

I'll Take Mine In A Kilt

By
Pamela Johnson



Echelon Embrace

I'll Take Mine in a Kilt

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Her heart palpitated, making her breathing shallow. Something close to desire surged through her blood. She tucked an uncontrolled curl behind her ear as the tingles skittered up her spine.

"Is that a new one Gabrielle?" His voice pushed its way into her intimate thoughts.

She blinked, coming back from her mental journey high in the Scotland hills. Somewhat embarrassed, she glanced at her latest literary escape. "Um, yes, actually, it's Morgan's Woman. You know by that author who wrote Scotsman's Desire?" Her voice trailed off as he gazed at her skeptically.

"So do you get something out of those?" Brendan flashed a smile, causing the dimple near his mouth to deepen. She watched him swing another cardboard crate full of books to the unpacking table. He whipped out his utility knife and carefully slit open the box.

"I just like them I guess." Gabrielle pushed herself from the break room table and wiped her

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hands of her lunch. She had been there for a year longer than the new manager and though he seemed nice enough, he kept to himself, except when he found the opportunity to tease her about her taste in books. He was a temporary transfer in-training for a manager position.

"Yeah, Gabrielle, but that 's not real life." He had a hardened look on his face and yet his eyes twinkled from behind the round spectacle frames he wore. She loved hearing her given name roll off of his tongue. She could almost imagine him in a kilt.

"Gabrielle?" She blinked from her daydream and saw him with his box knife paused in mid-air. *Lose the shirt, add a kilt and a sword and grow the hair out and he could be Morgan!* She sighed.

"Are you all right?" His face came into focus in front of her. His eyes appeared twice as large and twice as forest green. For a moment, she couldn't speak as she searched his face. Why did she suddenly seem tongue-tied around him after working with him for over a year? She frowned and wondered why he hadn't been assigned somewhere else after the normal six months training.

Picking up her lunch, she feverishly

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wadded up the paper sack. "I'm fine, I need to get back out there." She ducked back into the bookstore showroom, her insides quivering. Was she trying to live out her romance novels? She frowned as she considered the possibility.

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"Is there something wrong with my check?" Gabrielle looked up at the concern-etched face of the older woman waiting for her purchase.

"Oh, I'm sorry. No, your check is fine, Mrs. Owen. I was thinking of something else." She felt the heat burn her cheeks as the woman smiled with a conspirator's twinkle in her eye.

"I can see why. I'd have a hard time keeping my mind on business too." Her bright blue eyes darted to Brendan's firm, athletic form as he stretched to place the magazines on the top rack.

Gabrielle's brows arched in surprised amusement as she watched the seventy-something woman disappear into the mall crowd. She started to chuckle and then couldn't stop, as she broke out in laughter that caused tears to roll down her cheeks. Gabrielle brushed her tears away and cleared her throat.

"Well, something has you amused." Brendan sauntered toward the register, sporting a wicked grin.

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She waved her hand, trying to catch her breath. "You cause quite the stir among the older women, Brendan." She spaced the words out through her laughter, trying to catch her breath.

"I'm glad you find that humorous." He placed a hand to his hip. "How old are we talking here, Gabrielle?" He tipped his head and his sparkling green eyes teased her.

Something snagged Gabrielle's heart and she stopped laughing abruptly. Perhaps, she thought suddenly, he was one of these men who preferred older women. But that would not account for his present girlfriend at any rate.

"I think she's seventy something. She said she understood why I had so much trouble keeping my mind on my business." Realizing her faux pas, she clamped her mouth shut and forced her eyes to the floor. "I mean, I was preoccupied, and she thought that...so, she assumed that it was because...."

She gestured wildly in an attempt to explain what her words could not convey. "It's not like what you think." She swallowed hard and took a deep breath before she raised her eyes to his nondescript expression. "We were simply watching the way you were put up the

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magazines."

His brows leaped above the rim of his glasses.

With a sigh, she placed her hand to her forehead, trying to sort out the right words. The more she tried to explain, the worse the explanation became. Chewing her lip, she sighed again and looked at Brendan in disgust. "Stop looking at me that way."

He held his palms up and gave her a wry grin. "What way? I'm just trying to make sense out of what you're saying."

"Bottom line, she just thinks ...that you're, well, attractive."

"Ah, I see." He ducked his head in a gesture of shyness and she saw the color fill his cheeks. "And you?" His gaze stayed to the floor.

Feeling as though all the air had escaped from her lungs, she stared at his profile in silence. *Did she hear what she thought she heard?*

For the first time, since she'd first appeared on the scene, she was glad for the presence of Brendan's flighty girlfriend. "Brendan." The singsong voice came from behind her.

