

One

ACCORDING TO DEX Fletcher, the single best reason for wearing his clan's plaid was the easy access the kilt provided for a woman's soft, wandering fingers. Unfortunately, the hand currently creeping up the back of his thigh belonged to none other than his Milwaukee Growler's teammate, Kane Palmer. Executing a move that looked more at home in a mixed-martial arts ring than a professional football team's locker room, Dex pinned the annoying rookie to the floor before his fingers could do any more walking.

"Keep yer girlish paws off my arse, Palmer." Dex allowed his Scottish brogue to slip its normally tight leash as he snarled into the punter's ear. "If you want to palm some balls, I suggest ye hit the practice field and take some snaps so ye willnae let one sail over yer head like ye did last week." Based on the roar of gleeful laughter filling the locker room, his teammates were delighted to hear their place-kicker use his native tongue, so to speak.

The late August morning was sunny and warm, matching the light, relaxed mood at the Growlers' practice facility. With the season opener just ten days away, the league's flagship franchise possessed the swagger and confidence to match its exorbitant payroll. Players in various stages of dress milled around the locker room, filled with optimism as they prepared for practice.

Having just endured a two-hours-too-long photo shoot the team's promotional department had coerced him into, Dex wasn't feeling as jovial as the rest of the guys right now. He leaned an elbow into Palmer's back just to put the rookie in his place. *At least the kid could take a hit well*, he thought. Now all Palmer needed to do was back up his big mouth with his leg so the Growlers would continue to dominate other teams with their kicking game. Dex took great pride in his title

as the league's leading scorer. Dubbed the 'Man with the Million Dollar Leg,' he fully intended to own the scoring honors for several more years to come.

Palmer grunted from beneath the weight of Dex's brawny body. "If you don't want to get felt up, stop wearing a skirt to work out in, Fletcher."

"Asshole rookie." Dex jumped to his feet. "It can only be called a skirt if I wear something under it." His smug declaration prompted more laughter from the other players, with a few catcalls and shrill whistles thrown in for good measure.

"You know, Palmer, word around town is Fletcher's balls are too big to fit into a pair of jeans, so he has to wear that damn wrap," Luke Kessler, the team's star wide receiver, called out from across the aisle. "If you don't believe me, check out the size of his cup."

Palmer reached for Dex's locker presumably to do just that, but Dex shoved the rookie's arm away. "What did I tell you about those wandering hands?"

"No need to get testy, old man. I *wouldnae* steal yer codpiece." Palmer's poor attempt at imitating Dex's accent had the players cracking up yet again.

Shaking his head, Dex turned his back on the heckling of his teammates, mooning them all when he unwrapped his kilt from around his waist. A coach's whistle blew, signaling the start of practice. The lingering laughter was drowned out by the sound of cleats tapping against the concrete floor as the players headed down the hall to the waiting field.

"You know the skirt doesn't bother me as much as the knee socks with the little tassels on them." Sitting in a metal folding chair in front of the locker beside his, Trey Van Horn, the Growlers quarterback, jerked his chin toward Dex's stocking clad feet. "You better be careful not to wear those during a game, or the league office will fine you for a uniform violation."

Dex shot his teammate the bird before tugging on his compression shorts, followed by a pair of nylon running shorts. “I stole them from your last girlfriend. Her ma is probably miffed she had to buy a new pair for the lass’s school uniform.”

Van Horn chuckled. The quarterback had a reputation for liking his arm candy to be fresh-faced socialites. Dex was one of the few people within Van Horn’s inner circle who saw through his teammate’s act. But since Dex had his own reasons for not pursuing any romantic entanglements, he was content not to cast any stones at his friend’s character.

“I’ll give you fifty bucks for your mathletes if you wear those girly socks to practice,” Kessler said as he passed by Dex’s locker on his way to the field. The brash receiver was the main instigator of crazy dares among the Growlers. But Kessler always put his money where his mouth was. For his part, Dex never said no to a contribution to his favorite charity.

