.

"Oh, sorry," I blurt out, my gaze lifting quickly. His gaze is dark, intense as it holds mine, and I try not to fidget under his scrutiny. Wait, did he hear me moan? Does he think it had something to do with him? Because it didn't. At all. Or much.

Okay, it totally did.

"I'm trying to get Tavish to sign up," Brodie says. "Unfortunately, all he does is growl no at me. The playground bullies would think twice about messing with Lucas with Tavish around."

"What?" I ask, tearing my gaze away from Mr. Hot Scot in a Kilt and work to focus on Brodie. "Who?"

“Tavish,” Brodie says with a nod toward Mr. Hot Scot in a Kilt.

Mr. Hot Scot in a Kilt, or rather Tavish, grunts something under his breath and walks away. Wow, what a neanderthal. Hottest Neanderthal I’ve ever seen for sure, but Neanderthal none the less.

I lean into Brodie. “What’s his problem?”

He snorts a laugh. “We don’t have time for that.” Producing a folder, he opens it and slides it toward me. “This is the contract and all the information.” I open my mouth and he holds his hands up. “Just read it, see what we have to offer and think it over before you jump straight to no. The minimum contract is for six months, and there are ways to get out of it if it’s not working.”

I take a much-needed sip of my beer and it feels good on my dry throat. “I wasn’t going to jump straight to no.” Tavish walks back to the beer taps, and as I take in his big hard body, the needy part of me wants to jump straight to yes—to a fast hook-up, maybe in the back alleyway. Which is absolutely insane and completely out of character for me.

Clearly my ovaries and my brain aren’t communicating.

“Look, you need help, Rachel.” I take in the concern dancing in Brodie’s blue eyes and feel a tinge of guilt. Maybe I’ve asked too much from him and he’s tired of helping me out. He’d never complain or come right out and say anything, but I do lean very heavily on him. “You can’t deny that.”

“Nope, can’t deny that at all.” I stare at the papers before me, an uneasy feeling in my stomach as Brodie takes a sip of his beer. “I just...I mean, this is like bringing a stranger into our lives and how safe is that?”

“All the guys are vetted carefully by me.”

“Was he?” I ask, my gaze raking over Tavish’s tattoos, and rock-hard muscles. Nothing about him screams typical dad.

“Don’t let the tattoos fool you. Underneath it all, he’s a softie.”

Tavish’s head lifts, and he arches a brow, like he’s giving Brodie a chance to take his words back before he takes him outside and gives him the pounding of a lifetime. Brodie just laughs. He’s obviously not afraid of Tavish. I can’t say the same for me. The hard, dangerous look about him, I weirdly enough find it kind of exciting...arousing. Good Lord, what is going on with me? Maybe I have heat stroke or something.

“Does he speak?” I ask quietly after Tavish walks away with a tray of beer.

“Only when it’s necessary, and you’d be lucky to have him as a dad for hire.”

Laughter erupts from the table beside us. Are they listening in, and think Brodie is out of his mind, too? “Really?”

“Former MMA champion in Scotland. No one will mess with you or Lucas when he’s around, and even when you’re not.” Brodie holds his hands up and fists them. “He’s good with his hands.”

“Yeah, for fighting,” I shoot back. Honestly, I don’t need that in my life. I’m a peacekeeper by nature, and during my seven-year marriage, there was enough fighting to last a lifetime. I want to kick myself for staying that long. I thought it was better for Lucas, but I learned the hard way it wasn’t.

He shrugs. “Not just fighting. He’s good with his hands in other ways, too.”

Unable to help myself, I turn on my stool and admire his big, battered tattooed hands as he distributes the beer. What would those hands be like on my body? My sex clenches and once again a small noise spills from my lips. I cover it with a cough, and take a big drink of my beer.

“Like what?” I ask, trying not to sound breathless.

“He makes rocking chairs. He’s very handy.”

“Oh wow.” I’m actually surprised hands as big and powerful as his could create something delicate and intricate.

“He’d be able to help you fix things in that heritage house. He’s not afraid to get his hands dirty, and what he doesn’t know, he’ll figure out.” He sips his beer. “No more plumbing mishaps,” he adds, like he’s trying to sweeten the deal.

“Is he good with kids, though?” Am I seriously considering hiring Tavish? The man doesn’t even talk.

All the better for what you want, Rachel.

Good God, what am I thinking? If I do sign with Brodie, the last thing I’m going to do is sleep with the dad I hire. Which means there is no way I could consider Tavish for the job. He hasn’t spoken one word to me since I walked in the door, and I’m sitting here fantasizing about all the positions he could put me in with those strong hands of his.