Gabrielle turned her gaze to follow the

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young woman as she sashayed toward Brendan. Naturally, there was no acknowledgement of Gabrielle.

"Are you almost through here? I'm hungry." She pressed unashamed against him, whispered something in his ear, and giggled.

Gabrielle pretended to be busy as she organized the stacks of brochures and bookmarks near the register.

"I don't close until nine, Jamie. I told you that earlier." His voice was low and his tone smacked of reprimanding a child.

Gabrielle glanced up quickly to see him take her elbow and gently propel her to the back of the store. She watched them disappear through the backroom door, then sighed knowing she would need to refocus her thoughts on what was going to be another quiet Saturday evening.

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"So, can I ask you something?" They sat in the back room of the mall bookstore, early Monday morning, sipping the coffee Brendan had picked up at the food court on his way in. "You like cream, right?" He offered her a cup, raising a brow in question as if expecting her confirmation.

"Uh, yes. Thank you. What did you need to ask?" Her mind searched quickly, trying to remember the few times they had shared coffee before opening the store. Either way, it made her heart race, that he would recall such an intimacy as how she liked her coffee.

"Well, its Jamie."

She studied his face, watching as he chewed his lip. Unsure of what to say, she removed her the lid and blew on her coffee, waiting for him to continue.

He hesitated and she saw that dimple crease his cheek when he smiled. It was like holding her breath, waiting for his next words. *More? How could this woman possibly want more?*

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He turned and looked at her with an expression that depicted the struggle going on within him. They held each other's gaze for a moment, before he looked away, shaking his head.

"This is harder than I thought it was going to be." He looked at the floor and rubbed the back of his neck, as he moved his head slowly side to side.

She forced her self to keep her backside firmly planted on the table, for the desire to walk over and knead the frustration from his broad shoulders was overwhelming. "Hey, if you're not comfortable talking about it, um...I understand."

"Gabrielle, it's not that. It's...look, I need some advice." He twisted around, propped his hand to his leg, his expression looked confused.

Which she found absurdly ironic. "You, want advice from me?" She gave him a pointed look and folded her arms across her chest.

"It's your books, really."

"My books?" She saw he was hesitant to speak his mind, as though protecting someone. Her patience wore thin. "What the hell does she want Brendan?" Her mouth immediately clamped shut, and stared in shock at what she'd

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said. Forget about *how* she said it.

It was nothing compared to the look on his face. "Uh, she wants me to be more...romantic." His pine-colored eyes peered at her as if he'd just discovered a new land.

She grabbed her cup in both hands to prevent it from slipping to the floor and attempted to keep her voice steady.

"More romantic?" Her words sounded forced, unsure.

"I thought maybe there was something in all those books you always read. I don't know, maybe something that would help me."

She wanted to tell him that it wasn't his problem at all and that it was most likely his sniveling, unappreciative girlfriend. "So, what do you want to know?" She cast her gaze to the ceiling, crossed her feet, and tapped her shoes nervously.

He laughed, "I'm not really sure Gabrielle. I've dated Jamie for six months and I thought I was doing okay in this."

She felt genuinely sorry for him, for it appeared to her that he was trapped in a relationship with a selfish woman who didn't see his wonderful qualities. Tipping her head, she narrowed her eyes. "Okay, let me look up some

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of my favorite scenes and you can read them. How about that?"

He nodded, with a shrug. "Okay, sure, it's worth a try, I guess." Nice to see an enthusiastic pupil, she thought.

Book after book, she poured through the passages that afternoon. She searched for parts that described the kind of romance she thought would appeal to a good cross-section of women. Hopefully, Jamie fit in the outer fringes somewhere.

Near closing, she carried her stack of books for Brendan to the backroom. She dropped them on the table and stretched her arms over her head, then sighed and closed her eyes.

"I closed the gate, mall traffic has really thinned tonight."

Her eyes popped open and she dropped her arms to her sides. The quiet gaze he gave her pushed warmth into her cheeks.

"So, what'd you find for me?" He rubbed a hand over his mouth and propped a hip to the break table. Book after book, he searched the cover, and then smiled at the brightly colored sticky notes inserted between the pages. "Nice touch." He fluttered the tiny bookmarks.

Thumbing through the pages he read in

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silence, and then grinned. "That's an interesting idea." Tossing the book to the table, he picked up another. "Whoa. I think I might scare her off if I tried this." He chuckled and glanced at her.