“You’re on.” He pulled his cleats on over the thick wool knee stockings. The shoe on his kicking foot was smaller and tighter than the one on his other foot, but it was just the way he liked it. He yanked a Growlers’ T-shirt over his head before he stood, then shrugged into his practice jersey.

Van Horn handed Dex his helmet and turned to the wide receiver. “You should have dared him to wear his kilt to practice, Kessler.”

“Nah,” their teammate replied as the three men made their way outside. “There are a bunch of pee-wee league kids visiting practice today. No need to scare them with a glimpse of Fletcher’s ugly *bullocks*.”

Kessler’s Scottish accent made Van Horn laugh as he shoved his helmet on his head. The quarterback slapped Dex on the shoulder and jogged onto the center of the field to take his place as the rightful ruler of this kingdom of jocks.

Grinning broadly, Dex dropped down beside Kessler onto the turf, reveling in the bright sunshine, the brotherhood of his teammates, and the promise of the season ahead. He loved playing this game, playing for this team. Football was his sanctuary. If he had to endure an exile from his beloved Scotland, he couldn't think of a place he'd rather be than on the field with these guys.

The trainers and coaches led the players through a series of stretches and conditioning exercises before they split them up into offensive and defensive units. Dex lined up behind the special teams' offensive line to practice faking field goals and muffed snaps. Then Van Horn held the ball while Dex kicked it through the uprights several times. After that, it was Palmer's turn. He worked on his punting by taking several reps with the Growlers' long-snapper. After six weeks of watching Palmer punt, Dex had to grudgingly admit the team hadn't wasted a seventh-round draft pick on the mouthy kid from Oklahoma.

The scrimmages ended, and the players and coaches dispersed into smaller practices within each specialty. With the rest of the team involved in other drills, he and Palmer made their way toward the locker room. They would emerge an hour later when the team reconvened for thirty minutes of full-contact play.

If Dex enjoyed the camaraderie of his Growler teammates, he loved the quiet solitude of the locker room more. He'd grown up the studious son of a math professor and a primary school headmaster. While always a natural athlete, the muscle he exercised the most growing up was his brain. The idea that he'd one day be the highest-paid professional athlete at his position—playing with the wrong kind of football, no less—never once entered a young Declan Fletcher's imagination.

Until fate intervened.

“Legend has it you grew up in St. Andrews.” Palmer took a Big Bertha putter out of his locker and began tapping a golf ball into a plastic cup he’d laid on its side. “The freakin’ birthplace of golf.” The rookie sighed in reverence as he bent over the ball.

Dex let out his own beleaguered breath before dragging his eyes away from the chess set in his locker. For six seasons, he and Palmer’s predecessor had matched wits over a chessboard while the rest of the team duked it out on the practice field. Palmer didn’t look like he’d sit still long enough to play a game of tic-tac-toe, much less a game of chess.

Resigned, he grabbed his iPad out of his gym bag and headed for one of the leather sofas scattered around the locker room. If nothing else, he could come up with some math drills for the team of high school students he worked with each week. Unfortunately, the rookie punter hadn’t picked up on the fact that Dex liked to brood in peace. Palmer dogged his steps across the room as Dex stretched out on the sofa.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love football, but not as much as I love golf,” Palmer was saying. “If I play my cards right, I can build my nest egg here in the league and, when I hang up my cleats, I’ll join the professional golfers’ seniors’ tour.” The ball smacked against the back of the cup from ten feet out. “Life is good when you can earn a living playing a game, huh, Fletcher?”

I’m gonna earn my keep playing a game, Dex. Ain’t that pure dead brilliant?

Memories of another young athlete, as boastful and arrogant as Palmer, suddenly swam in front of Dex’s eyes. Niall’s cheeky smile and brilliant talent had been the pride of St. Andrews. The familiar tightening began in his chest. He squeezed his eyelids shut to block out the image, but it was no use. There was no way to exorcise the past from his conscience. It—along with the guilt—had burned a hole deep within his soul.