Brodie turns to glance at Tavish and as if feeling our eyes on him, Tavish turns our way, a scowl on his handsome face. Brodie sighs. “Yes, he’d be great with kids. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Maybe he’s not, and that’s why he won’t sign up.”

“No, that’s not it.” There’s something lost and sad in Brodie’s eyes and it tugs at my heart. I thought he knew Tavish from the pub, but now I suspect they go way back.

“Were you guys friends in Scotland?”

“I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for Tavish,” is all he says as he turns his focus back to the papers, putting an end to the conversation. Something obviously went down years ago, and Brodie keeps it close to his heart. While I want to pry, I don’t. Their past is not my business.

“I guess the point is moot, since he won’t sign up.”

“True.” Brodie nods in agreement and drains his beer. He looks at mine. “Another?”

“No, I have to stop at work before heading home.”

“Are you still up for the VP of sales position?”

Now it’s my turn to sigh. I’m the only female sales rep at MedFlex Pharmaceuticals, and I deserve the promotion over Jakob the snake, who has the perfect wife, kids and dog and plays golf with Matthew Callaghan, the CEO, but do I think I’ll get it? Hell no. It’s an all-boys club, with an impregnable glass ceiling for someone like me. “The decision will be made next week.”

He smiles. “You’ll get it. You deserve it.”

I nod, appreciating his vote of confidence, but I’m a single mom who sometimes has to rush home to her son. They don’t consider someone like that reliable enough. They want the married man who has a wife at home to take care of things. Maybe if they saw a guy like Tavish standing with me, it would shake them all up. Maybe they’d take me a little more seriously if they thought I had that kind of support.

That idea of Tavish intimidating them fills me with a morbid kind of glee.

Brodie gathers the papers and puts them in the folder. He holds it out to me. "You'll think about it?"

"I will." I slide off the stool. "Thanks for the drink. I'll see you tomorrow for dinner?"

"I think I might be taking a shift here, so I'll let you know."

I nod and head toward the door, and the strangest sensation crawls up my neck. I turn and spot Tavish standing at the bar talking to Brodie, but his eyes are burning through me. I step outside and a warm breeze cools my body down. Yes, something about Tavish makes me that hot. I tuck the papers into my bag, grab an Uber and head back to the office, where my car and a bit of work awaits me.

Inside our building, I take the elevator to our floor and the second I step off and see Jakob and our CEO Matthew Callaghan clinking glasses filled with amber liquid, my heart sinks. Jakob glances my way, a wry smirk on his face and it takes everything for me not to walk into his office and smack it off. God, I hate the way he thinks he can walk all over me.

No one would mess with you or Lucas if Tavish was around.

As I stand here, my disappointment turning to anger, Brodie's words bouncing around inside my brain, I can't help but think maybe I should sign the contract and find a guy like Tavish to be Lucas' dad...and my big daddy.

“Are you still covering for me tomorrow afternoon?” I ask my buddy Brodie as I pour a beer and slide it across the counter.

“That depends.” I arch a brow and glare at him, bracing myself for what’s about to come next. Dammit, I’m tired of repeating myself. “Are you going to sign up for Dad for Hire?”

“Right after you marry a fine lassie and have a dozen kids.”

He laughs like he always does, since we both know that’s never going to happen—for either of us. I support the organization he’s building, but what do I know about being a dad? Fuck, I was taken from my own dad when I was a wee boy. Apparently in Scotland, you can’t beat the piss out of your kid to toughen him up. You end up with your arse locked behind bars, and a kid who goes off to foster care, which in my opinion was never much better.

Nevertheless, that’s how I met Brodie. We go way back and I’m here in Massachusetts, trying to rebuild a life outside of the MMA spotlight. He’s responsible for helping me find

work, not that I need the income. I made a fortune in the cage, but I need to get out of the house once in a while.

“Why do you need me to take your shift?” He wags his brow. “Hot date?”

I toss a cloth over my shoulder. Back home, women threw their panties at me. I was, after all, a well known UFC champion. Here I’m just a guy who serves beer in a kilt and I’m okay with that. It’s true, I’m totally played out and want a simple life. My gaze goes to the empty stool beside Brodie, and something twitches between my legs. I’d have to be blind not to notice that way she looked at me—a mixture of fear and intrigue. She doesn’t strike me as a panty-tossing kind of woman, and getting involved with a young mum is not on my agenda. I hated hearing her kid was bullied, though.

“I have a delivery,” I remind him. “I sold two chairs to a woman in our neighborhood, and promised I’d have them to her by tomorrow afternoon at the latest. I’m just waiting for the stain to dry. Last month, shortly after I moved in, she was driving by when she saw me in the garage and stopped to inquire.”

