

The background of the book cover is a scenic landscape photograph. It depicts a lush green valley with rolling hills, a small body of water (likely a loch) in the distance, and a flock of sheep grazing in the foreground. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue. The title 'The Kilted Governess' is written in a large, dark blue, serif font with a white outline, positioned at the top. Below the title, the words 'A NOVEL' are written in a smaller, white, serif font. At the bottom, the author's name 'Janet Quinn' is written in a large, white, serif font with a dark blue outline.

The Kilted Governess

A NOVEL

Janet Quinn

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

...Duncan looked at the moon shining down on them. *What a glorious night.* It made his heart sing. For a few moments he could enjoy the company of a woman as wonderful as the night. Though he had nothing to offer her but his company, at least he could give her that. Ease her loneliness a bit before he was forced to leave.

Already he would miss this place and the two lasses he would leave behind him. He brushed back the hair curled about her cheek.

"He is a great burden." His grandfather had been ill for a year and had been a burden on all of them. His mother had suffered the most having to take care of the elderly man. She'd never complained, but Duncan had seen the tiredness wear at her.

"He's really not a burden. I have Cory to tend him and help." She smiled at Duncan. "Most of the time he manages to get things confused and then I must straighten out the mistakes. As with hiring you for governess. Generally, they're wee mistakes."

"I am glad he made that mistake." He couldn't be sorry. He'd met Eirica. For that, he could never be sorry. He could dream about her when he did have a lonely night.

"Why do you say such a thing? You've been sorely inconvenienced." She strolled toward the pen.

Duncan looked toward the baaing of the lambs. *Because*

I've met you and you've brought a brightness to my heart I have never before felt. No, he couldn't say that to her. "Because...because I would never have gotten to be a governess without your father's help."

Her laughter wrapped itself around him and he smiled...

ALSO BY JANET QUINN

Arrow of the Heart
The River's Treasure

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

BY

JANET QUINN

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

THE KILTIED GOVERNESS
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction.
All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of
the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales,
or events is entirely coincidental.

Amber Quill Press, LLC
<http://www.amberquill.com>
<http://www.amberheat.com>

All rights reserved.
No portion of this book may be transmitted or
reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission
in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief
excerpts used for the purposes of review.

Copyright © 2007 by Janet Cornelow
ISBN 978-1-60272-036-7
Cover Art © 2007 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To my biggest fan, my sister Kathy.

*To my sons, Tom, Michael, and Robby,
for all their confidence,
support and love.*

*To Debra, my critique partner,
for all her help and encouragement.*

CHAPTER 1

Scotland, 1842

“I won’t wed the man, Father.” Eirica MacDougall turned to stare at her father, her green wool skirt swishing about her legs. The smell of sickness clung to the room like a shroud, even though the heavy red velvet curtains had been drawn back and the French doors thrown open to let in sunlight and air.

Angus MacDougall weakly waved a hand in the air. “Now, daughter, you’ve nothing to say about the matter. I’ve promised your hand to Gilliskel Anderson.”

She walked over to her father and tucked the plaid blanket

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

around him. Bending next to the red velvet settee where her father spent his days, she took his hands into hers. His skin felt like parchment. His blue eyes were dulled, as, at times, was his mind. "You had no right to do that, Father. I can't wed. Who would care for you?"

Angus blinked at her. "Why you, daughter."

"If I wed Mr. Anderson, then I won't be about to care for you or Anne." Her father grew weaker with each passing day and he wouldn't be with them much longer, but she wouldn't desert him while he still drew breath.

"He's planning on living here and running the farm." Angus pulled his hand from his daughter's and reached for the cup sitting on the table next to him. His hand shook and the tea sloshed over the edge. Steadying the cup with his other hand he took a sip and set it back, the pink-flowered china clinking against the saucer.

Eirica stomped across the room. As much as she loved him, he could be so exasperating. She had enough problems without his adding to them. Twenty sheep had disappeared from the north pasture last night. Plus she was waiting for the new governess, the third in two months, and she hoped the poor woman hadn't run afoul of the highwaymen who had suddenly appeared a fortnight ago. Running afoul of Anne would be enough for the woman. "I won't wed the man so he can steal my inheritance."

"Now, daughter, Gilliskel has not offered for your hand so he might steal what is yours." A sigh rippled through Angus's body as he sagged into the cushions.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“What else would you call it?” She looked out the window at the trees shading the garden. A garden alive with a riot of colorful blooms. She would enjoy the renewal of life if her father’s weren’t slipping away so fast, and perhaps her freedom with it.

“None else will offer for you.” He picked at the edge of the blanket covering his lap. “At your age you should be glad that any have made an offer after...”

“It doesn’t matter.” She looked at him. “The man’s as old as you and a lowlander besides.” She shrugged. “What am I to do? Nurse both of you. Then let his sons take what is mine and Anne’s? Am I to be dependent upon the charity of others once you have joined Mother?”

“You don’t understand, child. How can I go to my eternal rest knowing you’re alone in the world?” He worried at the blanket.

“I’m not alone.”

“A woman needs a husband.” He looked up at her, a frown creasing his mouth. “Who’ll run the farm if you’ve no mate?”

“I will. As I have.” *For seven years.* She groaned and went to kiss him on the brow. “A fine job I’ve done of it. We’ve made more money each year and have more sheep. How can you fault me?”

“I’m not faulting you. I’m looking out for you.” Angus reached up and grabbed her arm, his bony fingers digging into her flesh. “I’ll see you wed before I die.”

“You’re upsetting yourself, Father. We shall discuss this later.” She lifted his fingers from her arm and placed his hand

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

beneath the blanket.

He struggled to raise his head. Sighing, he closed his eyes and sagged back. “We wouldn’t have this problem if you’d agreed to wed Eachan MacFie seven years ago after...”

“It’s over and done. I had no desire to wed him.” She tucked the blanket around him again. “Don’t worry yourself about it, Father. I’ll tend to the matter.” As she tended to all the matters affecting the household.

“Gilliskel will be here in three days.”

“Then I’ll be sure a room is readied for his stay.” She would make sure his stay was short. He wouldn’t be claiming her hand anymore than Eachan had. “You must rest now. Dinner will be in a bit and I’ve matters to attend to before then.”

A knock sounded on the door of the small parlor.

“Come in.” She turned to see Mrs. MacAlister standing in the doorway. “Yes?”

The gray-haired woman glanced over her shoulder, then entered the room and shut the door behind her. “The new governess we were expectin’...”

Eirica nodded. “Yes?” She held her breath. Something had happened.

Mrs. MacAlister twisted her apron in her fingers.

“Is there a problem?” Please not the highwaymen, she prayed. Or that the woman had changed her mind. Maybe she’d heard from one of the last two about “darling Anne.”

Mrs. MacAlister frowned, adding to the wrinkles that creased her face.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"She isn't coming." Eirica's shoulders sagged.

"No, miss. That's not the problem." Mrs. MacAlister's apron had become a knot of white cloth.

"Then she's arrived." Eirica smiled. Maybe all was not lost. *Thank heavens.*

Mrs. MacAlister nodded. "But..."

"Show her in."

"I must tell..." Mrs. MacAlister turned toward the door and back to Eirica.

"I haven't much time. Show her in. Father will want to meet her before he naps.—And I've much to attend." Eirica frowned, tapping her foot. She should be outside figuring out what had happened to her sheep and overseeing the shearing.

Mrs. MacAlister opened the door and waved her hand at the person in the hallway. "Miss MacDougall will see you." She stepped to the side, gripping the edge of the door with fingers that turned white.

In strode a tall man with flashing blue eyes and dark brown hair curling around his ears. His arm muscles bulged against his white linen shirt sleeves. Eirica's stomach did a flip. Never had she seen a finer looking man. Her heart skipped several beats and the room suddenly became over warm.

She stared at him for several seconds. He returned her stare.

Heat crept into her cheeks. "Mrs. MacAlister, I didn't wish to see the coach driver. If we need to pay him, take care of it, please. I wish to meet the governess."

"That's what I've been tryin' to tell you, miss." Mrs.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

MacAlister edged around the door. "This is the governess."

"What?" Eirica looked at the housekeeper, then back to the man standing in her parlor. "Oh, good grief."

"Who's here, daughter?" Angus's feeble voice came from behind her.

"The new governess, Father." She turned to look at her father. "This isn't the...the...one I sent for."

"I thought your choice not proper for our Anne. She didn't have the character needed in dealing with the child." Angus pushed himself up. "So I chose another."

"Father, where did you get the name for this other whom you chose?" Could things get any worse? Instead of a governess for a seven-year-old girl, they had a man. *A man*. A man she could truly enjoy looking at, but a man none the less. A man was not a proper person to teach a young girl.

"From...from..." Angus put his hand to his head. "Oh, I know. From Gilliskel. He highly recommended the new governess."

"Did you happen to mention to him you had a young daughter?"

"Of course I did. You think me a doddering, old fool?" Angus pushed himself upright on the settee.

"Then, Father, why do we have a man standing in our parlor?" Now what was she to do? She'd have to tend to Anne herself and she hadn't the time to do so. The sheep were being sheared. Mr. Anderson would arrive in three days expecting to wed her. A groan from deep within escaped.

"A man?" Angus looked toward the stranger. "This can't

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

be the governess I sent for.”

“He is, Father.”

“No. Some mistake has been made.” Angus collapsed.

Eirica twisted her fingers together. *Yes, he'd made a mistake. Again.* She turned back to the man who grinned at her. A grin that melted her insides. She took in a deep breath. “I am sorry.” She moved closer to the man and lowered her voice. “My father’s an invalid and often not in his right mind. He didn’t realize he hired a man to be his youngest daughter’s governess.”

The man laughed. “I gathered that by the conversation.”

Eirica smiled at him. “I’m sorry. I seem to have forgotten my manners. I’m Eirica MacDougall.”

He gave her a slight bow. “I am Duncan MacKinnon. Your new governess.” His laughter filled the small room with warmth and pushed away the feeling of impending doom.

* * *

Duncan surveyed the room behind Eirica. The small parlor spoke of wealth with its heavy furnishings. The fleur-de-leis wallpaper was red, though faded with age. The old man’s settee was placed in front of the large gray stone fireplace, but turned so he could look out onto the garden. Another red settee sat at an angle to her father’s. Two matching wing chairs completed a circle, with several small round mahogany tables covered by lace doilies. The sire of the estate was covered in a tartan blanket, his weak fingers clutching the edge. He stared toward the ceiling, his eyes half open.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Duncan looked back at Eirica. She was a comely woman and appeared to be but a few years younger than his six-and-twenty. Her green eyes flashed as though she contemplated throttling the old man. With her arms crossed in front of her, she forced a smile. Her blonde hair had been pulled back into a severe knot, but small tendrils had escaped and curled about her right ear.

He could think of no explanation why such a lovely woman wouldn't be wed, except she had given up her own hopes for a family to tend to her ailing father and her younger sister. When she was younger, she must have had beaux lined up from here to the lowlands to beg for her hand. He would have been one of them. If he'd had anything to offer.

He smiled at her again. Her smile brightened a bit.

"Come. Let us go to the library so we don't disturb Father's nap." She whisked by him, her skirt brushing against his leg.

He followed, enjoying watching her walk, her white blouse tucked in at a tiny waist above swishing skirts. He wasn't what she wanted, but hopefully she wouldn't send him away without some recompense for his journey. He was down to his last farthing.

In the library, she sat behind a massive desk, rubbing her fingertips across the wood, caressing it. "I'm sorry, Mr. MacKinnon. A terrible mistake has been made." She waved him to the chair in front of the desk.

He picked up the green pillow taking up most of the wing chair and held it for a moment. Then he tossed it into the

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

matching chair a few feet away. Settling into the seat, he stretched out his legs.

Mahogany cases holding books lined one wall of the library. He would explore the shelves later if he got the chance. Wallpaper with a green floral design covered the other walls. Several large pictures of the highlands were hung, as well as a portrait of what must be Angus MacDougall.

Duncan placed his hands on the arm of the chair. "The mistake is no' of your making."

Eirica let her shoulders sag. "I'm glad you see it that way. That still leaves me with a problem."

"And myself." He shifted, trying to get comfortable. He had nowhere to go. Besides, he wouldn't mind staying here a bit longer and getting to know Miss MacDougall better. She showed a strong will, but seemed disconcerted by the turn of events.

He felt a bit disconcerted himself. He thought he'd come to tutor a seven-year-old lad. A lass was a different story.

"What's your problem?" She stared him straight in the eye.

"I have traveled quite a distance and have nowhere else to go." He leaned forward. "'Tis no' your concern, but 'twill take me at least a month to secure another post." He shrugged. "'Tis shearing season, and if you'd allow me to stay and help shear while I look, I'd be most grateful."

"Shearers I have in plenty." Placing her elbows on the desk, she rested the top of her head in her hands. "What I don't have is a governess." She peeked at him. "I don't know how this could happen." As she raised her head, she let her

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

hands drop to the desk. "I don't know how he gets correspondence out of this house without my knowing. I'll find out who helps him and put a stop to it. The servants have to realize the man's not right in the mind." She slapped one hand on the desk.

Duncan laughed. "Sometimes 'tis no' always possible to control those who brought us into this world."

Eirica nodded. "Sometimes. The man's impossible. Some days he spends hours conversing with my deceased mother. Heaven help us all if he really sees her." Pressing her hand against her mouth, she stifled laughter. "'Tis not a thing of amusement, but sadness. Other times, he seems to know what goes on about him, but then he tries to take control and remembers only half." She shook her head. "How could he forget he had a daughter and not a son?"

"At least he remembered he had a child."

"I should count what blessings I have." She straightened. "Actually, I've many blessings for which I am grateful. At this moment, I would dearly love to have a governess to tend to my sister. She's a handful and I haven't the time, with the shearing and guests arriving."

"I may no' be a governess, but I am qualified to instruct young ones." If he could stay until she found a governess, that would give him time to find a new post. He couldn't return home.

"That would be improper. A man instructing a young girl." Placing her hands flat on the desk, she flashed him a smile. "What do I care about proper anyway? 'Tis not as if being

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

‘improper’ has not influenced my life before.” She pursed her pink lips. “It would only be until I could find a proper governess. Anne is small enough it won’t affect her reputation. Besides, Nanny McCall could sit in the classroom with you.”

She nodded, as though agreeing with herself. “That would make it acceptable.” She nodded some more. “Yes. That’s the only solution.” Her green eyes darkened as she gazed at him for a long moment. “Yes. If you’ll stay until I can find a replacement that might suit us both, it’d give you time to find another post as well.”

He continued to gaze into her eyes. *Eyes the color of the hills at the end of spring. Eyes that told of passions buried deep within her.* Passions he wished to know more about. “I would be pleased to be of help.” Her solution seemed one suited to both of them.

“The child can’t read or cipher. The last two governesses taught her naught.” She grimaced. “She’s a bit of a handful, but I wasn’t the best of mothers.” Shrugging, she continued, “Sickness befell Father and the running of the estate fell to me. We all let her do as she pleased, because it seemed the easiest thing to do.”

“I shall do my best.”

“That’s all I can ask. If you can teach her anything, it’d be an improvement.” She grinned. “Of course, I’m sure you wouldn’t wish to teach her needlework or deportment.” Her left eyebrow quirked upward.