“Hey, Fletcher,” one of the trainers called into the locker room. “You’ve got company in the lobby. A woman.”

Palmer let loose a taunting whistle before refocusing on his putting. Dex swung his legs down to the floor, grateful for the distraction from his thoughts of home and the people he’d never be able to face again. Other than reporters, it was highly unusual for someone to visit him at the practice facility. Especially a woman.

His thoughts immediately jumped to the young students he tutored in mathematics each week. They were kids with difficult lives caused by unfortunate circumstances. They were also Dex’s outlet, his way to atone for the sins in his earlier life. A pang of unease raced up his spine as Dex wondered if one of them was in trouble.

Another form of dread gripped him as he made his way out of the locker room, and he quickly began to catalog all the women he’d been with the past several months. He’d been upfront with all of them. His commitment level was set firmly at no-strings-attached sex. The seven—or was it eight—women he’d hooked up with had been in complete agreement. Of course, it wouldn’t be the first time in history a woman fed him a line just to get at what was beneath his kilt.

Damn it.

Increasing his pace, he navigated the long hallway leading to the lobby. He blew out a breath of relief when he rounded the corner and saw his personal assistant, Marlene, waiting near the reception desk. Then he noticed the normally unflappable older woman wringing her hands. Whatever couldn’t wait until he got home was clearly important. His gut seized as he thought of his family in Scotland, many of whom he hadn’t seen for nearly ten years.

“What’s wrong?” Dex asked once he reached her side.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” she whispered, her eyes darting back and forth behind her wire-rimmed glasses. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Tell me,” he commanded. “Is it my father? Or my ma?” *Christ, please don’t let it be my little sister, Annis.*

Marlene placed a hand over his on the counter. “Oh, no, Dex, your family is fine. It’s not that at all.”

His relief was palpable. The Fletcher family had endured enough pain. Whatever the ‘trouble’ was that had Marlene so distressed, it couldn’t be as dire as Dex’s greatest mistake.

He reached out and gave Marlene’s shoulders a gentle squeeze. “Relax and breathe. Whatever it is, it can be fixed.”

She glared over his shoulder. “I’m not so sure about that. This guy says you’re in trouble.”

“What guy?”

“Perhaps I should explain.” A slender man dressed in a navy suit stepped out from behind the display case housing the Growlers championship trophies. He extended his hand before pulling it back when confronted with Dex’s fierce glare. “I’m Victor Figueroa. It’s an honor to meet you, Dex. Can I call you Dex? I mean, I’m from Chicago, so the Bears are my team and all, but any football fan would be honored to meet you.”

Dex narrowed his eyes even more at the guy’s rambling. He didn’t know what in the hell was going on, but the last thing he needed was a crazy Bears fan trying to sniff his jockstrap. “And how exactly do you fit into this story, Figueroa?”

“Actually, it’s Agent Figueroa.” He reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out a leather ID holder. “I’m with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and I’m here to facilitate your deportation back to Scotland.”

#

IT SEEMED LIKE a good idea at the time. But now that Andi Larsen was sitting in the attorney's office, she was seriously second-guessing her decision to allow sweet Mrs. Hilbert to talk her into meeting with her son. Not because the man was aiming an annoyed glare at both women—there was a glass desk the size of a skating rink separating them, fortunately. But because she wasn't sure she wanted her dirty laundry aired out in public. The embarrassment of her few friends knowing was bad enough, but this man, a man who possessed not only the common sense but the aptitude to survive law school and pass the bar, would also know her shame. There was no way he wouldn't believe she was gullible, stupid, or worse, reckless.

And she was none of those. Well, except for maybe the reckless part. But only a little bit. And she was working on it. Really, she was.

“Mom, I've told you a hundred times I'm not that kind of a lawyer.”