Intrigue dances in his eyes. “This woman...”

Why is he always trying to set me up? If I want company, I can find it. If I want a bed mate, I can find that too. I just don’t want either.

Except maybe with the gorgeous lassie Brodie was just talking to.

Shite, what am I saying?

“Nice lady. Evelyn Hart.” I grab the cloth on my shoulder and start polishing glasses. “Owns the bakery in town.”

“Aye.”

I angle my head and take in his smile. “You know her?”

He nods toward the empty stool. “Rachel’s mother. You’re right, nice lady. You should check out the bakery. She makes the best sticky buns. Rachel made them for me a few times. Delicious.”

A very odd sense of jealousy grips me. “Are you and Rachel—”
“Friends,” he interrupts.

I laugh as I take in his sheepish grin. “Turned you down, did she?”

“Something like that.”

The door opens, and oddly enough, a part of me hopes it’s Rachel coming back. It’s not. It’s Craig, here to replace me. “Thought so.” I check the clock, and unknot the apron around my waist, hanging it on the hook behind the kitchen door. I wave to the owner, Gavan, letting him know I’m leaving and grab my helmet and coat.

It’s still early enough for a relaxing ride along the coast. My home is about an hour from the city, but I don’t mind the ride, especially on bike. The winter months might be a different story. I say goodbye to Brodie and he hollers after me to think about signing up for Dad for Hire as I step outside into the late day sunshine. I breathe in the city scents, and walk to where I parked my bike. Twenty minutes later, I’m cruising along the coast, suddenly hungry for sticky buns, and I’m not sure I mean the ones sold at Evelyn Hart’s bakery.

I reach Gloucester and instead of going home, I head down the main street. I pass by the water tower. It looks newly

painted and has *Welcome to the Scenic Town of Gloucester* written on it, and a picture of a clam to represent the fishing industry. Only problem is that the clam looks more like...well, let's just say it's questionable. I pull up in front of the bakery. I kill the engine, and I'm about to take my helmet off, when taunting noises from the community park behind the bakery grabs my attention. My thoughts instantly go back to Rachel, and her son. If there's one thing I hate, it's a bully.

Fire raging through my veins, I follow the path to the park, passing by a community piano that I've yet to see anyone play—properly, anyway. Not that I can play it. Music wasn't in my childhood, and it's too late for that now.

In the distance, I spot two boys around ten years old circling another boy, calling him names and teasing him about wearing girl clothes, even though he's dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

Since I'm still in my kilt, I walk toward them as one kid pushes the boy to the ground. "Hey," I yell and take my helmet off.

All eyes turn to me, and the boy on the ground scrambles backward. I step up to him and hold my hand out. His eyes are full of wary suspicion as I try to help, and that's a good thing. He should be afraid of a grown-ass man—whether he's trying to help or not—on the playground. "What's going on here?" I ask.

"Nothing," one of the bullies says, and points to the boy on the ground. "He slipped."

"Is that what happened?" I ask the kid who's still in the dirt, narrowing my eyes to see if he's hurt. He has the same blue eyes as Rachel. I don't believe in coincidences, but all signs indicate this is her son.

“Uh, yeah,” the blue-eyed boy says, and I bend, grab his elbow and haul him to his feet.

“You’re in a skirt,” the other bully says.

“You got a problem with that?” I ask and take a step toward him. Hey, I’m not a guy who likes to threaten or intimidate kids, but these little eegits deserve a bit of their own treatment.

The kids stumble backward. “I never saw a man in a skirt before.”

“Now you have. If you have a problem with me, like you do with my friend here, now’s your chance to show me. See, if you mess with him, you mess with me.” Both boys shake their heads, and I wonder if their fathers will be on my doorstep later. I turn to the boy staring up at me with big blue eyes. “Where’s your mother?”

“In the bakery.”

“Let’s go.” I put my hand on his back and lead him away.

He looks up at me. “I like your skirt.”

“Thanks, kid. Why were those kids bothering you?”

“I wore a skirt once.” He looks down, defeated. “I probably shouldn’t have done that.”

“You can wear whatever you want. I do.”

“I’m not big and strong like you.” He looks at the tattoos spread along my arms. “I bet no one picks on you.”

“You’re right, kid, they don’t. Have you thought about—”

A wailing cry cuts me off and I glance up to see Rachel coming our way. I hold my hand up to stop her. "Whoa." I'm not trying to abduct her son or anything.

"Back away," she screams, and holds her hands out like she's going to karate chop me or something. "Lucas, get over here."

"Mom, it's—"

"Lucas," she screams, her voice boarding on hysteria now.