His laughter burst forth, his deep voice echoing off the walls. “I do no’ think I would be much good at needlework.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He studied Eirica's hands laying on the desk. The fingernails were chipped, and calluses marred what should have been soft flesh. "It may be something all great ladies need to know, but it'll have to wait until the next governess."

Dropping her hands into her lap, her cheeks flushed. "Not all ladies have the time for such pursuits. If I wanted..." She crinkled her nose. "If I had the time, I wouldn't do needlework. It bores me and I'm terrible at it." She giggled. "What good is it anyway? It clutters the walls." Straightening her shoulders, she folded her hands so her nails didn't show. "I'm more interested in her learning to read."

"I can teach her that, plus history and geography, math and a bit about sheep farming." She had the most beautiful smile. Her laugh reached out to him and warmed his heart. What a bonny fine lass she was.

"That would be fine."

"I can teach her to play the pianoforte and the bagpipes."

"We can live without the bagpipes." Eirica laughed. "I can see Anne puffing on them. It probably would suit her fine, but I don't think Father could withstand the noise. Learning her letters would be a start." As she reached for the bell pull, a smile flitted across her face. "Getting her to sit in the chair in the classroom would be a miracle."

Mrs. MacAlister entered the library. "Yes, miss?"

"Mr. MacKinnon will be staying until we can find another governess."

A frown flittered across Mrs. MacAlister's face and her fingers picked at the edge of her apron. "Do you think that

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

proper?”

“Probably not, but ’tis of no matter. We need someone to teach Anne, and he has come for the job, thanks to Father.” Eirica rose. “Please ready a room for him.”

Mrs. MacAlister’s eyes widened. “Not the room next to the nursery?”

“Of course not. That truly would be improper. We can’t have Mr. MacKinnon on the same floor as Anne. Nanny will have to stay and tend to the child’s needs. I’m sure that will please her immensely. She has been most maudlin about having to leave when we find a governess. I believe she’s behind part of Anne’s shenanigans.”

Mrs. MacAlister nodded. “Where are we to put him?”

Duncan watched the exchange between the two women. They seemed to have forgotten he existed as they talked. The older woman twisted at the front of her apron. A permanent crease had formed where she worried the material. Her graying hair peeked out from beneath her white cap.

Eirica’s lips pursed and she tapped her foot as she tried, with little luck, to force the escaped tendrils of hair back into the knot at the nape of her neck. “Give Mr. MacKinnon the end room on the second floor. The one farthest from Father. That way he won’t be disturbed if Father has a bad spell at night.”

“That’s on the same floor as you.” Mrs. MacAlister released her apron and put her hands on her hips. “That’s not—”

“Oh, good grief. Would you have me put him in the sheep

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

barn?" Her brows pulled together. "I can't worry about proper. Can my reputation suffer anymore than it has? Besides, Mr. Anderson will be here shortly." She glanced at the ceiling and shook her head. "You can put him in the room next to Mr. MacKinnon. His two sons in the rooms adjacent. 'Tis settled." Eirica walked from the room. "Come, Mr. MacKinnon. I shall introduce you to your pupil."

Duncan followed her up two flights of stairs and into the classroom. A small child, who resembled Eirica, sat on the floor playing with a doll. A woman of about thirty sat in a rocking chair, doing needlework. Her brown hair was fastened atop her head with small ringlets falling at the sides of her face. Her gray dress gave her skin a matching hue.

"Anne," said Eirica, "come and meet your new—"

Duncan stepped forward. "I am your new governess." He bowed and smiled at the child.

Standing, Anne stepped close to Eirica and wrapped an arm around her. She looked him up and down, her green eyes flashing. "You're not a governess. You're a man." Anne glanced at Eirica. "I don't want a man for a governess."

Nanny McCall anchored her needle and placed her sewing on the small table next to her before she stood. "This isn't proper. This man may not come into my nursery."

A sigh rattled through Eirica and she shook her head. "Nanny, we have no choice. The child must learn and until I can find a proper governess, Mr. MacKinnon...well...he's here. You will, of course, stay on and supervise."

A smile graced Nanny's face, alleviating the look of

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

sorrow that seemed a permanent part of her. “Of course, I will.” She glared at Duncan.

He smiled, wanting to laugh. The woman appeared ready to behead him to protect her charge.

Stamping her foot and crossing her arms, Anne glared at Duncan and Eirica. “I won’t have this man teach me.”

“Now, Anne” —Eirica patted the girl on the head—“we don’t always get that for which we wish.”

“Send him away.” Anne stomped over to her doll. She grabbed it up by one arm and slung it into a chair. “I shall wait until you find me a real governess.”

Eirica glanced at the ceiling again and took a slow, deep breath. “Anne, sweetheart, he’s a very nice man. You’ll find you’ll like him better than the other governesses. He has a nice laugh. He even said he would teach you to play the bagpipes if you wished to learn.”

Anne peeked over her shoulder at him, glaring.

Eirica shoved her balled hands into her pockets. “I told you she was—”

“She’s a pretty lass.” Duncan smiled at Anne. Eirica had no control over the child and the nanny would do nothing to further his cause, but he had learned children weren’t so very hard to win over with the right persuasion. “And a very smart one. I’m sure we shall get along fine once we’ve come to know one another.” He hunkered down to look at Anne at eye level. “Besides, lass, ’twill only be for a short time.”

“You can start lessons tomorrow. After you’ve gotten settled.” Eirica picked at her skirt, then folded her hands in

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

front of her.

“We shall start lessons after dinner. No sense in wasting a beautiful afternoon.” He stood.

“He can’t take dinner with us.” Nanny stepped forward, standing between Anne and Duncan.

Duncan swallowed a laugh. The woman would stop at nothing to protect her charge. Even when the lass wasn’t in danger.

“Of course not. He’ll take his meals with...” Eirica pursed her lips again. “With Father. Father will enjoy the company.” She smiled at him.

He would enjoy the company. Especially if Eirica joined them.

CHAPTER 2

Duncan took a deep breath before striding into the schoolroom to face his charge. She sat on the blue wool rug playing with a doll. “Good afternoon, Mistress Anne.”

Clutching the doll, Anne glared at him.

“The time for school has come.” He walked over to her.

Nanny McCall looked up from her sewing and glared. “It’d be best if you waited until the morrow.”

Duncan smiled, one of his best smiles. The child would offer resistance, but he wouldn’t allow the nanny to be her accomplice. Besides, he didn’t threaten her job. He couldn’t take over the care of the child. “Now is as good a time as any.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I'm busy." Anne turned away, her curls bouncing.

"Your doll may join us." He hunkered down near Anne. "She might enjoy learning her letters."

Anne peeked over her shoulder at him. "Dolls can't learn letters."

He quirked his eyebrows. "They canno'?"

"Of course not. That's silly." Anne laid the doll on the blue wool rug, her back to Duncan, her head turned enough she could look at him.

The expression in her green eyes reminded Duncan of Eirica. A strength of will ran deep in both the MacDougall lasses. He picked up the doll dressed in a blue muslin frock trimmed in white lace to match Anne's. "Would you like to go for a ride with me and learn your letters?"

He nodded the doll's head up and down. "Why, yes, I would like that very much," the doll said in a squeaky voice.

Anne broke out into laughter. "You're silly."

Still holding the doll, Duncan sat cross-legged on the rug. "Do you think we should ask Mistress Anne to come along with us?"

The doll shook her head. "She does no' want to learn her letters," the squeaky voice said.

"Then we shall go without her." Duncan rose, taking the doll with him.

"Wait." Anne pulled at his trouser leg. "I'd like to go for a ride." She looked up into his face, her expression serious. "I don't wish to learn my letters."

Duncan addressed the doll. "Shall we let her come along,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

even though she does no' want to work?"

He turned the doll to look at Anne, then back to look at him. The doll shook her head. "Only those who want to learn their letters may go for a ride."

Anne stomped her foot. "You're my governess, not the doll's."

"The doll wants to learn and you do no'."

Anne snatched the doll from Duncan's hand. "I shall learn some of my letters, but doll stays here." She laid the doll in a chair and straightened its skirt. "Are we going by buggy or horse?"

"A horse ride would be nice. You could show me about and learn at the same time." Duncan congratulated himself. Young people weren't so hard to convince to do what they were told, if the convincing was done correctly.

"Then Nanny will stay behind and keep doll company." Anne smiled. "She doesn't ride."

Nanny McCall rose from her chair and set her sewing on the table. "Then we must go by buggy. You can't go about with this man alone."

"I shall return your charge unharmed." He tried his best smile on Nanny for the second time, but it didn't seem to move her highness.

Nanny folded her arms across her chest, raised her chin and fixed him with a stare. "It is most unseemly."

"'Tis only a ride about the estate. We shall no' be gone long." Duncan edged toward the door.

"I can't allow it."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He stopped and fixed Nanny with his best no-nonsense stare. He'd used it often on pupils who didn't want to listen. It generally worked on them. On Nanny? Maybe. If he moved quickly enough. "I shall return her within two hours. After all, I am her 'governess.'" He tried not to laugh as he spoke the word governess. That would defeat the purpose of his stare.

"Well...it isn't proper." Nanny huffed and reached for her shawl. "The buggy will have to do."

"It'll be fine." Anne bounced toward the door, the ruffles of her white petticoats looking like a frothy wave breaking on the rocks "I want to ride my pony and you haven't let me do it in ever so long because no one could go with me." She turned toward Duncan. "I hate shearing season. Everyone's so busy." She was out the door, nothing more than a wisp of blue.

With a quick tilt of his head toward Nanny, Duncan strode after Anne, down the stairs and out the back door. Her muslin skirt and petticoats flounced and bounced against her white stocking-clad legs as she made her way to the stable and informed the groom to saddle her pony and a horse for her new governess.

Duncan couldn't suppress the laugh when the groom looked him up and down, then up and down again, before turning back to Anne with his mouth agape.

"'Tis my father's doing." She shrugged.

The man disappeared inside the stable and returned with the pony and a horse. Duncan boosted Anne onto hers, then pulled a large pad of paper and a pencil from beneath his coat.

"What's that?" Anne settled into the saddle and held the

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

reins loosely.

“Paper with which to learn your letters.”

A frown flickered across her face, then she broke into a big smile. “I did agree to learn some of them.” She nodded. “I shall abide by my word. MacDougalls always abide by their word.”

Duncan couldn’t repress a smile. For such a bit of a thing, she certainly was full of herself. She must lead the entire household a merry chase.

She studied his face. “Do you ever do anything but smile?”

“Why not smile? The world’s a glorious place. ’Tis better to smile than frown and ’ave the world think you sour.” There had been times when he’d had nothing to smile about, but he’d learned it didn’t matter if one smiled or frowned. Life dealt what it did, and a smile helped the bad times seem not so bad.

“I guess.” She seemed to think about what he said as she urged her pony down the path.

As they rode in silence, Duncan looked around him. They rode past the shearing and he watched two men wrestle a sheep into the pen. Another man stood with one leg up on one of the wooden slats of the fence. A wide-brimmed hat covered his face. The man put his foot down and bent over. His breeches stretched across flaring hips.

Duncan smiled again and turned in his saddle to watch. He wasn’t a man, but the mistress of the house. The breeches gave him a view her skirts had not and a pleasant view it was. When she stood, she turned enough for him to see the tendrils of hair that insisted on escaping her bun. Even in a wool work

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

shirt and breeches, she was the most comely woman he'd ever met. He hoped she would join him and her father for supper. He could truly enjoy supping with her.

"Mr. MacKinnon, what letter am I to learn first?"

Duncan turned around, sorry to be riding out of sight of Eirica. "How about 'h'?" He flipped open the pad of paper and drew a capital and small "h" on the paper. Then he wrote "horse" below the letters. He turned the pad toward Anne.

She pointed at the letters. "What is the word?"

"Horse. 'H' is for horse."

"How many letters do I have to learn?" She glanced ahead, studying the trail.

He could tell by her voice she was ready to quit. "Five for today. We shall pick the five as we ride. Then, when we return to the school room, you can draw pictures to match the words."

She looked at him for a moment. He could see she thought over his instructions, deciding whether to challenge him or not. "Will you take me up to the loch?"

"What loch?"

"There is a small one nearby. I like to ride up there, but usually whoever has to ride with me won't go so far."

Duncan heard a bargain coming. "And if I say no?"

She studied him for a moment. "'Tis the most beautiful place on the estate. You would truly like seeing it."

"Shall we be back on time? I would no' wish to worry Nanny the first time I take you out for a ride."

"Oh, we'll be back in plenty of time. We don't have to stay

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

long.” She looked at him, pleading with her eyes. “I’d still have plenty of time to draw the pictures.”

“Then we shall go and see this loch of yours.”

“Thank you.”

He hardly heard her. “You must pick four more letters to learn.”

“Loch. What letter does it start with?”

“‘L.’”

“Than that will be one.” She headed her pony down a path that cut off from the road.

Duncan drew the letter on the paper and wrote “loch.” He watched her as she rode ahead of him, her back straight.

When they arrived, Anne slid from her pony and scampered up on a rock. She smoothed down her skirt and looked out across the loch. Duncan climbed up beside her and sat.

“Is it not as pretty as I said?” She continued to stare at the crystal clear water.

An osprey soared overhead, floating on the breeze between wing beats. A ptarmigan flew up from the far side of the loch, then descended on rapidly beating wings, blessing them with a belch-like croak. Duncan laughed and pointed the birds out to Anne.

Trees and bushes surrounded the water. Trailing azalea added their bright colors to the red campion and wood sorrel that bloomed near the edge. The place was as beautiful as she had said. “I’m glad you convinced me to ride here.”

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “Do you

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

think we could have a picnic here one day soon? Before you are replaced by a proper governess.”

“That would be an excellent idea. We shall ’ave to come by buggy so Nanny can come with us. She will ne’er allow me to take you on a picnic alone.” He looked at the trout jumping in the water. “We shall ’ave to bring fishing poles. Then we could catch our supper.”

“We could have school out here. Nanny would enjoy listening to the lesson.”

“I’m sure she would.” He wouldn’t mind bringing Eirica on a picnic to this spot. Its beauty would compliment hers. He wondered what her hair would look like hanging loose about her shoulders. With the weight of so many upon her, she was more in need of a picnic than Anne.

“Mr. MacKinnon, I’m glad my father made a mistake and hired you.”

Duncan looked at the lass. He wanted to pat her head, but decided that wouldn’t be proper. She looked so small and serious as she sat upon the rock. “Why is that?”

“You’re nicer than the other governesses I’ve had.”

“You barely know me.”

“True, but the others were mean-faced and sour. They never smiled.” She hugged herself. “They wanted Nanny to leave.”

“Tis often the way of things. Governesses come and nannies leave. They go to take care of other wee ones.”

“I don’t want Nanny to leave.”

“You are becoming a fine grown-up lass. You canno’ have

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

a nanny forever.” She was quite grown-up for her seven years, both in speech and manner.

She stared into his eyes, tears rimming hers. “She’s the only one who loves me.”

“Now that’s not true. Your sister loves you.” Duncan could see the hurt in the child’s eyes. How could one who had so much feel so sad and alone?

“She never has time for me.” Anne wiped at her eyes and looked out across the loch.

“She ’as a great deal of responsibility.”

“I know.”

“I’m sure your father loves you.”