Beside Andi, Mrs. Hilbert squared her shoulders. “Of course, you are a lawyer, Kurt. I paid for you to go to law school.” She donned a proud smile and turned to Andi. “Did I tell you he originally went to school to study opera? His voice is divine. It will give you goosebumps. Sing, something for her Kurt.”

“Mother!”

Andi flinched at his yell. She was definitely sporting goosebumps all right. Although divine wouldn't be the word Andi would choose to define the man right at this moment. Peeved was a more apt description. She glanced sheepishly at the lawyer. His face was pink with frustration. A sudden image of him donning a Viking helmet complete with horns and yellow braids while belting out a song in some indistinguishable language on stage flashed before her eyes. Stocky and tall, he would make an intimidating Norseman. He was certainly doing a good job of intimidating Andi.

His mother? Not so much. The woman had more than four decades of practice ignoring her son's antics. She simply arched an eyebrow at him. With an anguished sigh, he ran his fingers over his bald head as though trying to summon some sort of follicle that would rid him of both women. Andi was about to oblige him when Mrs. Hilbert's hand on her arm stayed her in the chair. For such a petite lady, she had the grip of a python.

"Kurt." Mrs. Hilbert attempted to soothe him. "Andi needs our help. It doesn't matter what kind of lawyer you are. I raised you to be kind to others."

Andi had to hand it to the older woman; she employed guilt with as much precision as a chef at a Benihana wielded a knife. Her son caved instantly.

"Okay." He blew out a resigned sigh. "Let's hear your story, Annie, and I'll see if I can make some calls to an attorney who will best fit your case."

"Andi," both she and Mrs. Hilbert said at the same time.

"My name is Andi. Andi Larsen," she repeated.

"Apologies." He studied her speculatively. "Just how do you two know each other, anyway?"

It was a fair question given the fifty years separating the two women.

"She works at Shear Envy salon, dear."

As if by reflex, Mrs. Hilbert fingered her sleek, ash-blonde bob, reminding Andi that she needed to order more 9v color. She wasn't the stylist who did the older woman's hair, but as the salon's receptionist and office manager, she made a point to ensure every client who walked in the door received top-notch service.

"You're a hairstylist?"

"No. I'm—"

“Andi wants to be an entrepreneur,” Mrs. Hilbert interrupted. “She makes the most wonderful soaps using all-natural ingredients. They’re luxurious and very pretty. I gave you some for your birthday. Don’t you remember? The lemongrass and lavender ones. They’re meant to help you relax. I worry about you. He’s always very stressed,” she confided to Andi.

As if his tight mouth and flushed cheeks hadn’t already given that fact away.

“Oh, I know,” Mrs. Hilbert continued, excitement making her voice rise a few octaves. “Once we fix Andi’s legal issues, maybe you can help her get on *Shark Tank*.” She turned to Andi. “My son works with famous people all the time. But when you go on the show, don’t let Kevin buy into your company. Hold out for Laurie. She seems nice.”

The lawyer groaned in annoyance at his mother’s meandering tale.

“I’m a senior at Marquette,” Andi explained before he summoned a security guard to escort her out. “I work in the salon during the day while I earn my business degree at night.”

“That’s admirable.”

“You might want to hold that thought until I finish my story.”

The corners of his mouth wobbled as if he were biting back a smile. Or a scowl. It was hard to tell. He excelled at a poker face, which was probably an advantage in his profession.

“Your mom is right. I want to open my own company someday. That’s why I’ve been careful to pay my tuition with grants and scholarships. It’s taken a few extra years that way, but at least I won’t have any debt when I graduate. My professor says the lack of loan debt will give me a big advantage when I apply for funding with a venture capital firm to kick-start my business.”

That had been the plan, anyway.

“Why do I sense a ‘but’ coming?”

“Because her ex is a butt,” Mrs. Hilbert interjected. Then the woman laughed. “That’s kind of *punny*, isn’t it?”