She felt herself blushing. *He was mocking her again!* "You have to use your imagination Brendan. Romance is better than real-life. It's how things should be."

He turned his face to hers and she assumed that he was processing that information. He was, just not the way she'd hoped.

"So, you do realize that this kind of guy simply is too perfect for reality. I mean, how could the average guy, ever hope to compete with that image?" He shook the book and flipped it to the table.

"It's not just the guy, Brendan. It's as much the woman that helps make the man all that he is." She averted her gaze from his to the floor and wondered if he caught her point.

"What kind of woman is that, Gabrielle?" His voice was quiet.

She sensed a sudden surge of electricity filled the back room. "You can, um...take those with you." Scooting off the table, she grabbed her purse off the hook.

"Hey." The tone of his voice caressed her

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skin as much as if he'd touched her.

She swallowed and turned to find his gaze soft in appreciation. "Thanks. Are you available, if I have questions?"

She lowered her eyes and turned to leave. "Sure, but I think you'll find most of those are fairly self-explanatory." *God knows I've read them enough times!*

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Startled, Gabrielle jumped back when the stack of books slammed to the front counter. She didn't have to look up to know that it was Brendan; the scent of his cologne was burned in her memory. Her mind conjured images of pressing her face to his neck savoring his exquisite male scent.

"These are useless."

She blinked from her reverie and gazed into his face. It wasn't the expression of a content man. "You tried some of these ideas out on Jamie then?" Gabrielle stared in amazement that he didn't come swaggering in like a satisfied pirate. She gave him a weak smile, as he paced back and forth in front of the counter.

"She liked some of it, but she also said that it didn't feel 'real' to her." Pushing hands through his sandy blonde hair, he sighed out loud in frustration. He stopped and placed his hands to his hips.

Her eyebrows rose at the accusing look on his face.

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"I told you they wouldn't help."

"Hey now, Mr." She countered as she placed her fists on her hips, squaring him off with a look. "This wasn't my idea, if you'll remember and they aren't meant to be 'cure-all' guides for those relationships that--" She stopped mid sentence and knew she'd gone too far.

He lowered his hands and tilted his head, squinting at her. "That, what?" His one-eyed gaze made her insides tremble.

"Nothing. It's none of my business." She smiled at the customer who was placing their purchases to the countertop. "May I help you?" Her voice changed to pleasant. From over the shoulder of the patron, she glanced at his face as he studied her, then he shook his head and stomped off toward the backroom.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything." The customer smiled sheepishly at Gabrielle.

"Oh not at all." The woman had no idea how grateful Gabrielle was for her presence. She stared at the empty backroom doorway as she spoke to the woman. "Just a bad book review." She glanced back to the customer's face and gave her a weak smile.

"He takes it hard." The woman responded

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and leaned closer to Gabrielle as if not to breach her confidence with Gabrielle.

She offered the woman with pensive look. "I guess he hoped for higher ratings."

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"It's me? Isn't it Gabrielle?" The voice came from behind her as she sat in the backroom later that day, eating her supper of carrot chips and cheese. Swallowing, she took a sip of her soda and turned to see him standing in the doorway, hands stuffed in his pockets, shoulders slumped forward.

"What?" She put her book down and turned in her chair to face him. "What are you talking about?" She'd had about as much of his problems with Jamie as she cared to hear.

"Maybe Jamie's right. Maybe I'm just a really clinical person. Maybe I'm not cut out to have an intimate, emotional relationship with a woman." He clasped his hands behind his head and sighed as he stared at the ceiling.

"Okay, I have one more idea." She summoned the courage to remove her self from her safe little shell. She held a finger up and stepped around him, then walked into the main room heading straight to the romance section. With quick precision she plucked up two copies

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of one of her favorite Scottish romances.

"Keep an eye on things, Tony." She called out to the hired high school junior. He waved in the air, slumped back down on the stepstool, and poked his head back into the magazine he'd been reading.

She pivoted on her heel and made a beeline for the backroom. Her heart pounded like a drum in her chest as she stepped into the smaller room.

Brendan rose quickly from his chair meeting her gaze with a questioning frown on his face.

She figured it was now or never. "Here." She tossed the book to him and he fumbled to catch it. Page 79"

"You have pages memorized?" His surprise was obvious.

"Hush, do you want to get to the crux of this problem or not?" She hopped to the table and flipped through the pages.

"Okay." His voice had a hint of intimidation to it that for some reason pleased her, though in the next moment she reminded her self that this was for Jamie, not her.

Right.

"Do you have it?" She questioned him like

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a school marm preparing a student to read in front of the class.