A bitter sound escaped from Anne’s throat. “Father. He doesn’t remember I’m about most times.” She pulled her knees up and hugged them. “He hired you. He couldn’t even remember he had a daughter.” Her small shoulders shook.

Duncan hugged her to him. “It’ll be all right, lass. He canno’ help what he does. His mind plays tricks upon him.”

“That’s what Eirica says.” She sniffed. “It doesn’t help. I’ve neither a father nor a mother. No one who cares but Nanny, and everyone wants her to go away.”

“’Tis that the reason you caused the other governesses to leave?”

She peeked up at him from under lowered eyelashes. “You won’t tell Eirica?”

“I shall hold your secret.” The whole family suffered from loneliness, but it radiated from Anne. Even though Eirica put up a brave front and dealt with the problems her father caused,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

he had sensed a feeling of it about her also.

His family had never suffered such. Too many of them abided in one spot. Jealousy and anger had permeated his home, but never loneliness.

He wasn't sure which was worse. He'd left his home and he'd never return. The anger had driven him away. Since then he'd had days of loneliness when he started a new position. He'd always made friends and had a student with which to spend his time and it had soon faded.

Anne was prisoner in the nursery. Eirica was prisoner of some hinted-at incident and her father's illness. They had no way to escape.

Anne slid from the rock. "We best go back. Nanny will worry."

* * *

Duncan reached for a slice of mutton from the white china platter. He smiled at Eirica at the foot of the table as he placed the meat on his plate, glad she had joined her father and him for supper. Dressed in a low cut blue silk dress, she looked even more desirable than in the trousers that had outlined her bottom so charmingly.

He reached over and passed Eirica the serving fork, surprised no servants attended the table, except the tall, blond man with wind-weathered skin standing behind Angus. A white linen cloth embroidered with tiny sprigs of forget-me-nots covered the mahogany table intended to sit more than three. Even though he sat between them, on the side of the

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

table, they were each out of comfort's reach and passing the food seemed awkward.

The walls were covered with the same pattern wallpaper as Eirica's office, only in blue. A seascape was mounted on the wall opposite him over a large buffet. A silver coffee service and a china soup tureen rested atop it.

"It was so good of you to join us." Angus, who sat at the head of the table, reached for his glass of wine. "You are again?"

"Duncan MacKinnon. You hired me to teach your daughter, Anne." Duncan took a helping of sweet peas from the bowl and handed it to Angus.

The tall man who stood behind Angus took the bowl and served the old man.

Angus picked up his spoon, took a bite of the peas and stared at Duncan. "It was so good of you to join us. We don't get much company." He turned and smiled at Eirica. "We should entertain more often, dear Colina. I so enjoy company when we dine." He set his spoon down and drained his wine glass, holding it up to be refilled. His hand shook and the man behind him took the glass, poured tea into it and placed it back in front of him.

"You raise sheep. 'Tis a good and prosperous thing to do. We must discuss your techniques in more detail after dinner. My wife doesn't much enjoy farm talk. She says 'tis boring." He smiled and raised his glass to Eirica.

Eirica leaned toward Duncan. "He forgets Mama is dead." She shrugged. "In a while he may remember."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I can discuss farming with him if it makes him happy. I did grow up on a sheep farm."

She graced him with a smile that made his heart glow. "Thank you."

What would it be like to kiss those lips now pursed in thought? Her nose was sprinkled with freckles. The tops of her breasts were as white as bleached linen and inviting. They strained against the material of her dress as she leaned toward him. He nodded at her.

"What're the two of you discussing?" A frown formed on Angus' face.

Duncan continued to stare at Eirica. "What a wonderful table your wife sets."

Angus cleared his throat. "I don't much appreciate you staring at my wife." He reached for his wine glass and took a gulp. Coughing, he slammed the glass back on the table, tea sloshing over the edge. "Where's my wine?"

"You've had all the wine you're allowed." The burly man crossed his arms.

Angus looked up. "Who are you?"

"Cory, sir."

"I want wine." Angus turned to Duncan. "Pass me the wine."

Duncan looked at Eirica.

She shook her head.

He grabbed the wine sitting near him and placed it upon the floor. "I do no' see the bottle upon the table."

Angus looked around, blinking his eyes several times.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Colina, where’s the wine?”

Eirica set her fork on her plate. “You’ve drunk all of it.” She reached for the peas.

“I have?” Angus looked at her for several seconds. “Then have the servants bring another bottle.”

“Our wine cellar seems in need of restocking.” Eirica cut off a piece of mutton and placed it in her mouth.

“How can we entertain a guest without wine?”

“I do no’ mind. Tea is fine.” Duncan looked from Angus to Eirica. She never batted an eye and continued to eat.

“I can’t eat without wine.”

“Now, Fa...husband, you must eat. You need food to keep up your strength.” Eirica took a sip of her wine.

Angus looked at his plate and picked up his fork. “Where’s my knife?”

“Let me help you,” said Cory.

For several seconds Angus sat and watched Cory cut up his meat. He looked at Eirica, then up at Cory. “Why am I not allowed a knife?”

“Because, Fa...your right hand isn’t strong enough to use one.” She smiled at him.

Angus nodded and stared at his plate before stabbing a piece of meat with his fork. He chewed for several minutes.

“Duncan is right, Colina.”

“About what?”

“What a nice table you set. The food is wonderful.”

“The credit for that goes to Cook.”

Angus smiled at his daughter and leaned over towards

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Duncan. "Isn't my wife radiant? She's expecting our first child in the spring."

Duncan looked at Eirica. Her freckles laid against a blush nearly as red as the wine. He stifled a laugh, but couldn't help grinning. "Aye, she's radiant." He wanted to take her hand and kiss her palm. Even the rough nails wouldn't deter him. Her skin would be soft. He wondered what fragrance she used in her bath.

"The child being born at the same time as the lambs will bring good luck to all." Angus raised his glass in salute to Eirica.

"Yes, that will be good fortune." Duncan raised his glass and took a small sip. The old man looked so happy, yet Duncan felt sorrow for him. He knew not where he was or when.

Eirica slid back her plate. "If you'll excuse me, I've things to tend."

"Yes, Colina. You must get your rest so the baby is healthy." Angus looked at his glass, then set it on the table. "Duncan, if you'll join me in the parlor, we can discuss sheep over brandy and a cigar."

Eirica shook her head.

Duncan rose. "Perhaps another time, Angus. I'm tired from my travels today."

"Of course. I understand." Angus tried to rise.

"Cory, please take Father upstairs to his bed." Eirica slid her chair back, walked around the table and kissed his cheek. She nodded to Cory.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Cory lifted Angus as though he weighed no more than a newborn lamb.

“Might I join you on your business?” Duncan moved around the table and stood next to Eirica.

He didn’t relish spending the rest of the evening in his own company. The part about a new post he didn’t like was the first few evenings before he met those of the house with whom he could become friends. Unlike other posts he’d had, he couldn’t even spend the evening in the company of his charge.

“I must go and check on the lambs who were separated from their mamas.” She gave him a look which said he needn’t bother, she could tend matters on her own.

“You raise them when their mamas will no’?” Spending a bit more time with her would make the evening delightful, even if they talked of nothing but sheep.

“Of course. We have nine motherless lambs. Nine sheep are too many to lose.”

He nodded. “My brother never saw the raising of orphaned lambs worth the effort.”

“Then your brother is an idiot.” She tucked the errant strands of hair behind her ear.

Duncan laughed. “Aye. You are correct there.” Her blonde hair looked like spun gold. It would feel silky against his hand, which itched to reach up and touch it.

She laughed. “You’ve no lost love for your brother.”

“None.”

“You needn’t attend me while I look in on the lambs. They’ve been fed, but I enjoy checking on them before the end

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

of an evening.”

“It has been a while since I ’ave seen lambs. I would enjoy going with you, if you would no’ mind the company.”

She drew her brows together for a moment, then nodded. “Mrs. MacAlister will think it improper for me to walk alone with you, but I see no problems. I long ago gave over worrying about what others thought of me. They’ll think what they will.” She smiled at him. “You may accompany me.”

Duncan offered her his arm. Her hand hovered in the air for several seconds before she placed it against his sleeve. He placed his free hand over hers. He’d been right. Despite the work she did, her skin was soft and warm. The warmth from her hand pushed back the loneliness that came with a new post and softened the anger living in his heart.

She had more to feel anger over than he. She’d been cheated of a life. He had lost things of importance, but at least he’d had choices.

“I apologize for my father.”

“’Tis no need. He canno’ help himself.” He opened the door for her.

“Thank you for understanding.” She lifted her skirt as they went down the back stairs.

He looked at the moon shining down on them. *What a glorious night.* It made his heart sing. For a few moments he could enjoy the company of a woman as wonderful as the night. Though he had nothing to offer her but his company, at least he could give her that. Ease her loneliness a bit before he was forced to leave.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Already he would miss this place and the two lasses he would leave behind him. He brushed back the hair curled about her cheek.

“He is a great burden.” His grandfather had been ill for a year and had been a burden on all of them. His mother had suffered the most having to take care of the elderly man. She’d never complained, but Duncan had seen the tiredness wear at her.

“He’s really not a burden. I have Cory to tend him and help.” She smiled at Duncan. “Most of the time he manages to get things confused and then I must straighten out the mistakes. As with hiring you for governess. Generally, they’re wee mistakes.”

“I am glad he made that mistake.” He couldn’t be sorry. He’d met Eirica. For that, he could never be sorry. He could dream about her when he did have a lonely night.

“Why do you say such a thing? You’ve been sorely inconvenienced.” She strolled toward the pen.

Duncan looked toward the baaing of the lambs. *Because I’ve met you and you’ve brought a brightness to my heart I have never before felt.* No, he couldn’t say that to her. “Because...because I would never have gotten to be a governess without your father’s help.”

Her laughter wrapped itself around him and he smiled.

CHAPTER 3

Pushing wayward strands of hair from her eyes, Eirica rushed through the back door. She glanced down the hall and heaved a sigh of relief. She should be able to check on Father and still make it up the stairs and into the sanctuary of her room without meeting Duncan. At this time of day, he'd be with Anne.

She had to hurry. At any moment Gilliskel and his sons were due to arrive. She had meant to come into the house before dinner, but one of the young lads helping with the sheep shearing had been injured. After tending him, she hadn't had time to change and so had eaten with the men. Now she would barely have time to bathe and dress before she had to

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

greet the Andersons.

She peeked in the parlor to see her father carrying on an animated conversation with the air. Cory lounged in the chair beside him, staring into space. She turned and rushed for the steps.

Duncan descended toward her. She rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath. She hadn't wanted him to see her in her breeches with her hair in disarray. The last three days she had been careful to always be properly dressed when she met him.

"Good afternoon." He bowed, smiling broadly. His blue eyes flashed as always with suppressed laughter, as though he found everything funny.

"Good afternoon." She brushed at the dust on her breeches, then quit. The dirt would take more than a brushing from her hand to be gone. Plus, she had a patch of mud where she had sat when the sheep had wrestled her to the ground. Mud most likely graced her face and hair as well. She couldn't stop herself from smiling.

"I see you've had a busy morning." He sauntered toward her.

"Quite." She had to get to her room before she ignited from the heat in her face.

He stopped and leaned lazily against the railing. His brown hair waved away from his face and soft curls caressed the back of his neck. "You've men in your employ to do the hard work."

"At times I must help." She liked working with the sheep

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

and could shear as well as her head shearer. That accomplishment she didn't intend to impart to Duncan. She didn't wish him to think her wholly unladylike. "How was your morning with Anne?"

"She's doing quite well. Already she knows all her letters and more than a handful of words. She 'as discovered reading can be fun." He crossed his ankles, the polished toes of his shoes standing out against the pristine hems of his breeches.

Hugging the railing as she climbed past him, she hoped he wouldn't notice the mud clinging to the toe of one of her boots. "I'm glad she has decided to learn."

"She is also learning her numbers and can add a bit." An out-of-character frown flittered across his face briefly. "She owns quite too many dolls. We can add up to thirty and still no' use all of them."

Eirica stared at him for a moment. "Really? I never realized." She could remember having two dolls when she was little. They had mostly sat on the shelf collecting dust. She'd never much enjoyed playing with them. Anne, however, seemed to always have a doll in her hands. Or two. "She seems to really love her dolls."

"No child needs that many. She canno' even give them all names and remember what they are."

"Are you saying we spoil her?"

Duncan folded his arms across his chest. "You, dear Eirica, yourself said you spoiled her."

Eirica laughed. Whenever he was about she found herself laughing and the world seemed a happier place. "I did, did I

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

not? And so she is.” She took another step. “She seems to have taken to you.”

“I ’ave no problems with Anne, but her highness keeps a wary eye upon me and frowns perpetually.”

“Who?” Eirica turned to look down at him.

“Nanny McCall.”

“She does seem a bit sour, but Anne loves her dearly.” Eirica wondered what Nanny would do if she heard Duncan address her in such a manner. She burst into giggles, picturing the look on Nanny’s face.

“You find the sour old woman funny.” He quirked his eyebrow.

“If she heard you...” Eirica grasped the railing and bent over, letting the laughter flow out of her.

Duncan opened his eyes wide. “I’d fear for my skin if she heard any of wha’ I said.”

“So you should.” Eirica wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at the smudge of mud on her fingers. “I must change. I’m expecting company.”

A loud rapping sounded at the door. It swung open and three men stood in the doorway.

Eirica stared, her mouth open, then turned to flee up the stairway. The door shouldn’t have opened. Those standing on the other side should have waited until someone came to let them in. That would have given her time to get to her room.

“Excuse me, my man,” one of the younger men said.

“Aye.” Duncan strolled down the stairs, waving his hand at Eirica to go.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"We'll need both of you to help with the luggage," the man said.

"Who might you be?" Duncan stopped in the entryway and leaned against the polished newel post of the banister.

The man glared at Duncan. "We're expected guests, but I find that none of your business."

An old man leaned on the younger man's arm. He smiled at Duncan, his face crinkling.

Eirica heaved a sigh. She saw no way around it. She'd have to greet her guests dressed as she was. The fact she more nearly resembled a farm hand than the mistress of the house would have to be put from her mind. She forced her smile to creep across her face. Her dress might prove to be an advantage. The old man surely wouldn't wish to marry a woman covered in mud. She stepped down the stairs as though dressed in her finest silk gown. "You must be the Andersons. I've been expecting you, but not for a couple of hours yet."

One man looked about forty, with dark hair streaked with gray. A scowl creased his face. He looked Eirica up and down and then up and down again. "You would be?"

"Why, I am Miss MacDougall, mistress of this house." She gave him a slight curtsy as she stepped onto the gray marble entryway. "You would be?"

His mouth dropped open. He swallowed twice. "I'm Carlton Anderson and this is my brother, Grant. My father's very tired and needs to be shown to his room."

"I'll call the servants and have him seen to." She looked at the old man. He didn't seem much stronger than her father. No

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

wonder the sons were in such a hurry to see him wed. He'd probably drop dead within a month, then her property would belong to them.

Or so they thought. They hadn't counted on Eirica MacDougall.

"You can't be the mistress of the house." Grant took his father's arm and helped him across the threshold.

"I want to see Angus." Gilliskel was stooped over, the hump on his back keeping him from straightening himself, and shuffled forward. "I'm not tired. I want to visit with my old friend."