Her son ignored her, keeping his focus on Andi. He nodded for her to go on, but her throat tightened up with embarrassment. It was bad enough she’d been duped so easily that no venture capitalist would even look at lending her a dime. Saying it out loud in front of a perfect stranger somehow seemed to make it even more real.

“Tell him,” Mrs. Hilbert coaxed. “He can’t help unless you tell him the whole story.”

She sincerely doubted the man in front of her would be able to help her, but she’d taken an hour off work to come here. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Kenny, my ex-boyfriend, somehow figured out how to access my financial aid account. He took out multiple public and private student loans in my name and kept the money for himself.”

“How much?”

These words were harder to get past her thick throat. The enormity of what she now owed both angered and frightened her. “Seventy thousand dollars.”

He whistled in surprise. “You don’t need a lawyer. You need a cop.”

“I’ve been to the police. They took my statement, but since Kenny left the state with the money, they told me my case isn’t a priority.” That was after making her feel naive and like she deserved to be conned. Her jaw clenched at the memory of leaving the police station feeling mortified.

The lawyer’s face grew hard. “They should have referred you to someone else who could help you. Where did this Kenny guy go?”

“Las Vegas.” She felt her cheeks begin to grow warm. “He bragged to a friend he was invited to sit in on a high-stakes poker tournament. He conned his way in using my money, figuring he’d be rich by now. But Kenny has never won at anything.”

“Well, that’s a life lesson they can’t teach you in business school.”

Mrs. Hilbert patted Andi’s hand. The gesture of reassurance made her feel even more humiliated. Her son had drawn the same conclusion as the police, that she didn’t have the bandwidth to know when someone is taking advantage of her.

Except she had known better.

She just chose to ignore her head, instead basking in Kenny’s charm and the idea that someone finally wanted to have her in their life. Both were survivors of the foster care system, except his transition into adulthood was a bit bumpier than hers. False bravado and charisma could only carry a person so far. Andi assumed the role of parent and provider while he began to brood and act out like a child. Still, he was all she had, and she refused to give up hope that with a little love and guidance, he could succeed. Together they would show everyone who labeled them as cast-offs that pedigree didn’t matter. It didn’t take long for her to realize while Kenny wanted to rise above his past, he didn’t really want to put in the work to achieve success. Feeling sorry for him, she let him hang around and mooch off her for too long.

And now she was paying the price.

“Do you have any family that can help you out?” the lawyer asked.

“No. It’s just me.”

And she was more determined than ever to keep it that way. *People always let you down.* She’d had that lesson drilled into her for her entire life. When the foster care system had cast her off, turning her out into the “real world” at eighteen with whatever she could squeeze into a state-

issued duffel bag and nothing more, she'd made a vow never to have to rely on anyone ever again. She'd slipped up with Kenny. There wouldn't be a second time. From here on out, she was a one-woman show.

Mrs. Hilbert's son scrubbed his face with his hand before speaking. "Okay, here is what we are going to do. First, I'll make some calls to the police to follow up on your complaint. Then I'll ask around to see if I can find you an attorney who'll take your case pro-bono. Does this Kenny dude have a job?"

Andi shook her head. "His only income is from selling vintage shoes on eBay."

The poker face was long gone now. His eyebrows nearly rolled over his bald head at the absurdity of Kenny's profession, if you could call it that.

"Then I'm afraid the likelihood of you recovering your loan debt from him will be nil. I'll have to find an attorney who can deal with the bureaucracy of the Department of Education. Then we'll follow up with the police to get him prosecuted for identity theft."

She'd already resigned herself not to expect to see a red cent from Kenny. Still, she was grateful the man in front of her was willing to help her clear her name as well as her credit score. Her name was all she had left.

"Why can't you handle her case?" Mrs. Hilbert demanded.

"Because those famous people you're so fond of telling everyone I know are my clients. I'm a sports agent, Mother. Not a trial attorney!"