"Yeah." He stared at the pages as he sat back down on the folding chair.

"Okay. Read it through once on your own, then we'll go through it once more." She watched his expression as he read, her eyes narrowed as she tried to ascertain his thoughts.

He raised his gaze to hers and gave her a wicked smile. "Okay."

She placed her hand to her chest and cleared her throat. "Okay, we're going to go through this, it will have to be quick for obvious reasons. But it might help you see what you may be doing wrong." She looked at him and hoped her feelings were well disguised beneath her bossy attitude.

"What? You mean like read it out loud?" He frowned at her, yet she saw the corner of his lip curl to a smile.

"Exactly." She sliced her hand through the air, in an effort to indicate that this was all business.

"And this will prove.... what?" A small laugh erupted from him.

"We'll see if its you." She tipped her head and raised her brows in a challenge to his

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disbelief.

He heaved a sigh, leaned back in the chair, and crossed his ankle over his knee. Settling in, he raised his green gaze and her heart slammed against her chest.

"Where do we start?"

There was an indication of suggestion in the twinkle of his eyes, but she chose not to acknowledge it.

"I'll start." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and refused to meet his steady gaze.

"Her heart beat fierce as he approached her from the hills of battle. His strength was evident now even to himself. She had waited for him to notice her above the others."

She paused licking her dry lips, and then continued, "His eyes were full of kindness and passion. Things she had always seen in him, but he had never seen in himself. She opened her arms and welcomed him home. Their mouths sought one another's passion, secure that it was safe to be vulnerable to the other."

Gabrielle stopped reading, bringing her breathing quietly back to an even control.

Brendan started to read without hesitation, as she stared intently at the words on the page in front of her. The sound of his voice was like the

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deep vibrations of a cello. The words rolled off his tongue and she closed her eyes to its tender undertones. Her imagination ran rampant as she listened, unaware that his voice was getting closer.

"He counted himself truly lucky to have won her heart. This gentle woman, whom had befriended him from the beginning, yet stood in the shadows as he made his journey.

All of the battles he fought had made him weary. She was his sanctuary."

Gabrielle felt his leg brush her knee and she slowly opened her eyes to find him standing in front of her. She swallowed, "You read this very well."

They held to each other's gaze, even as he lowered his face to hers.

Her insides liquefied as his scent permeated her senses. "I don't think the problem is yours." She could feel his breath now against her lips and she reminded herself to breath.

"This is just a practice thing, right?" He whispered the words, lifting his gaze to meet hers. As her mind swirled in languid ecstasy he captured her mouth with his. Her hesitancy melted with the tenderness of his kiss and she slid her hands into his hair, pressing his face

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closer as their kiss deepened.

Someone cleared their throat. "Uh, I got a problem out here."

Startled, then embarrassed at her behavior, she pushed Brendan away and glanced at the young clerk who stood in the doorway of the backroom. He had a wide grin plastered to his face.

"*This* was wrong." She whispered, as she slid from the table. Pushing her hair back from her face, she smoothed her skirt and turned to the clerk. "What is it? I'll be right out." Her voice wavered in nervousness.

"That's okay, I just need the special order book. Someone moved it." He shrugged and she could see that he was uncomfortable.

"It's to the left under the counter, Tony." Gabrielle placed a hand to her forehead and forced her thoughts back to reality.

He nodded and returned to the main room.

"How was it wrong, Gabrielle?"

She turned to face him and saw his softened expression of contentment.

"It was supposed to be for you and Jamie." The words tumbled out as she grabbed the books from the table. "This wasn't a good idea." She fought guilt and her own attraction to him at

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once.

"Maybe it's the woman, like you said." He stepped toward her reaching for her arm, but she stepped away from his reach.

"Six months is a long time, Brendan. You owe it to yourself to try that with Jamie." She smiled raising her brows, "If she doesn't respond to that, well, the girl's dead." She held her hands in front of her to stave off his advance.

"I can't deal with this, I thought maybe I could. But I can't." She turned, walked to the back of the store, and grabbed her coat and purse as she jerked the door open.

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Gabrielle leaned her fist to her chin as she read. This Sunday afternoon was unusually quiet for the mall, but she was grateful just the same. It had been a week of fitful sleep and on top of that, Brendan had called and said he needed some time off. Glad for that, she'd decided that the distance would do them both good.

Perhaps I should look for another job?

She stared into the mall and let her gaze rise to the large circular atrium dome that allowed the natural light to spill into the courtyard. The sky was blue overhead and generally that would have delighted her, today very little served to nudge her out of her gloom.