"Come right this way." Eirica walked toward the parlor. "I'll make you comfortable and have some tea served. You must wish refreshment after your long journey." Holding her head high and peeking out of the corner of her eye, she saw Duncan standing near the doorway, a smile gracing his handsome face as always. A warmth flooded through her. She was glad he enjoyed this free-for-all.

As she entered the parlor, she pulled the rope for the housekeeper. "Cory, this is Mr. Anderson. Please see to his comfort while his sons get settled. I'm sure he and Father have a great deal to discuss and will want tea."

Cory took Gilliskel's arm and helped him to a chair.

Eirica swept from the room. "Follow me. Mrs. MacAlister will show you to your rooms." She nearly collided with the housekeeper as she walked out of the parlor. Duncan still stood by the door.

Carlton watched Eirica. Grant followed her.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“My father needs tending,” Grant said.

“He’s in good hands.” Addressing Mrs. MacAlister, she said, “Please show the Andersons to their rooms. They’ll want to freshen up before they have their tea.” She held her voice steady, hoping no one realized how much she wished to disappear. Greeting her father’s choice for her husband-to-be in muddy breeches hadn’t been part of her plan. From the looks on his sons’ faces, they didn’t approve.

Carlton stepped closer to Eirica and looked down his nose at her. “I do not take orders from a woman. Especially a woman dressed...” He looked down at her breeches as though he had stepped in something unpleasant.

Squaring her shoulders, she stared straight into his eyes. Being tall had advantages at times. “I do not like visitors who do not wait for the door to be answered.” She could feel Duncan standing behind her and she didn’t have to look to know he no longer smiled.

“We don’t stand about waiting for servants who aren’t prompt.” Carlton squared his shoulders and glared back at Eirica.

“Lowlanders are no’ known for their manners.” Duncan’s breath caressed the side of her neck as he spoke.

She glanced back at him. “I believe you’re correct. They couldn’t have waited more than a hair’s breadth before they barged into my home. I took not but one step between the knock and the opening.”

Grant smoothed his dark mustache. “My father can’t stand for long periods. We wished nothing more than to get him

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

settled.”

“At his age, I can forgive poor manners. Like my father, I’m sure he has forgotten much of what he learned.” Lifting her chin a tad more, she figured she might as well earn a bit more of their disdain while she was about it. It might work in her favor. They might not wish one so blatantly unladylike as their stepmother. “However, it seems he forgot to impart what he knew upon those he sired.”

Carlton’s face flushed red. “I...I never...”

Mrs. MacAlister stood twisting her apron. “Gentlemen, I’ll be glad to show you to your rooms.”

Carlton snapped at her. “Someone needs to fetch the bags from the carriage and settle with the driver.”

Pay the carriage driver? Eirica forced herself not to let her mouth drop open in shock. With Duncan’s hand pressed against her back, she steadied herself.

“What are the Andersons bringing to this marriage if they canno’ even afford to pay their own carriage bill?” His voice came in a loud whisper. “Even I paid my own.”

Eirica wondered the same thing, but bit her tongue. She glanced at Duncan and wondered why he had the ability to state what she thought, unless he was reading her mind.

Grant huffed and pointed toward the door. “See to the bags, man. Get that man from the parlor to help.”

“That is no’ part of my position.”

“I’ll have one of the lads bring your bags directly to your rooms,” said Mrs. MacAlister. “One of the maids has gone to get hot water so you might wash. If you’ll come this way.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She bowed her head and climbed the stairs.

As Carlton followed Mrs. MacAlister, Eirica stepped in front of him. "There's the matter of the carriage driver."

"I'm sure you'll see to it." He moved to step around Eirica.

Duncan blocked his way. "Miss MacDougall made a request."

"The MacDougalls have the largest farm in the area," Carlton snarled. "They can afford to pay the carriage driver."

"'Tis not their responsibility to pay for your travels." Crossing his arms over his chest, Duncan dared the man to go past him.

Eirica hadn't realized how powerful he looked. The muscles of his arms bulged against his shirt sleeves. Carlton would make a mistake if he thought he could go through or around him. The thought of what it would be like to have Duncan wrap his arms around her made her lightheaded and she nearly giggled at the ludicrousness of her thoughts.

She took a deep breath. None of the men would understand what she saw funny in this situation. None of them would understand she had drifted off into an imaginary world where only she and Duncan existed. He held her, taking with him all the responsibilities she had. It would be a wonderful world.

She had no time for silly, female dreams. Those had ended years ago. The day her mother died.

"I'd think they'd be so grateful my father offered for her hand, they'd willingly pay all our travel expenses." Grant stood next to his brother, trying to face Duncan down. "After all, none other will have her."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Oh, good grief,” Eirica snapped under her breath.

“I’m sure many would wish to take such a lovely lady as wife.” Duncan took a step closer to the brothers.

She hoped a brawl wasn’t about to break out in her hallway. Though Duncan didn’t seem the least bit fearful, she didn’t wish him hurt. In fact, anger gleamed in his normally jovial eyes. He looked as though he would relish a fight and probably take them both on without a thought. She couldn’t understand why he’d become her protector. Not that she minded. Having someone to help was a new and pleasant experience.

Carlton looked at Eirica. “Not with her reputation.” He shifted his nose up, as though something didn’t smell very nice. “Not the way she dresses.”

Eirica refused to cringe. So she smelled of sheep. After all, she was a sheep farmer. A man would have been excused for having been caught working, but not her. She was never excused for anything. Even things not her fault.

“If you find her reputation and appearance so repugnant, then I do no’ see why you would wish your father to wed her.” Duncan clenched his hands into fists. “Seeing your feeble father, I do no’ see why she would wish to marry him. She already has one ailing father. She does no’ need two.”

“He’s still capable of being a husband,” said Grant.

“I doubt that.”

Heat crept up Eirica’s face. She couldn’t believe they talked about the wedding bed with her standing there. “Enough. The carriage driver must be paid.” She turned. “I’m

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

going upstairs to change for tea. I certainly could use some.” Her foot in mid-air, she stopped. “You’ll join us, Duncan. Father will be most upset if you don’t.”

He inclined his head toward her. “It will be my pleasure, though I canno’ stay the whole afternoon visiting with him. Another needs my attention.”

Carlton placed his foot on the stair. “Grant, pay the driver. Father will get it from Angus later.”

Duncan didn’t move.

Pulling a coin from his pocket, Grant flipped it toward Duncan. “Pay the man.”

Duncan let the coin clatter against the marble staircase, skitter across the step, then roll down. “’Tis no’ part of my job.”

“What an insolent servant.” Carlton glared at Duncan again.

Duncan smiled, a smile that crept across his face to his eyes. “I am no’ a servant.”

“Then who are you?” Grant reached down to retrieve the coin.

Duncan laughed. “I’m the governess.”

Eirica turned and fled up stairs.

* * *

Standing by the French doors, Eirica looked into the garden. The blooming roses created bright spots of color against the green. It looked peaceful compared to the scene in the parlor. She turned to watch her father as he waved his

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

hands. He was more animated than she'd seen him in months. Maybe having Gilliskel visit wasn't all bad.

"Father, we must discuss the wedding arrangements." Grant paced back and forth across the space between Gilliskel and Angus.

Gilliskel waved a feeble hand at him. "In due time, son. In due time."

"Now." Carlton stood behind the settee where his father sat. "This must be taken care of immediately."

Yeah, thought Eirica. Before the old man met his Maker and they had no one to offer for her hand. It would severely upset their plans to acquire her property. She grimaced. They had to have holes in their heads if they really thought she would wed their father.

Angus shifted on his settee and reached for his tea cup. "Why such nonsense? Gilliskel came to visit with me." He took a sip. "Now, what were we talking about before these lads interrupted us?"

"The war with the English." Gilliskel took a sip from his cup and frowned. "Can we not have a nip of scotch with our tea?"

"Cory, get the scotch." Angus waved his hand.

Cory looked at Eirica. She nodded and held up her fingers, about a half-inch apart. Cory nodded.

"Offer the lads some also." Staring into space, Angus picked at his blanket. "Oh, yes. The battle with the English. It was glorious, wasn't it? We should ha'won." He looked toward Eirica, but he didn't seem to see her.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She smiled. Her father hadn't fought against the English. He'd set out to, but had fallen gravely ill on the way and had never actually taken up arms. Of course, that didn't matter anymore.

"Father"—Grant sat down next to Gilliskel—"we must discuss the wedding arrangements."

Gilliskel placed his hand on Grant's shoulder. "All right, lad. If you're in such a hurry to tie the knot, then we'll discuss the arrangements."

Grant rolled his eyes and groaned. "No, Father. I'm already married. Remember Mary?"

Gilliskel blinked at him. "Oh, yes, the pimply-faced one." He sighed. "Such a sour woman." A smile crossed his face. "What happened to the pretty one? The one with the pink dress."

Grant's face puckered, his mouth forming a tight, wrinkled "O." "That's Carlton's wife."

Gilliskel face lit up. "Such a sweet woman she is. Always kind to me. Makes me tarts and serves them with clotted cream." He patted Grant's hand. Confusion flashed across his face. "Then who's getting wed?"

"You are, Father," said Carlton.

Putting her hand to her mouth, Eirica stifled her laughter. *Definitely Gilliskel and Father were cut from the same cloth.*

"Your mother wouldn't be pleased if I took another wife." Gilliskel's brows drew together and he studied Grant's face. "She wouldn't take kindly to having another woman in her house."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Carlton placed his hands on Gilliskel's shoulders. "Mother died five years ago."

Gilliskel reached up and covered his son's hands with his. He stared straight forward for several minutes, tears forming in his eyes. "I miss her."

"Yes, Father." Grant patted Gilliskel's leg. "The time has come to take a new wife."

Gilliskel shook his head. "I've no desire to have another wife."

Eirica smiled. Their plans weren't going the way they wanted them. She enjoyed seeing them squirm, trying to convince their father he wanted to marry again. She coughed to cover her giggle. He probably talked to his wife the way Father talked to Mother.

Grant glared at her. She turned toward the window for a moment so she wouldn't burst into full-blown laughter. A hand rested on her shoulder and she turned. Duncan held out a cup of tea.

"Enjoying the conversation?" He raised one eyebrow.

"Immensely." She was glad Duncan had joined them for tea. "Is Anne missing you?"

"She is 'aving tea with several of her dolls and her highness. Her highness does no' think it proper for me to join them."

"Then 'tis our gain." Sipping her tea, she stared at his face over the top of her cup. *Such a handsome face.* Her heart ached every time she looked at him. For that matter, her whole body ached. No man had ever had this effect upon her. She

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

wanted to touch him, but that wouldn't be proper. Not with a room full of men arguing over whether she was to wed that old man.

She would never marry Gilliskel. If she were to wed, it would be a man like Duncan. A man who made her heart race.

"I never said your father was to marry my daughter." Angus' voice sounded angry.

Eirica turned. Her father had pushed himself up on the settee and his hands shook. Handing her cup to Duncan, she sped across the room to sit next to him. "'Tis all right, Father. Don't concern yourself over any of this."

"I didn't give our daughter's hand to our friend. She isn't old enough to wed." Angus stared into her eyes, confusion filling them.

"I know." She patted his hand. "This discussion is finished." She glared at Carlton and Grant. "If your father wishes to talk of the war or sheep, that's fine. The discussion of weddings is over." And not a moment too soon. She'd heard all she wished on the subject.

"Your father did promise your hand in marriage to our father." Grant's face turned red, his hands fisted.

"That doesn't matter. He doesn't remember." She smiled. She finally had something about which to smile. Father had forgotten what he'd done and so had Gilliskel.

"We have letters. Proof." Carlton reached into his pocket and waved the correspondence at her.

Eirica shrugged. "You can't hold an old man to what he has written, when most of the time he doesn't even know

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

where he is.”

Angus took her hand. “They cannot be serious, Colina. Our Eirica is still in the nursery.”

“They cannot be serious.” She caressed his hand and smoothed the hair from his face. “Cory, Father needs to be taken to his room and rest. He has had too much excitement for the moment.” She looked at Duncan.

He smiled at her. “Carlton and Grant might like to see the sheep and the work that goes on this time of year.”

Carlton flung himself into a wing chair. “I’d rather set the date for the wedding.”

Duncan set down his tea cup. “A ride about the estate might be a good way to spend the afternoon. You might as well see what your father is going to obtain if he weds the mistress of the house.” He arched an eyebrow.

“I hate sheep.” Grant leaned back, scowling. “They smell.”

“Then why would you want to own them?”

Duncan voiced the question she wished she’d had the nerve to ask.

Grant glanced away.

Gilliskel glared from one of his sons to the other. “Such poor manners you show. I’d enjoy a ride about the estate. I’m sure Angus would love to show us his holdings.”

“Angus is going to rest.” Eirica stood and walked over to Gilliskel. “After your long journey, you might wish to take a rest also. Cory would be happy to help you to your room after he has taken Fa...Angus up.”

Gilliskel reached out and took her hand. His skin was dry

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

and cracked. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

A rap sounded at the door. Eirica turned. “Come in.”

Mrs. MacAlister entered the room. “Miss, you’ve a visitor.” She picked at her apron.

Now who? She needed no more people about the house.

A man of about thirty stepped into the room. His shirt hung about his frame and his breeches bagged where his suspenders fastened to them. His brown hair stood out on one side. A sheepish smile creased his face.

Eirica stared, not recognizing the man. “Can I help you?” She took a step toward him.

He clutched his hat in front of him. “Are you Miss Eirica MacDougall?”

“Yes.” A shiver ran up her spine. He looked like a puppy drooling over a bone. This didn’t bode well.

He walked across the room, took her hand, and kissed the back of it. “I’m Keegan MacCallum. Your father has promised me your hand in marriage.”

CHAPTER 4

Duncan bit the inside of his cheek to stop the laughter building way down in his belly and threatening to erupt. He pressed one hand against his mouth.

Eirica tried to tug her hand away from Keegan. She stared down at it, eyes wide, her mouth twisting into a grimace. She seemed to be trying to force a smile back on her face.

Keegan dropped her hand and she held it in the air, still staring. Duncan gave her his handkerchief and she turned and wiped the back of her hand, then balled up the material. She looked at her father, then turned back to Keegan. “Who are you?”

“Why, Keegan MacCallum. Come to claim your hand.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I know that. I mean...who are you? How do you come to be here?"

"Your father, Angus MacDougall, invited me." Keegan stared at her with large, brown, puppy-dog eyes.

Duncan coughed, nearly choking, trying to disguise his laughter. Eirica kicked his shin and folded her arms across her chest. "'Tis not funny," she snapped.

"Oh, but 'tis." Duncan looked toward Angus.

He sat perched on the edge of the settee, Cory about to lift him. He waved his hand at Cory. His eyes had cleared and had a sparkle to them. "Why, daughter, that is no way to greet a guest. I invited Mr. MacCallum to be our guest at sheep shearing time."

"When, pray tell, did you meet Mr. MacCallum to offer him such an invitation?" Eirica glanced at her father before turning her gaze back on Keegan.

"A few months past." Angus folded his hands in his lap atop his blanket. "He stopped by to discuss buying our wool. Made me a fine offer."

Eirica's mouth dropped. She closed it. She blinked several times. She cleared her throat. Then she threw her hands in the air. "Where was I, Father?"