I continue to hold my hands up and start moving away from Lucas. The boy glances at me with a hint of embarrassment. "She's been watching some show called Cobra Kai," he explains.

I nod in understanding. "It's okay. I was only trying to help."

"Get away from here." She pulls her phone out. "I'm calling the cops."

"You better go, kid."

Lucas walks toward his mom and she runs up to him, closing the gap between us. Suddenly her hand drops and her eyes go wide. "Tavish?"

I think she was so panicked, so focused on a man walking with her son, she didn't realize it was me. Her gaze drops to my kilt.

"I didn't realize." She takes deep gulping breaths. "I thought... I just saw the motorcycle out front, and your jacket and...Oh, God." She buries her face in her hands and as the sun shines down on me, I peel my coat off.

"It's okay. Everything's okay."

“No,” she gulps out, her voice shaky as tears pool in her eyes. No doubt from the big adrenaline dump. “Everything is not okay.”

Sensing there is a lot more going on here, and not really knowing what to do or how I can help, I walk up to her and do the only thing I can think of. I pull her into my arms and simply hold her. I’m not going to tell her not to cry, or that everything is going to be okay, because clearly she needs a good cry and I don’t know if everything is going to be okay. The only thing I do know is the protector in me is ripping its way to the surface, wanting to take this woman and boy home and keep them both safe.

She sniffs and inches back. “I feel so stupid.”

“No need.”

A laugh that holds no humor bubbles in her throat. “You talk.”

I shake my head. I can’t even imagine what Brodie said about me. “Yeah, I talk.”

She turns to Lucas and goes to her knees. Her small hands grip his shoulders as she searches his face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think Tavish scared Jared and Owen. I think they both shit their pants.”

Rachel’s lip quirks. “Lucas, no swearing.” Her lids lift and she mouths the words, “Thank you.”

I shrug. “Do you know their parents? I’m not sure this is over.” I wipe the moisture on my brow.

“I’m not sure they’ll admit to their parents that they were picking on Lucas.”

Lucas pounds his fist into his palm. "If their parents find you, you can take care of them."

"Violence isn't always the answer," I tell him. Ironic, really. Considering I spent my childhood kicking ass. Sure, it was to protect those I cared about but still, and then I went on to make a name in the MMA.

Rachel's brows pull together and she glances around. "Wait, what are you doing here?" I'm about to tell her and she comes up with her own conclusions. "You decided to become a Dad for Hire?"

"No," I answer quickly. "I actually live here." I gesture toward the road, even though you can't see my place. "Moved from Scotland a month ago. Brodie didn't tell you?" She shakes her head and I continue. "He told me I needed to try your mother's sticky buns. That's why I'm here, in the park." She looks at me oddly, and I grin. "I don't think that came out right."

"Come on. I'm buying. It's the least I can do," Lucas says, and I laugh. What a funny little guy. He takes my hand, catching me by surprise. He tugs on my hand and my heart, and I glance at Rachel, waiting for her reaction.

"He's buying," she says with a shrug. Lucas skips along, no worse for the wear after the bullying incident, and as I take in the way Rachel watches her son with love and concern, my gut tightens. There's no doubt the kid needs a guy in his life. Someone to teach him how to stand up for himself, and be there for when he can't. That guy just isn't me.

We step into the bakery and delicious scents bombard me. Evelyn takes one look at me, her grandson's hand in mine, and surprise moves over her face. Who can blame her.

"Tavish?"

“Hi Evelyn,” I say, and Rachel stands there shocked, her gaze going back and forth between the two of us.

“You know my mom?”

“She bought rocking chairs from me. Delivery is tomorrow.”

Evelyn beams. “You do such beautiful work. Remember me telling you about the chairs, Rachel?”

“Actually, I kind of forgot. I remember now. I didn’t realize... Brodie said you were good with your hands. I didn’t put it together.” A pink flush moves into her cheeks as she glances at my hands. Jesus, what is going through her head, and if it’s the same thing going through mine, I should walk out the door. I’m all about a fast hook-up, but I’m not going to get involved with a woman with a kid. I’m not the guy she needs in her life. “I had no idea you lived near me or that you were the guy Mom bought the chairs from.”

“Can we get some sticky buns, Nan?” Lucas asks.

I turn to investigate the near empty display as Evelyn frowns. “I’m sorry, hon, we’re all sold out.”

“I have an idea,” Rachel says. “Why don’t you come for dinner tonight? A little thank you for helping Lucas and I’ll make some sticky buns.”

It’s not a good idea and that’s exactly what I’m going to tell her.

“What do you think?” she asks.

“What can I bring?”

Shite.