"It's fine," Andi interjected before the other lady spoiled it for her. "I'm grateful for anything you can do for me." It was her turn to pat Mrs. Hilbert's hand. "Really."

He picked up his pen. "How do I get in touch—"

“You can’t go in there,” a voice shouted just before the office door was nearly ripped off its hinges.

Ignoring the warning, a man stormed in, his hands balled in fists.

“Oh, my,” Mrs. Hilbert exclaimed.

‘Oh, my’ was right. The man making his way into the room was compact and rugged, with broad shoulders, and a swagger that might have been cocky were he not so distressed. His thick, dark hair had been finger-combed until it practically stood on end. But it was what he was wearing that made her mouth gape. The interloper was dressed in an actual kilt showcasing a pair of well-sculpted legs beneath its hem. A disheveled dress shirt was hastily tucked in above it. He resembled an untamed Highlander from centuries past—one with a very wild edge that seemed to be a siren’s call to parts of her body, if the fluttering deep within her belly was any indication

The attorney shot out of his chair. “Declan? Is everything all right?”

“Hell, no,” the other man shouted. “I’m being bloody deported!”

A lick of desire danced down Andi’s spine at the sound of his craggy voice before his words registered. And she thought she had problems. Clearly, his case was more urgent. Not only that, but the fewer people who learned of her embarrassing predicament, the better. She began to stand so the attorney could focus on the other man.

“Sit,” Mrs. Hilbert commanded while jutting up her chin. “We were here first.”

The Highlander jerked to a stop at the sound of the old woman’s voice. Obviously, he was so consumed with his own dilemma, he didn’t realize there were others present. Andi’s breath hitched when his gaze landed on her. Pale, dove-gray eyes framed by thick dark lashes quickly assessed her from head to toe and back up again. The look she saw within them startled her more than his intimate appraisal. Fiery desperation burned in their depth, but there was something else,

too. Something Andi recognized instantly. She saw the same expression every time she looked in a mirror: loneliness. The deep, isolated lonesomeness Andi felt even in a crowded room.

Mrs. Hilbert wiggled her fingers at him. “Nice to see . . . so much of you again, Declan.”

“Deported? What are you talking about?” The attorney’s question had the Highlander breaking his gaze and refocusing his attention to the matter at hand.

“An ICE agent showed up at the practice facility.” He waved a bunch of papers in front of the lawyer’s face. “He came to give me my final deportation notice in person. My bloody renewal paperwork for my visa was never filed. The notices weren’t ever delivered to me. Damn it. I pay you handsomely to take care of that for me, Kurt. Now I have three days to clean up this mess or I’ll be sent home to Scotland. For *six whole months!*”

The attorney was frantically punching keys on his laptop. “This can’t be. The paperwork was completed two months ago. I handed it off to Nicole to file with ICE.”

The Highlander gripped the back of his neck while releasing a string of angry words in a language Andi didn’t understand.

“Oh, for crying out loud, Dex.” The attorney glared at him. “Don’t tell me you’re the one behind Nicole’s emotional breakdown that caused her to quit.”

“Hey! I made it clear up front there was never going to be anything more than one night!”

Mrs. Hilbert tittered. Her son groaned. Andi felt her cheeks flush. Her thoughts immediately conjured up carnal images of the sexy man before her slowly unwrapping his kilt and strutting toward her in all his muscled glory. She sucked in a ragged breath, just barely resisting the urge to fan herself. She really needed to stop watching that *Magic Mike* movie on cable.

For his part, the Highlander looked sheepish, dragging his fingers through his hair. “Now what do I do? The season starts in a week and a half.”

The attorney sighed. “Let me make some calls. There’s got to be some way to get around this.”

“Of course there is,” Mrs. Hilbert chimed in. “It’s simple, really.”

Both men turned to stare at her expectantly.

“Dex needs to get married.” She beamed in triumph before turning to Andi. “And aren’t we lucky we have the perfect bride right here.”