He shrugged. "I would have no idea. It was of no matter. Business is not for girls to be discussing."

She groaned and let her head fall forward, shaking it. "Father, the wool is promised to another."

"Now, daughter, 'tis not for you to say to whom I sell the wool." Angus frowned, his heavy gray eyebrows coming

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

together.

“See, I told you she was his daughter, and old enough to wed.” Grant glared at Gilliskel.

Gilliskel looked from Grant to Eirica to Angus. He shook his head and blinked his eyes. “I do not understand.” He took Carlton’s hand. “If she is his daughter...”

Carlton patted his father’s hand. “Do not worry yourself. That is why Grant and I are here. To see to what is best for you.”

Angus glared at Carlton. “Now, daughter, I’ve promised your hand to this young man. You should be thankful he would offer for you after that ‘incident.’”

Eirica tapped her foot. “Now you remember what is going on. Fine timing you have.”

* * *

Anger ran down Duncan’s spine and he shivered. His oldest brother’s face flashed in front of him, the anger shining from his eyes. Duncan clasped his hands into fists at his side and tried to get the taste of anger out of his mouth. It tasted of bile. Unpleasant and bitter.

“The mistress of the house forgets her manners towards her guests and her father,” he whispered.

Eirica glared at him, then let her hands drop to her sides. She nodded. Taking a deep breath, she smiled at Angus. “Father, ’tis time for your nap. We shall discuss this matter later. After Mr. MacCallum has been settled in his room.”

“We have nothing to discuss.” Angus raised his head.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Father, you cannot promise to one what has already been promised to another.” Eirica walked across the room and sat next to Angus.

He looked at her, then around the room. “I promised your hand to a man who was willing to take it.”

“And the wool?”

“And the wool.” Angus nodded.

“I’ve already promised the wool to another. I made a deal and signed it on paper.” She took his hand in hers.

“I gave my word. That’s as good as any contract.” Angus yanked his hand back from her.

She frowned.

“Yes, Angus, your word is as good as a contract.” Duncan let the anger flow away from him. Everyone needed to stay calm. “A contract signed by your daughter is also legal. ’Tis no’ something that can be sorted out in a moment, but must be studied.”

Keegan stood, his arms hanging at his sides. “I’ve traveled a great distance upon the assurance I would be allowed to buy the wool.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Eirica picked at a ragged fingernail.

“But...” sputtered Keegan.

“I do.” Grant rose and started pacing again. “Angus promised his daughter’s hand to our father, and we intend to hold him to that promise.”

“But...” sputtered Keegan.

“Grant is right.” Carlton crossed his arms. “My father will

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

wed Miss MacDougall within the week. Nothing else will be tolerated.”

Eirica looked down at her shoes, tiny green satin toes peeking from beneath her skirts. She shook her head, but held her silence.

“I shall not be sent away with nothing.” Keegan stomped across the room and stood in front of Grant, glaring down at him. “I will have Mistress MacDougall and the wool.”

Angus started to shake. He looked from Grant to Keegan, then to Gilliskel. Finally, he looked at Eirica. “I did promise your hand to Mr. MacCallum, but I believe I also promised your hand to my friend Gilliskel.”

Eirica nodded. “Yes, Father. I believe you did both.”

“What are we to do, daughter?” He reached out and took her hand.

“I shall straighten it out.” She smiled at him. “You must take a nap. Rest is what you need. Do not worry about a thing.”

“You’re a good daughter.” He picked at his blanket. “And the wool?”

“I’ll straighten that out also.” She patted his hand.

“Yes, you are a good daughter. I only want what is best for you.”

“I know that, Father.” She sighed and looked up at Duncan.

He wanted to take her into his arms and hold her, tell her everything would be fine, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t tell her everything would work out correctly. Nor could he hold her in

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

his arms. He was nothing but hired help. He should not even be involved in this conversation.

Her eyes beseeched him to rescue her.

Never had he been able to resist the plea of an angel in distress. Yes, definitely an angel. "Cory, take Angus and Gilliskel up to their rooms to rest. Have Mrs. MacAlister prepare a room for Mr. MacCallum. This will take a bit to sort out and will have to wait until later." Duncan moved across the room and stood next to Eirica.

Carlton glared at him. "You have no place here."

Duncan folded his arms across his chest.

Eirica looked at Cory. "Please do as Mr. MacKinnon asked." Her shoulders sagged.

Duncan wanted to put his hand on her shoulder to assure her. He shoved his hands into his breeches' pockets and picked at the lint, the only thing his pockets held.

"We will discuss the matter of the wedding now, while the old man remembers," said Carlton.

Eirica shook her head.

"No' at the moment." Duncan glared at Carlton.

Carlton pointed to Keegan. "This man will not come in and claim our father's bride."

"No man will claim her for the moment." Duncan fisted his hands in his pockets. Carlton reminded him much of his brother. A brother he had wanted to poke in the face more than once.

"I shall not have my bride and the wool taken from me." Keegan waved a fist at Grant.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eirica stood and stamped her foot. "I will not have fisticuffs in my parlor."

"You gentlemen seem to ha' forgotten your manners." Duncan smiled and took a step toward the men. "If you wish to win the lady's favor, you ha' best keep your tempers in check. I do no' see the lady wishing to deal with those who start fights." He really didn't wish to have to stop one. One of the elderly men or his angel might get injured in the fracas. 'Twould be better to stop it now before it became physical.

Keegan stared at Duncan. "Who're you to interfere in this matter?" He frowned "Are you a male relative to whom her responsibility will fall if something happens to her father?"

And inherit the farm? The question hung in the air.

Duncan smiled and shook his head.

"He's no one to be concerned about," said Grant.

"He's nothing but the governess," said Carlton.

"What?" Keegan stared at Duncan.

Duncan smiled in spite of everything.

Cory lifted Angus and took him from the room. Eirica shook her head, a smile playing at her lips.

Duncan offered her his arm. "I ha' a matter of utmost importance to discuss with you concerning your sister. If I might ha' a moment of your time in private?" He inclined his head toward the garden.

She smiled and took his arm. "That problem I can solve."

"But..." Grant sputtered.

"We have other matters to settle." Carlton rose from the settee.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Later.” Eirica waved a hand at them.

Duncan lead her into the garden away from the parlor door. Finding a bench, he brushed the dust from it and offered her a seat.

“What do you wish to discuss about Anne?” She folded her hands in her lap.

“Nothing. I thought you might wish a chance to flee.” He smiled at her. Escaped ringlets of hair framed her face. He sat on his hands to keep from brushing them back into place.

She stared straight ahead. “Thank you.”

“It will all turn out all right.”

She looked at him. “Will it?”

He nodded. He wished he could promise her it would, but he was not sure. He did not see how anyone could hold her to the word of a man obviously incapable of entering into any type of contract. “Your father is...no’ himself. He canno’ be held to his word.”

A strangled noise came from Eirica. It sounded like a laugh mixed with a cry. A cry for help. She nodded. “How...could...any...one...” She shrugged. “No...one...could...take...Father...seriously.” Tears shone at the edges of her eyes.

Duncan wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. She shook against him. Taking his wadded handkerchief from her hand, he dabbed at her eyes. “’Tis no’ so bad as that, angel lass.”

She shook her head against his shoulder. “I cannot believe Father would promise my hand to...to...to those two men.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Surely many hereabouts would gladly ask for your hand. Many better than an old fool and a scarecrow.”

She sat up and looked at him. A small giggle issued forth. “He does look a bit like a scarecrow, does he not?”

Duncan nodded, glad to see a smile grace her face. “See, all is no’ lost if you ca’ smile about it.”

“Two old fools and a scarecrow for me to contend with.” She shrugged. “What am I to do?”

“‘Tis a puzzle.” He couldn’t understand why she wasn’t already wed to one of the young men in the village. There had to be one who had land and looks appropriate to wed his angel. His angel. He wished. He had nothing to offer her, but he could hold her for a moment. “Why has no other offered for your hand? You’re a comely lass. Any would be happy to call you wife.”

She shook her head. “No.”

He looked into her eyes, green eyes that had darkened, as though hiding a secret. “You canno’ tell me you have no’ wed because of your father and sister. Your father can well afford to hire all the help they need.”

She shook her head and wrung her hands in her lap. “‘Tis part of it.”

He wanted to know her secret. The secret that had kept this lass unwed so long. “And the other part?”

“‘Tis not a tale I enjoy telling.”

“I canno’ believe anything you could do would be so bad as that.” He reached up and brushed back her hair. The soft tendrils wrapped themselves around his finger and he rubbed

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

his thumb down the strands.

“’Twas the talk of the village.” She placed her hand on his. “Still they do not let me forget.” She hiccupped. “Now, Father’s doings will once again make me the talk of the village. I shan’t be able to show my face without the snickering.”

He lifted her chin and looked straight into her face. “Old biddies who ha’ nothing better to do than gossip about others hold no import in life. Ignore their idle prattle.”

“’Tis easy for you to speak so. You’re not the one they prattle about.”

“What was the prattle?”

She turned away from him. “You have been witness to enough of the disaster of my life without learning of ‘the incident.’” She sighed. “That is why I am left with an old fool and a scarecrow to choose between.”

“You would choose either?” His heart skipped several beats. He couldn’t imagine Eirica wed to them. In fact, the thought made his stomach churn. Then again, he didn’t wish to have any other man with her.

He stared at his hand for a moment. The thoughts running through his mind were improper. He was in her hire, even though mistakenly. He should return to the classroom and Anne before he did something he would rue.

“Never.” She shook her head. “Never. I am quite happy upon the shelf and have every intention of staying there, no matter what Father thinks.”

“Then you must figure a plan to discourage them.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Until then, I shall try to avoid them.”

“Tomorrow, Anne, her highness and I are going on a picnic to the loch Anne is so fond of. Would you care to join us?”

She nodded. “That would be most pleasant.”

He looked at her upturned face. Her tongue darted out and licked her bottom lip. Her mouth formed into a small pout and he wanted to kiss it. “I must return to the classroom. Anne will be waiting for me and she can become quite impatient.”

Eirica graced him with a big smile. “Yes. She likes to have her way.”

“Whose fault is that?” He smiled back, glad to see her humor had improved.

She cocked her head to the side. “Why Father’s, of course.” She giggled again and placed her hand against his chest. “Why should he not take the blame for that as well as the rest?”

“Why no’, indeed?” Her lips beckoned to him. He leaned forward, capturing them, gently, softly. She tasted as sweet as clover honey. He kissed her harder, his tongue flicking across her lips.

She slid her arms around his neck, returning his kiss. Her lips parted, her tongue meeting his. She shivered in his arms.

“Mistress MacDougall,” called Keegan.

She broke the kiss and let her head fall on Duncan’s shoulder.

Duncan took in a ragged breath and wished to put his hands around Keegan’s throat.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Mistress MacDougall,” called Grant.

“The hounds are upon us.” Duncan stood and pulled Eirica up. “We must be away.”

Her eyes twinkled and she arched an eyebrow. “Quickly. I know a secret escape route.” She took his hand and pulled him down the path.

“Miss MacDougall, we must speak with you and settle this matter.” Carlton’s voice drifted after them.

Duncan glanced behind him, but couldn’t see the men. He followed Eirica as she made several turns and they came out near the sheep shearing pens. She turned to him and placed her hands on his shoulders. She gave him a quick kiss. “Thank you for saving me.” She turned and scurried back toward the house. Duncan put his fingers to his lips. He smiled to himself. She had graced him with a kiss.

* * *

Eirica held the shears in one hand and grasped the ram. She wondered what Duncan and Anne were doing. She should have looked into the schoolroom before she went out to the sheep pens. Not that they needed her. They seemed to get along quite nicely. Which helped her situation, but a twinge of jealousy shot through her as she thought of the time Anne spent with Duncan. She wished she was back in the classroom.

She shook her head. She needed to tend to the business at hand. The work would not do itself. She’d come outside early to avoid the Andersons and Keegan. The men hounded her constantly. She had to find a way to be shed of them.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She grabbed hold of the ram to shear him. He baaed loudly at her and wriggled. She tightened her hold and he squirmed more, breaking free. She grabbed for him and he pushed himself against her. She went off her stool and into the dirt. The ram flopped down across her, looking her soulfully in the eyes.

“Move, you stupid beast.” She shoved against him.

Humphrey, her head shearer, laughed as he picked up the animal. He extended a hand to help her. “Miss, you should give up trying to work today. That is the second beast that’s gotten the best of you. Your mind seems to be elsewhere.”

She brushed off her breeches. He was right. She couldn’t concentrate on the job she was supposed to be doing. She nodded. “Maybe I’ll go and see to the lambs.”

He smiled at her. “’Tis probably a safe place. None of the suitors seem to want to be close to the sheep.”

Eirica wrinkled her nose. “’Tis the smell. Thank goodness they have an aversion to it.”

Humphrey leaned against the fence, guffawing. “Truly. I should hate to have them down here telling me my business.”

“Not much worry there.” She laid a hand on his arm. “Thank you for all of your hard work. I would never make it through this season without you.”

He bowed his head. “’Tis my pleasure, mistress.”

She climbed over the fence and headed toward where they kept the orphaned lambs during the day. Watching them romp about would improve her humor.

“Good luck to you, miss,” Humphrey called.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She would need more than good luck. She needed a miracle. Leaning her head against her hands on the top of the fence, she watched while the lambs butted each other, then ran and jumped. They shook their heads, then butted each other again. She laughed softly. *Such innocence.* They had no idea what problems life held.

Like Anne. Anne in her classroom with Duncan learning to read and cipher. She would grow up to be a fine and proper lady, and Eirica would make sure she made a good match. Eirica would be the maiden aunt, but not the kind who sat in the parlor doing needlework. She'd still be wearing breeches and tending the sheep, but she didn't mind.

It would be better than being wed to Gilliskel or Keegan. A shudder ran through her. *Duncan. Now he was a man to stir a woman's heart.* Too bad her father hadn't promised her hand to him. Though knowing her father, anything might yet be possible.

She pushed back her hair. He would never ask for her hand. Foolish, uninvited thoughts seemed to pop into her head since Duncan arrived. Or was it caused by the onslaught of suitors her father had found? She sighed. She might as well go in the house and clean up for dinner. 'Twould show poor manners to leave Duncan and Father to handle the house guests, even if she did wish to avoid them.

She entered through the back of the house and walked toward the steps, peering around her, hoping to avoid everyone until she'd had time to get to her room and change. A few days ago she could walk through her house without

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

even thinking about how she dressed. No one had paid the slightest attention to her.

Now everyone scrutinized her every move, as well as her dress. She'd just started up the stairs when a knock sounded on the door. She paused and looked around. Where were the servants when she needed them? Lately, every time someone knocked on her door, they all disappeared. Every time she answered it, things got worse.

She glanced down at her attire and shrugged. If another suitor stood on the opposite side, at least she'd make a terrible impression and he might leave.

"Hah. Like the rest have left." She stepped down as the person rapped louder. She wasn't much of an heiress, but it seemed enough to gather a crowd. "I'm coming."

She flung the door wide. Her mouth fell open and she swallowed twice before she could speak. "Eachan MacFie, what are you doing here?" She had not seen him for years, except in passing at church or some village event. They had only exchanged pleasantries.

"Is that any way to greet a neighbor?" He started to step across the threshold.