A few weary shoppers sat, scattered throughout the seating area and she studied them, wondering of their lives. Were they happy? Would they go home to an empty apartment or to a boisterous and loud house? How many of them were lovers? She sighed and her ears perked to an unfamiliar sound.

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Curious, she walked to the front of the store. Shifting one of the freestanding racks, she straightened the books and tilted her head to the sound that seemed to be coming closer. *Were those bagpipes?* She stepped out into the mall and checked up and down the long corridors. Several other shoppers had also stopped and were looking around, searching for the origin of the sound.

Her gaze rose to the railing of the upper level balcony that overlooked the food court and through the shaft of sunlight an image appeared as if stepping out of history.

He wore a traditional Scottish kilt with a billowy white shirt that lay open, revealing his perfectly sculpted chest. From her view, he looked as though he was returning over the hills from battle.

Her heart stayed in her throat as she watched him come down the escalator, the piper in full dress played as he followed dutifully behind him.

Brendan stood before her and rotated, giving her the full view of his clothing. "Well? What do you think?" He placed his hands on his hips.

"What are you doing?" Gabrielle had a

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hard time keeping her eyes from staring at the bare chest she had only imagined. She pulled her gaze to his face and watched his grin tease his dimple into place. She placed her hands to her cheeks, the heat radiating from her blush.

"Promoting our new romance book."

She blinked, her brows pressed together. "What book? Our book?"

Brendan knelt in front of her as a group of mall spectators gathered around them. The piper stopped and gave her a pleasant smile.

"It's the story of a man too blind to have seen love standing right under his nose. And of the woman who brought out the best in him." He paused, took her hand, and pressed it to his chest.

She could feel the steady beat of his heart under the flesh.

"She knows his heart, maybe better than he does himself. But he knows now that she is all he has ever needed or wanted in a woman." He took her face in his hands and pulled her to him, making no excuses for kissing her so boldly in front of the crowd.

"Hey! That sounds like a good one! How does it end?" Came a loud voice from somewhere in the crowd.

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"We'll let you know when we've worked out the ending." Brendan spoke out loud, as he stood smiling. He gently held his hand to her cheek.

"It has to have a happy ending." Her heart felt as though it would burst as she said the words, "All romances end that way."

He smiled and slipped his arm around her shoulder, as they walked through the parting crowd. "You got any other passages we could read?"

She smiled and gave a glance over her shoulder. "You may have to lose the piper."

"Done m'lady." He reached up and pulled the security gate down to the cheers of the mall crowd.

The End

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About the Author:

Pamela Johnson, an avid believer in potential and possibility has in three years, achieved publishing success with her short stories, articles, and poetry. She is currently published/contracted in both e-Book and print.

In 2001, she published in three anthologies, (Romancing the Holidays, Vol I, Lovey Dovey Romance, and Seasons of Romance) and released her first novel. (Unfinished Dreams-2002 EPPIE FINALIST/ 2002 Independent Awards nominee) Nominated at Preditors & Editors for favorite Novel 2002, as well as favorite author, favorite Poem, favorite Poet, and favorite short story. She also co-authored Cursed Comes Christmas, a paranormal romance novel. Cursed was also nominated for favorite novel and artwork at P & E.

2002 will see the release of novel her next McCudahy's Challenge (NCP/March 2002) and a special charitable writers anthology she is co-editing, made up of over seventy-two authors.(Crumbs in The Keyboard; Courageous Women Juggling Life & Writing) Her medieval poetry has been published online and as a prologues in the novella duet, To Tame A Viking, by Leslie Burbank. She has just contracted her first historical, White Eagle's Lady, due out in July 2002 from Echelon Press. Her novellas are available at Echelon Press for download.

A member of RWA, EPIC, Divas of Romance, TRC, and officer in both From the Heart and World Romance Writers, she has held several Reviewer and editorial positions with online and print writer publications. She also manages a weekly newspaper column covering the Fine Arts. Pamela lives in rural Iowa with her husband of twenty-three years and their four children (including twins)

"Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try"~Anonymous

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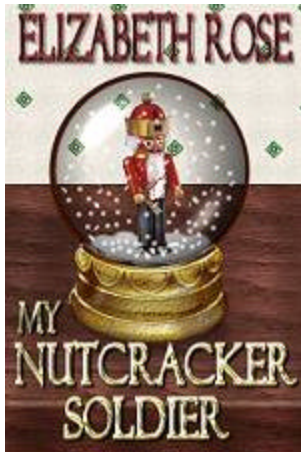
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