Eirica closed the door part way and blocked his entrance. "It has been years since you paid a visit. Seven years to be exact." The last time he'd been in her home, he'd smashed her mother's vase.

"I should've been a better neighbor. You have had so much to tend and I should've offered my help." He smiled at her.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

The smile made her shiver. "I've managed quite nicely."

"With help it would've been easier."

"I think not." She stared at him and wished him away. She glanced over her shoulder, hoping Duncan might be descending the stairs behind her. He would still be in the school room at this hour. "What do you want, Eachan?"

"I have come to do the proper thing." His smile grew.

"What might that be?" She sucked in her breath and held it. She would regret his answer.

"I've come to propose and, of course, properly ask your father for your hand in marriage." He took a step forward.

Eirica slammed the door.

CHAPTER 5

The latch rattled behind Eirica as she leaned against the door. Eachan pounded. Mrs. MacAlister hurried down the hallway.

“Is there a problem, Miss Eirica?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Do you wish me to answer the door?”

“No.” She didn’t want to let Eachan into the house. She didn’t know how she would keep him from entering. The knocking increased.

“Eirica, open the door,” Eachan shouted.

Oh, good gracious, he’ll bring everyone out to see what the ruckus is. She opened the door. “Go away, Eachan. You

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

have no business here.”

“You nearly took off my nose.”

She smiled. She should have waited a second more. “Then you should not be putting it where ’tis not wanted.”

“Eirica, you have no reason to be rude. We meant something to each other at one time.” He wedged his foot in the door.

She stared at him. “A long time ago I thought you meant something to me.” She could see the crystal of her mother’s vase spray away from the fireplace. “That died a long while back and cannot be restored. Leave my house.”

“Eirica, I cannot believe you are acting this way.” He stared at her, looking up and down her clothes. “I cannot believe you are dressed so.”

She smiled broader. “I dress as I please. As a spinster, I’ve no one to impress.”

“That isn’t what I hear.” He pushed against the door.

Eirica pushed. “What have you heard?”

“That your father has found two suitors for you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What business is that of yours?”

“You were promised to me at one time.”

“You wed another. She has been in her grave but barely six months. ’Tis unseemly to be thinking of marriage again so soon.” Her skin crawled. If forced into marriage, she’d rather it be with Gilliskel. At least he wouldn’t remember she was his wife.

“I would have waited, but your father has made it so I cannot.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"You need feel no obligation." She pushed harder against the door. "Go home, Eachan. You aren't welcome here."

"How can you say that? 'Tis only right that if you wed, you wed me. After all, I am from the village. We've known each other all our lives."

"If I were to marry, it would not be you. 'Tis you who put me on the shelf."

"I didn't mean for that to happen. I only wished to speed up our marriage." He wrapped his fingers around the edge of the door.

"You what?" She blinked, remembering the day of the picnic when the wheel on the carriage had broken. "You broke the wheel on purpose." She wanted to slam the door on his hand.

"No. That's not what I meant." His face colored and he looked away from her.

"Lying does not become you, Eachan. I had to withstand the sneers of those who had been friends because of what you did. Why would I now allow you into my house?"

"So I can right the wrong I did you."

"Convenient of your wife to fall down the stairs." She tried to grab the words back as they came out of her mouth. She didn't mean to be cruel. He just brought the worse out in her. All these years she had been snubbed because he had purposely ruined her reputation to force her into marriage.

"Eirica, sniping is not fitting of you." Eachan frowned as he looked into her face.

"You're right and I offer my apology. Now, Eachan, go

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

home.”

“I shall speak with your father. I have first right to your hand.”

“Father’s mind is not sound. You can speak with him, but that does not mean you will get anything of sense from him. Already he has promised my hand to two others. I am sure he’ll be glad to include you, but it doesn’t mean he will honor his deal. He is way past making deals that stand up under scrutiny.” She watched him. She did not want him in her home. At least she wouldn’t have to fix him a room. He could go home.

“I shall talk with him, Eirica. He’ll see reason. He is still your father and you must abide by what he dictates.” He pushed against the door again.

She laughed and stood back from the door. “I am in charge in this household.”

Eachan sprawled across the threshold, landing face first on the marble. “But...”

Eirica stepped over him. “The rest are probably in the parlor with Father. You may speak with him if you wish. You might inform him you ruined his oldest daughter’s reputation on purpose. I’m sure that will please him greatly.”

She started up the stairs. A long soak in the tub would surely help her mood. Either that, or drowning herself. At least Duncan would be at dinner. Eachan would not like Duncan.

Duncan. How would he react to Eachan? Especially when he found out he was the one involved in the “incident.” Dinner would be most interesting. More so since Gilliskel had arrived

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

and Father had someone as befuddled as himself with whom to converse. "Mrs. MacAlister, set another place for dinner. Mr. MacFie will be joining us, I am sure."

* * *

Eirica pushed away from the table. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to attend to." She rose and headed toward the back door. She should change into her work clothes, but she couldn't concentrate. All she wanted was to be alone to think.

Duncan rose. "I must attend to Anne." He bowed his head and walked toward the stairs.

Keegan jumped up, upsetting his chair. "'Tis too nice a day to be working." Without picking up his chair, he rushed to her side. "I believe a walk would be nice. You could show me the gardens." He took her right hand and tucked it around his arm.

Grant and Carlton stepped up on her left. Grant took her arm. "We shall join you."

Eirica stopped and looked at Grant. "Maybe our fathers would like to sit in the garden for a bit."

"That would be a wonderful idea." Carlton stepped in front of her. "It will give you a chance to better know my father."

She already knew Gilliskel as well as she cared. He, like her father, faded in and out of reality, living in a world of his own making, but she liked him. He was a kindly old man. "It would give them a chance for some air while they talk."

Grant patted her arm. "We want you to talk with him, not your father. You'll find he will make you a wonderful

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

husband.”

Eirica shivered at the thought.

Keegan gripped her arm tighter. “She is to become my wife.” He glared at the Anderson brothers.

“She was—” Granted glared back at Keegan.

“Enough.” Eirica yanked her arms from both men and stepped away from them. “I shan’t sit and listen to this constant bickering.” She should go upstairs and put on her breeches and go back to work. Wrestling sheep was far less annoying than listening to the lot of them.

“Eirica is correct.” Eachan stepped between Grant and Keegan. “All this talk of whom she will wed is tiresome. After all, she will wed me.”

She grimaced. “I haven’t said I would marry any of you.” She crossed her arms over her chest so she wouldn’t lash out at Eachan. “If all any of you want to speak about is marriage, then I shall leave you to your own company.”

Keegan laid his hand on her arm. “I’m sorry if I’ve offend you, Miss Eirica. We’ve shown poor manners in all of this.”

“Yes, you have.” If stomping her foot would have helped the situation, she would have, but she knew they’d see it as a temper tantrum and a need for her to choose a husband to guide her. Somehow, she’d feel better if she could. Frustration welled up in her and she had no way to release it.

Carlton studied her face for a moment. “You’re correct. We have been boorish.”

“If she would commit to what her father promised, then the discussions would stop.” Grant laid a hand on her other

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

shoulder.

Eachan reached out to take her hands and she stepped backwards. "All of this is..."

She stomped out the door. Maybe if she ran, she could escape them.

"Help Father to the garden," Carlton called.

She heard footsteps behind her, but she didn't turn. All of them followed her. She sat in a chair placed away from the rest of the benches and chairs.

Keegan dragged a chair close to her and sat so his knee bumped hers. "'Tis a lovely garden."

Eirica studied his face for a moment. "My mother loved flowers and spent a great deal of time here. She had one of the men who helped her plant. The roses were her favorites." The bushes had bloomed and a wide variety of colors filled the garden.

"It shows." Keegan patted her hand. "You should have time to tend flowers and have tea with friends. You shouldn't have to run a farm. 'Tis not work for a woman."

She'd groan, but it wouldn't do any good. No one wanted to understand she enjoyed running the farm. Tending flowers and having tea weren't things she enjoyed. She never knew what to say to the women when they came to visit, and since her mother had died and "the incident," they came rarely. "I enjoy working with the sheep."

"They smell so bad." Carlton dragged a bench across the garden so he and Grant could sit near her.

"Then why would you wish your father to own a sheep

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

farm?" Eirica forced herself to smile. She knew the answer, but she wanted them to admit it. Not that she expected them to do so.

"He wishes to do so and he wishes to take care of his friend's daughter." Carlton patted her other arm.

She wondered if she could get Humphrey to nail the benches in place so they couldn't be moved and the suitors couldn't crowd her. She looked past the men. Gilliskel and her father chatted where they sat across the garden from the rest. Her father looked happy. For that, she would give thanks. If only she didn't have to put up with the rest of them.

"Eirica." Keegan took her hand in his.

She looked at him.

"Woolgathering?" He smiled at her.

Duncan was right. He did resemble a scarecrow, and he seemed a nice enough man. She wasn't interested. The look on his face told her he was besotted with her. She didn't wish to cause him pain, but she wouldn't wed him. "Thinking how happy my father has been since Gilliskel has come to visit with him. He needed someone of his own age with whom to talk."

Keegan glanced over his shoulder. "'Tis pleasant for him." He squeezed her hand. "It must be pleasant for you to see him happy."

"Yes, it is." She wanted her father's last days to be happy ones.

"'Twill make him even happier to see you settled with a husband who can care for you." Keegan moved her hand to his

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

knee.

She tried to pull her hand free, but he gripped it fiercely.

“Our father is just the man.” Carlton squeezed her other hand. “He not only can converse with Angus, but he can care for Miss Eirica.” He flashed her a big smile.

“He seems to be more interested in talking with Angus than courting Miss Eirica.” A frown creased Keegan’s face. “I, on the other hand, understand about sheep farming and the selling of wool.”

Eachan stood behind Keegan. “What experience do you have in sheep farming?”

He looked around, but no more room existed to put another chair next to Eirica. She wanted to laugh. He’d been slow and lost out on sitting next to her. The day wasn’t all bad.

“I’ve bought and sold wool for several years now.” Keegan glowered at Eachan. “I know the market and what needs to be done.”

“Do you know about birthing lambs or shearing sheep?” Eachan looked down his nose at the man.

“I know enough to take care of Eirica.” Keegan rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand. “Angus promised me her hand, and I shall have it.”

“I have a sheep farm and am a neighbor.” Eachan straightened up as tall as he could. “She will become my wife.”

Carlton chortled. “You’re an opportunist. You heard Angus had promised her hand to another and suddenly appeared at her door.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Why shouldn’t I? I’ve known Eirica most of her life.” Eachan balled his hands into fists.

Keegan patted the back of her hand. “Don’t fret, dear. I shan’t allow this man to wed you.”

Eirica could feel a scream building up. “I’m not worried.” She needed to find a way to escape them soon.

Keegan reached over and picked a pink rose from the nearest bush. “A beautiful flower for a beautiful woman.”

“You give her a flower that belongs to her.” Eachan laughed. “You’ll have to do better than that to woo her heart.”

“What have you done to woo her?” Keegan shifted so he could look into Eachan’s face.

“I haven’t been in a position to woo her until now.” A crease formed across his forehead.

Eirica laughed. “That could be because you were wed to another.”

“Only because you refused to wed me seven years ago.” His mouth turned down. Anger flashed from his eyes.

She shrugged. “I didn’t wish to wed you then and I don’t wish to wed you now.”

“Your father will see it differently.” Eachan glanced back at the two old men, heads together in a conspiratorial manner.

Keegan released Eirica’s hand and stood, knocking his chair into Eachan. “You have no right to be here. You ruined her reputation and now that your wife is dead, you come to make amends. ’Tis too late.”

“’Tis never too late. Eirica refused to wed before, but now her father will insist upon it. He’ll see the wisdom of choosing

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

me for her husband.” Eachan leaned closer to Keegan.

“I was promised her hand and I shall have it.” Keegan waved his fist in the air.

“Oh, good heavens.” Eirica yanked her hand from Carlton’s grasp. “I’ve heard all of this before, over and over, and I tire of it.”

Keegan sat and reached for her hand. “I apologize. Shall we speak of having a party to announce our upcoming wedding?” He smiled.

She hid her hands beneath her skirts. “It would cause too much excitement for Father to have any kind of a party.”

“He can rest in his room.” Keegan placed his hands on his knees.

“She’ll marry our father.” Grant stood and glared down at Keegan.

Keegan looked up at him, a smile pasted on his face. “She’s tired of the arguing, so we shan’t discuss it any longer.”

A hand touched Eirica’s shoulder and she jumped. “I am sorry, but I need to speak with you.” Duncan’s voice wrapped itself around her.

She smiled. She’d thought him with Anne. She tried to stand, but Keegan and the Anderson brothers were in the way.

“Miss Eirica is busy.” Keegan frowned. “You’ll have to wait until we’ve finished our visit. I’m sure whatever you want to discuss with her can’t be of any great import.”

“She doesn’t answer to the hired help.” Eachan tapped one foot against the grass.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eirica looked at Duncan. "What do you need?" If she ignored the rest, maybe they'd disappear. She could only hope.

"'Tis a problem with Anne." He gave her a smile and left his hand resting on her shoulder.

"Oh." She motioned for the others to back away. "Is it serious?" She frowned. What could be wrong with Anne?

"The child is not her concern." Keegan refused to rise.

Eirica stood and Duncan pulled her chair back. "Of course she's my concern." She walked around the chair and towards the house.

Duncan took her arm and steered her down the path. "We shall have more privacy this way," he whispered in her ear.

"What's wrong with Anne?" Eirica grabbed his arm.

Speaking into her ear, he said, "Naught, but was the only excuse I could think of to whisk you away from your tormentors."

Her shoulders drooped. "You scared me."

"For that, I am sorry." He flashed her a bright smile and laughed. "You seemed to be losing the battle and in eminent need of rescue."

She leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked down the path. She liked the sound of his laugh. It warmed her to the very depth of her soul and made her believe life was not so difficult. She could imagine nothing more wonderful than to have him always about, laughing, brightening her day.

"Eirica," Grant hollered.

"Eirica, come back this instant," called Carlton. "We have

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

things to discuss.”

Eirica continued along the path with Duncan.

“Eirica,” called Grant, “we’re going into town this afternoon to arrange your wedding to our father. We plan to talk to the minister. You should come with us.”

Duncan placed his hand over hers on his arm. “Would you care to take the air in another spot?”

She slipped her hand onto his arm. “That sounds most lovely.” She giggled. “If they want a carriage, they’ll have to find their own way to the stable.”

“They will convince the minister you are to wed their father.” A frown flashed across his face.

“They will never convince me to show up at the church. I’m not sure they’ll convince Gilliskel to show up either. He seems in no mood to marry.” She leaned her head briefly against his arm. He was so strong and always about when she needed help. Her savior. “Have you seen the garden on the far side of the house? I have some quite interesting flowers over there.”

“I have no’ had the pleasure.”

“Most do not see it. It’s hidden behind a row of shrubs.” She sighed. “My mother loved that garden. There’s a bench where she could sit and no one could see her. She would read me stories or sew while I played.”

“I’d very much like to see a place that belonged to your mother. She must ha’ been a very special woman.” Duncan patted her hand on his arm.

“She was. She loved Father very much, though she cared

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

nothing about the sheep. She was a grand lady, but never scolded me when I put on my breeches and went with Father to work the sheep. I liked working with him far better than trying to sew or play the pianoforte. I never could master either talent. Mother didn't care. She loved me anyway."

"You must miss her very much."

Eirica blinked back a tear. "Mother always knew what to do. How to handle Father. Even in his saner days he could do some crazy things. Mother tempered him. When she died, he cried for two weeks. He could hardly look at Anne." She wiped at her eyes. "I would never tell this to Anne. It was months before he would acknowledge her."

"Grief affects people in different ways."

"Father insisted Mother's garden be kept up and never changed. The gardener tends to it." She pulled him through the opening in the hedge. "Is it not beautiful?"

"'Tis one of the loveliest gardens I ha' ever seen."

Eirica glanced at him to find him staring at her. She wanted to brush her fingers across the side of his face. Her stomach tightened. She let the warmth from his fingertips spread across her.

"You are not even looking at the garden." She looked away at the pink stars of moss campion, blue forget-me-nots and trailing azaleas. The flowers her mother had loved so well.

Duncan laughed. "The garden is no' the only thing of beauty to gaze upon."

"Such nonsense." She turned back to look at him. Did he think her beautiful? It had been so long since a man had

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

looked at her for her. Even Eachan had only seen how many sheep she owned. She could have resembled a mud fence and he still would have courted her.

“’Tis no’ nonsense.”

Heat flooded her face and she looked away from him. She wasn’t coy. Never had been. Her mother had tried to teach her a time or two how to be, but with little success. Suddenly she felt like a sixteen-year-old again being courted for the first time. By a man more handsome than words could describe and as poor as a church mouse. Not that she cared, but he would.

“Come, sit with me for a few minutes before you must return to the school room.” She tugged on his hand and led him to a bench.

He brushed the dust from it with his handkerchief before she sat.

“I always seem to be needing to launder your handkerchiefs.” She folded her hands in her lap.

“’Tis a good thing I carry one.”

“Especially since I never seem to have one of my own.” She smiled. “I have a drawer full of them. All clean and pressed. Some of them are monogrammed by my mother. An intricate ‘E’ in the corner.” She shrugged. “I never seem to remember to grab one as I leave my room and tuck it in my sleeve.”

“A gentleman should always ha’ one available for a lady.” His leg brushed against hers as he sat next to her. “Your mother did a wonderful job on this garden.”

“She loved flowers. She loved all growing things. Anne

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

would have been so different if Mother had lived to raise her. I feel sorrow that Anne never got to know Mother. Or Father.” Erica looked at the carefully tended rose bushes that were interspersed with white mountain saxifrages, creamy white and purple gentians and yellow mouse-ears.

“Anne is growing into a fine young lady anyway. Family canno’ always be there to tend to one.”

She heard bitterness in his voice. She took his hand. “You sound as though you have had some experience with such.”

“’Tis no’ worth speaking of.” He squeezed her hand.

For several moments she sat in silence next to him. Curiosity crept into her mind, but she kept her mouth quiet. He seemed hesitant about speaking of his family and she had no right to pry. She wanted to offer him comfort as he offered it to her.

She stroked the side of his face. Her fingertips tingled. She put her fingers to her lips, remembering his kiss. Pressing her fingers against his mouth, she licked her bottom lip. She wanted to kiss him again.

That would be so forward.

She didn’t care. She was a spinster. A spinster who ran a sheep farm.

A spinster she would stay.

He kissed her fingers.

She leaned forward. She gazed at his mouth, covered partially by her fingers. Letting her hand fall away, she pressed her lips against his. His arm went around her and he pressed her against him. His lips molded to hers, his tongue

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

flicking across hers.

She sighed and leaned into him.

CHAPTER 6

Eirica peeked out of her bedroom and down the hall. She breathed a sigh of relief at finding it empty. She had a few moments before she had to be downstairs for supper. Maybe she could creep to her study and avoid her house guests. That would be enjoyable for a change.

As she reached the top of the stairs, she heard a door open and whirled to look. Duncan came into the hall. She smiled. Seeing him was even more of a treat. “Good evening.”

He gave her a big smile and nodded. “A fine evening it is.”

“At the moment.” She walked toward him.

“The others are not about.”

“I was thinking of hiding in my study until such time as I

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

must appear at the supper table.” She tilted her head to the side and smiled.

He leaned his head back and laughed. “Do you think that’ll help?”

“It will give me a few moments of peace.” She reached up and straightened his black tie. “Would you care to join me?”

A noise came from the bottom of the stairs. She turned and saw Keegan in the vestibule. She groaned.

Duncan took her arm and pulled her toward the stairs leading to the third floor. “Quickly.”

She giggled and allowed herself to be pulled along. She stepped up two steps and turned to look at Duncan standing on the step below her. She could look him nearly straight in the eye. “Thank you, kind sir, for rescuing me.” She gave him an exaggerated curtsy.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Duncan put his finger to her lips and pulled her against the wall. They stood silently. A door in the hallway below closed.

Eirica let out a small gasp. “We are unfound.”

“No’ a very private hiding place, but adequate for the moment.” He ran his thumb across her cheek. “Is that a new frock you’re wearing?”

“Why, yes.” She did a swirl, careful not to fall from the step. The pink silk swirled about her legs. The puffed sleeves gathered at her wrists with a touch of lace. Her locket lay on the white lace inset that veed down to her waist.

“You look quite fetching.”

She put her fingers to her lips and tilted her head. Then she

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

blew him a kiss and winked.

He laughed. "Are you flirting with me, Eirica MacDougall?"

She put her hand to her chest and raised her eyebrows. "Me, sir? Heavens, no. That would be most improper." She burst into giggles. "Besides, I do believe I have forgotten my fan to do so properly."

"You could return to your room and retrieve it."

She leaned forward. "Then I'd have to admit I do not own a fan. I have one of my mother's tucked within a drawer, but it would not go with this frock. 'Tis black lacquered with pearls." She laid her hand on his shoulder. "Also, I have not the faintest idea of what to do with it, except to create a breeze to keep the heat away."

He took her hand and pressed her wrist to his lips. "You skipped those lessons, along with the needlepoint."

She shrugged. "I saw no use in either."

"That's what is so special about you, Eirica."

"What is that?" He smelled of soap and the outdoors. She didn't know when he could have been out, unless he had taken Anne about with him. He always smelled wonderful.

"You have no pretensions. You say what you mean, and let the world know how you feel."

"Oft times that is not appreciated." She leaned closer. His lips were so close she could feel his breath upon her face.

"Because people try to hide their true wishes." He touched her cheek, then kissed her.

She held him by the shoulders, exploring his lips with her

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

tongue. He tasted of sweet grass and berries. She sighed, her mouth pressed against his. Kissing him made her whole body tingle. She would never get enough of it.

A door in the hallway opened and he broke the kiss, pressing her back against the wall. She put her fingers to her lips, still warm from his. She listened to the footfalls until they disappeared at the bottom of the steps.

She looked into his eyes. Eyes that gleamed, that asked for another kiss. She leaned forward and gave him one.

* * *

“We cannot wait any longer for them to return.” Eirica picked up the bell from the dining room table and rang it.

“I am hungry,” whined Angus.

“I know, Father.” She looked at the two old men. Both of them looked unhappy. “For all we know, Grant and Carlton stayed in the village for supper.”

“I hope we have a nice rack of lamb this evening. I am growing tired of mutton.” Angus smiled at Eirica.

Eirica grimaced. She’d ordered mutton and bread pudding. Usually her father’s favorites. Tomorrow she’d make sure they had a nice rack of lamb. Of course, by tomorrow he’d probably want mutton.

Gilliskel toyed with his fork. “I wish they’d return.”

“I am sure they are fine, Mr. Anderson.” Eirica took the platter of mutton from Duncan.

“I can’t say I miss their company.” Keegan placed a large piece of meat on his plate. “Tis so much more pleasant

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

without them.”

Eirica had to agree with him. It would even be more pleasant without him. She reached for her glass. Gilliskel put no food on his plate and she motioned to Cory to help him. “Mr. Anderson, you must eat.”

He let his hands fall into his lap.

“I can’t believe they would go to talk with the minister without you.” Keegan reached for his wine glass and drained it. “They show such presumption. Obviously Mr. Anderson has no desire to wed you and they should abide by his wishes.” Keegan smiled at Eirica. “Besides, tomorrow I plan to take you to see the minister.”

Eirica groaned. Soon the whole town would be buzzing about her matrimonial problems. “I have no—”

“I shall treat you to dinner after we arrange our upcoming nuptials.”

“What upcoming wedding?” Eachan strode into the room, a glare creasing his face.

“Miss Eirica’s and mine.” Keegan raised his glass in salute.

“I think not.” Eachan pulled out a chair and sat next to Gilliskel. “I spoke with the minister this morning and have arranged for Eirica to wed me on Sunday next.”

“You what?” Eirica reached for her wine. She’d completely lost control. She would never be able to show her face in church again. It had taken her years to get the women to accept her and allow her to participate in the ladies’ group. They finally decided she had been very young and had come

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

under Eachan's spell. He was a dashing handsome man, or so they told her. They also told her she should have married him. Her mother would have wanted it.

Now it'll start once more. She wouldn't mind so much for herself, but she had Anne to protect. Anne would want to wed, and Eirica couldn't let her own reputation hurt her sister's chances.

Whatever had she done to be in such a quandary? She didn't care about being the polite and perfect hostess. She only wanted to flail against the injustice of the situation, but she couldn't. "You had best tell the minister you spoke out of turn, Eachan."

He reached for the bottle of wine. "Once you think about it, you'll agree with me that it's for the best."

She took a deep breath. Duncan's hand was wrapped around his wine glass. His knuckles turned white and she feared the glass would shatter. She reached beneath the table and patted his knee. He looked at her and she gave him a half-mile. Squaring her shoulders, she looked back at the two men. "I cannot marry anyone. I have responsibilities here."

"You will have fewer responsibilities with a husband." Eachan reached across the table and picked up the platter holding the mutton. "You'll soon be my wife and will abide by what I say."

"Eachan MacFie, you will mind your manners at my table." Angus pushed himself to a standing position. "My daughter won't be bullied by you or anyone else."

"Now, Angus, I meant no disrespect. I was only discussing

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

our coming marriage plans.”

Angus blinked at Eachan as he sank back into his chair. “You are wedding my daughter? She refused you and you wed another.”

“That was years ago.” Eachan cut a piece from his meat. “I am a widower and wish to wed your daughter.”

“If you had wished such, you should’ve waited for her. After all, you caused her shame.” Angus picked up his wine glass and took a sip.

Eirica let her fork fall onto her plate. Her appetite had fled when Eachan had entered the room. She turned to him. “Why are you so rude as to enter my dining room late for supper? A supper, I might mention, to which you were not invited.”

He inclined his head toward her. “I apologize. I had business to attend. It took me longer than I had thought.” He glanced around him.

Keegan set his knife down. “If you were not invited, you should leave.”

“And leave her to you.” Eachan shook his head.

“I wish all of you would leave.” Eirica chewed on her bottom lip. She wanted her quiet life back. She wanted all of her guests gone.

“Now, Miss Eirica, you’re becoming overwrought. You will feel better once we’ve spoken with the pastor.” Keegan reached out to pat her shoulder.

She pulled away from him.

“Everyone should abide by Miss MacDougall’s wishes.” Duncan took her hand beneath the table and squeezed. “She

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

did no' wish the Andersons to talk with the minister, nor Eachan, nor you." He glared at Keegan. "This is her house and her wishes are the only ones that matter."

Eachan pointed his knife at Duncan. "You're but hired help and have no say in this matter. Neither does Eirica. 'Tis still her father's house, and she must abide by what he dictates."

"He dictates nothing. Neither does he remember anything of import." Duncan stared at Eachan. Eachan's gaze wavered and he looked away from him.

Keegan slammed his hand on the table. "Mr. MacDougall invited me here and offered me his daughter. I shan't leave until she has wed me."

"She has given her answer." Duncan turned his glare on Keegan. "She does no' wish to wed. She wants you gone."

"Who will enforce such?" Eachan rose from his chair.

Duncan released Eirica's hand and rose, leaning across the table. "I shall."

"You have no authority." Keegan sank down in his chair.

Duncan glanced at him then back at Eachan. "I have the authority given me by the mistress of the house."

"'Tis the master of the house to whom I shall listen." Eachan placed both hands flat on the table.

"Then you listen to a fool, and only a fool would listen to another fool." Duncan clenched his hands into fists.

"You dare call me a fool." Eachan's face blanched. He leaned closer to Duncan.

"Enough." Eirica stood, her chair crashing behind her. "I

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

shan't abide a fight in my dining room. Tomorrow, changes will be made. Eachan, you will not show up without an invitation. Mr. MacCallum, you will find an abode elsewhere."

Duncan sat, a glare on his face. She wanted to touch his cheek and thank him for coming to her aid.

"What of the Andersons?" Keegan reached for the wine.

"They aren't here. I shall deal with them later." She crossed her arms. Her anger made her shake.

"What of this man?" Eachan pointed to Duncan.

"He stays. He is my sister's—"

"Governess." Eachan laughed. "'Tis not the job for a man."

Eirica waved her hand in the air. "So?" Even having Eachan in the same room sent fearsome trembles through her. She wanted to feel Duncan's arms around her to make the trembling stop.

"As long as that man abides under your roof, I will be here." The anger she had seen the night Eachan had smashed her mother's vase shone from his eyes.

Duncan gripped the edge of the table.

A shiver ran down Eirica's spine. Eachan was capable of anything. She wouldn't let him change her mind. She stared back at him. "This is my household, and I will run it as I see fit."

"I want my sons to return." Gilliskel's voice broke over them in a near sob. "Something terrible has happened to them."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eirica looked at him. He wrung his napkin in his gnarled hands. Tears filled his eyes. She plopped back into her chair. If Carlton and Grant were here, she'd upbraid them for causing their father such worry. "Mr. Anderson, it'll be fine. I'm certain they were just detained."

Duncan took her hand beneath the table.

Gilliskel looked at her with eyes wide. "Eirica, are you sure?"

Angus reached out and patted Gilliskel's withered hand. "If my daughter says it is so, it is so. She is very bright and efficient." He nodded.

"I wish they'd return." He continued to worry his napkin. "What shall I do without them?"

"We shan't let anything happen to you." Eirica smiled at the old man. He had become a dear friend to her father and brought him joy and companionship. For that, she would care for him.

Also, he'd stopped the men from coming to blows at the table. Every gaze was now on Gilliskel.

"Your sons are quite capable of caring for themselves," said Duncan. "You need no' worry about them. They're probably at the local pub."

Gilliskel blinked at Duncan. "You are so kind, sir. I am sure you're correct."

"Of course he is." Eirica pushed away her plate.

"With any luck they've fallen from the carriage in a drunken stupor and broken their necks," muttered Keegan as he reached for the wine bottle to fill his glass again.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Anything could happen along the road.” Eachan took the bottle from Keegan.

The front door slammed. Eirica jumped.

“Where is everyone?” bellowed Carlton.

Grant flung open the dining room door. It banged against the wall. “They didn’t even wait supper for us.”

“We did not...” Eirica gaped. “Whatever happened?”

Grant’s coat was missing a sleeve and had a rent down the front. Carlton had dried blood on his cheek and his trousers were torn. Neither man had a hat. Carlton’s hair was matted on the side of his head. Grant clutched his left arm across his chest.

“Whiskey,” ordered Carlton. “I need whiskey.”

Grant reached for the bottle of wine, glanced around for a glass, then put the bottle to his lips and drank deeply. Swaying, he moved around the table and fell into the chair next to Angus.

“You’re finally home.” Gilliskel stared from one son to the other. “You shouldn’t stay out so late.” He continued to worry the napkin in his hand.

“Old man, we did not stay out late.” Carlton collapsed in the chair next to his brother. “Where the hell is the whiskey?”

“You won’t speak so in front of my daughter.” Angus banged his fist on the table.

Carlton glanced at Angus, then down at Eirica. “Call the maid and have her bring me whiskey.” His hand shook as he reached for the bottle of wine Grant held.

Eirica rang the bell and the maid appeared. She sent her for

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

whiskey and another bottle of wine. "Did you have a carriage accident?"

"Carriage accident!" Carlton shook his head. "You did not inform us it was dangerous to travel the roads hereabouts."

"'Tis not. The road is not in disrepair." Eirica was glad they did not seem terribly injured. Maybe Duncan was correct. They had likely stopped at the local pub and driven the carriage off the road due to their intoxication.

"It wasn't the road." Carlton took a swig from the wine bottle. "We were set upon by highwaymen."

Eirica knocked her wineglass over as she reached for it. "What? How can this be possible?" She looked to Eachan. *Highwaymen?* "I've heard nothing of any other incidents hereabouts. Have you?"

Eachan sipped his wine. "This is the first I've heard of anything of the like."

Eirica looked back at Carlton and Grant. "Are you injured greatly?"

"We shall live." Carlton banged his hand on the table. "They took our money."

"I was nearly killed." Grant grabbed the decanter of whiskey from the maid. He poured himself a wineglass full and took a deep drink.

"You. All they did to you was throw you to the ground." Carlton grabbed the decanter from his brother.

"And injured my arm. My coat and shirt are ruined." Grant held his glass in his right hand. The glass shook.

"They held a knife against my throat."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"They did not." Grant glared at his brother. "They brandished it."

"They tried to stab me with it." Carlton put his hand to his head.

"The blood came from your running toward the bushes. If you hadn't tripped over that log and cracked your head..."

"Oh, be quiet. You're no more injured than I." Carlton took a swig of whiskey.

"My arm is broken sure," Grant whined.

Eirica rang the bell again. She stifled a smile. The Anderson brothers weren't seriously injured. Their fear had done more than the highwaymen. "I shall send one of the men for the surgeon and have the maid bring each of you a bath. You'll surely feel better after you've cleaned up."

"Thank you." Grant smiled at her. "We did settle matters with the minister."

"That's something to be discussed later, after your wounds have been attended." She smiled at them. She wasn't about to let that discussion begin again.

"My boys are fine?" Gilliskel looked from his sons to Eirica.

"Yes, Mr. Anderson, your sons are fine. They had a bit of a mishap, but nothing more." Eirica smiled, rose and went to Gilliskel. She leaned over him and patted his hand. "You must eat your supper."

"Sons can be such a worry." Gilliskel picked up his fork.

"Daughters can be worrisome also." Angus smiled at Eirica. "But a fine daughter you are."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“See? She’s partial to our father. She will make him a fine wife.” Carlton stood and weaved toward the door.

Eirica glared at him. “I shall have one of the maids bring you some supper in your room.”

Duncan stood, watching Grant and Carlton. “What has become of the carriage and the horses?”

“The highwaymen took them.” Grant refilled his glass with whiskey. “That is why we’re so late. We had to walk home. Carlton was bleeding. I’m injured. It was a long walk.”

“’Tis but five miles.” Eachan raised his hand to the maid who entered the room. “Bring another bottle of wine.”

“I want more wine.” Angus lifted his glass.

“You have had enough, Father.” Eirica glared at Eachan.

“Do not fuss, daughter.”

Grant poured whiskey into Angus’ glass. “Whiskey will warm your innards.” He took another swig. “Have the maid bring up more whiskey with our meal.” He stood and canted several steps to his left before he regained his balance.

Eirica returned to her seat. Duncan took her hand beneath the table. If it were not for Gilliskel, she would wish the Anderson brothers drowned in their baths.

“’Tis a terrible thing to have highwaymen about.” Duncan continued to clutch her hand beneath the table. “You are no’ planning to go to town anytime soon are you?”

She shook her head.

Keegan banged his fork against his plate. “We were going tomorrow.”

“Eirica canno’ be out while highwaymen plague the area.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Duncan lifted his eyebrows as he looked at Keegan.

"You do not dictate—"

"A man with any sense would no' put her in danger's way." Duncan reached for his wineglass.

"He's right," said Eachan.

Eirica squeezed Duncan's hand. "Until I know the roads are safe, I shan't leave home." She turned to Eachan. "You're sure you have heard of no other incidents?"

"I have not." He pushed his plate away. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I. As landowners, we must not let this sort of thing continue." A shiver ran up her back. Highwaymen lurking about the neighborhood gave her an unsettled feeling. Would they only attack carriages on the road, or would they resort to breaking into houses? She had heard of such happenings.

This on top of missing sheep.

"You needn't worry about it, Eirica. I shall tend to it." Eachan crossed his arms.

"As the largest landowner about, 'tis my responsibility as much as yours."

"It is your father's," said Eachan.

"My father tends to naught." She placed her hands on the table, missing the warmth of Duncan's touch. "If anything more happens, then, in my father's place, I must see that something is done. These men must be caught."

"They will be."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Duncan.

Eachan glared at Duncan. "My men will find them."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Will my man be safe going for the surgeon?” Eirica didn’t want to have to worry about things in the village. She had sufficient to worry her at home. Robbers couldn’t—and wouldn’t—be tolerated. Then again, with highwaymen about, maybe everyone would forget she had three suitors and a male governess.

She sighed. *Probably not.*

“I’m sure they won’t attack a lone man, especially one who looks as though he has no money.” Eachan pulled a cigar from his pocket.

“I hope you’re correct.” Eirica looked at him for a moment. “You need to go into the parlor if you wish to smoke that.”

Eachan pulled out a cigar cutter and cut off the end. Holding it in his mouth, he took a match from his pocket.

Duncan stood and leaned across the table, snatching the match from Eachan’s hand. “Eirica asked you to smoke in the other room.”

The cigar fell from Eachan’s mouth. He grabbed it just before it hit the table.

Eirica hid her smile behind her hand. She looked at Eachan. A man who had everything he wanted. Except her. A man with money in his pocket. A man whom everyone around knew was rich. A perfect target for the highwaymen. She hated to ask, but if something happened to him on his way home she would forever feel guilty. “Eachan, will you be safe traveling at night?”

“Of course. No one would dare attack me.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"His arrogance alone should protect him," whispered Duncan.

Eirica giggled. She couldn't help it. Too much had happened. "I'm sure you are correct."

"If you would feel better, I shall spend the night under your roof." Eachan smiled at her and placed his cigar back in his mouth. He didn't reach for a match.

She wouldn't. Not really. "If you think it would be better, you are welcome. I'll have Mrs. MacAlister make up a room." She hoped no one else arrived and expected to stay. She was fast running out of rooms.

"That is so kind of you." Eachan smiled at her.

Duncan frowned.

"What am I to do?" Eirica shrugged. "If something happened..."

Duncan nodded. "I would no' wish you to worry. I do no' like him under your roof at night."

"With so many about, I shall be safe. One scream will bring a multitude."

Duncan stared to laugh.

"What are the two of you whispering about?" asked Eachan.

"Nothing of import." Eirica looked up at her father. His wineglass was half empty. Grant had filled it with whiskey. She sprang up. "Father, you have had enough to drink." She reached for the glass.

Angus moved it from her reach and took a long drink.

Eirica pried the glass from his fingers before he could

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

drink the bit left in the bottom. It would be a long night. At least the surgeon would be in residence. She couldn't let him travel alone at night either. Not after what had happened to the Andersons.

* * *

Eirica sat straight up in bed. She'd heard something. Someone at her door? *No. None of them would be that addlepated.* They would know the rest were listening to every creak to make sure none snuck down to her room.

She heard the sound again. A soft rapping on her door followed the noise. It would be Cory to fetch her. Father was having one of his attacks.

She pulled on her wrapper and padded barefoot across the floor to open the door. Cory stood on the other side, a lamp in his hand.

"Come quick, miss. He's tossing and turning, and moaning something awful."

"I was afraid of this. Get the surgeon. I think he's next door to me." She trod down the dimly-lit hallway to her father's room. The light moved away from her as Cory went for the surgeon. At least tonight, they would not have to wait for the man to come from the village. The Andersons had done something worthwhile.

She went and sat on the bed. The soft glow of another lamp cast a circle of light around her father. He looked so pale as he thrashed back and forth. He clutched his head in his hands, moaning.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

At least the spell had not gotten so very bad. “Father, wake up. ’Tis me—Eirica.” She shook him gently. “Father, wake up. You need to take some medicine.” If she could get him to swallow the liquid the doctor had left for him before he got worse, she might be able to get the spell to abate. Then there would not be days of convalescing.

“Father, please wake up. I have your medicine.” She tried to stop his thrashing.

He flipped his head back and forth on the pillow, still holding it.

“Father, please wake up.” *Before you wake the whole house.* “Please.”

He gurgled. Eirica grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him up, afraid he would choke. He fought her, pushing away from her. She couldn’t maintain her hold on him. He screamed, and the scream rang in her ears.

CHAPTER 7

Duncan sat bolt upright in his bed as the scream echoed through the house. “What the hell?” he muttered, reaching for his breeches. He opened the door and looked down the hallway. It was empty. None of the others seemed to be worried about what was happening. Or the swains were hiding under their beds.

He hurried down the hallway. The scream seemed to have come from the other end. He stopped at Eirica’s door and listened. Nothing. He went to Angus’ door. Voices came from behind it.

He entered and saw Eirica trying to hold her father. Cory stood on the far side of the room, and the doctor was mixing

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

something in a cup.

“Hold him still,” snapped the doctor.

“I’m trying.” Eirica reached for her father’s shoulder to grasp him. He hit at her and she lost her grip.

Cory grabbed Angus’ arm to lift him. Duncan moved up to the side of the bed and gently moved Eirica aside.

“Let me help,” he said.

“Be careful. Do not hurt him.” She pleaded with him with her eyes.

“I shall be as careful as possible.” He reached for Angus. “Together, Cory. Got his arm?”

Cory grunted.

Duncan grabbed Angus’ flailing arm and put one hand behind the old man. Cory did the same and they held Angus in an upright position.

Angus thrashed his head and screamed again. Eirica sat on the edge of the bed, worrying her wrapper with her fingers.

She’d said Angus had spells, but this was the first one since Duncan had arrived. He didn’t know how she managed this on top of everything else. The man looked as though he would hurt himself if not restrained, but for such a frail old man, he had a great deal of strength. Duncan had trouble holding on to him.

“Can one of you hold his head steady so I can get some of this down him?” The doctor stood next to the bed.

Duncan doubted that could be accomplished, but he would try. He sat next to Angus on the bed and wrapped Angus’ arm around his own back, pinning it out of the way. Then he

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

leaned his head against the old man's. Angus twisted away and back, his head slamming into Duncan's. Sparks flashed before his eyes and he had to will himself not to move out of the way. He grabbed Angus' head with his hand and held it pressed against his. "Quickly. Before he knocks me out."

A hiccupping giggle erupted from Eirica. "Are you all right?"

"I shall survive." Duncan wanted to rub the side of his head, but his forehead and Angus' were pressed together.

The doctor held the cup to Angus' mouth. "Drink, Angus. 'Twill make you feel better."

"Please, Father, drink the medicine. Then you'll be able to sleep."

For a moment, Angus' stiffened body relaxed and the doctor poured liquid into his mouth. He swallowed twice, then started to cough. Duncan leaned him forward until the coughing stopped, then pulled him close again. "More?"

"He needs to drink all of it."

Duncan groaned. Never had he seen the likes of this and he didn't care to again. "Then let us hurry."

The doctor held the cup to Angus' mouth again and the old man took a sip, then another. Soon, most of the medicine had gone down his gullet, though some of it graced his front and Duncan's.

"You can release him now." The doctor turned back to his bag. "He'll rest easier."

Duncan and Cory laid Angus back on his pillow. His eyes fluttered, then he looked at Duncan. "Might I help you, sir?"

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"No, Angus. 'Tis time for you to rest. I only looked in to say good-night." Duncan brushed the old man's hair back from his forehead.

"That was kind of you, sir." Angus' eyes drifted shut and a soft snore issued forth from his lips.

Duncan stood, rubbing his temple. "Does this happen often?"

Eirica shook her head.

"You allowed him more than a glass of wine at dinner, did you not?" The doctor stood with his hands at his waist.

"I didn't give it to him. Grant Anderson gave him whiskey." Eirica stared down at her bare toes peeking out from beneath the white ruffles of her nightdress.

"You didn't take it away from him," said the doctor.

"I was talking about the highwaymen." She folded her hands in her lap.

"Eirica, you know what happens when your father drinks. You have to pay more attention." The doctor's voice was stern.

She looked up at him.

"She tries her best." Duncan put his hand on her shoulder.

"Her best was not good enough," the doctor growled.

Duncan took a deep breath and swallowed down the anger that threatened to erupt. "With all the commotion Angus has caused, she does well to keep things running as smoothly as she does. The Andersons distracted her with their tales of being robbed and she did no' notice Grant had filled Angus' glass. She took the glass as soon as she did."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I saw..." Eirica stopped and looked up at Duncan. "I should've been more careful."

"Yes, young lady, you should have." The doctor picked up his bag and walked toward the door. "Many more spells like this and you won't have a father." He stopped and glared at her. "Do I make myself clear?"

She nodded.

The doctor stomped out of the room.

"Duncan, I should've taken the glass sooner. I saw he was drinking the whiskey, but I was so concerned about..."

Duncan put his arm around her. "You have much to worry about. 'Tis no' your fault." He hugged her. She felt so right in his arms. He wanted to hold her forever. "Now that I know, I shall help you keep watch."

"Thank you." She leaned against him. "Cory, you may retire. I'll sit with Father."

Duncan heard the door close. He pulled Eirica close. "You should retire also. I can sit with Angus and make sure he sleeps peacefully."

"That's not part of your job." She wrapped her arms around his chest and snuggled her head against him.

His job. He wanted to be more than an employee to her. He held her tightly. Holding her in his arms was not the proper thing to do. Not while she paid him a salary to teach her sister. He didn't care. He might have few chances to hold her and he'd take each of them. Too soon he'd have to leave her. Leaving her to all of her problems. "That does no' matter. I can watch him for a while."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She pulled back and looked into his face. “You’re so kind. I don’t know what I did before you arrived.”

He looked down at her. Tears still filled her eyes. She was chewing her bottom lip. He bent his head and pulled it into his mouth and nibbled. She stretched up on tiptoe, pressing herself against him. He captured her mouth and kissed her softly. Her lips parted slightly and her tongue flicked over his lips.

He groaned, wanting more than a kiss. Thankful he was allowed the kiss. Wanting it to never end. Knowing it had to, because he couldn’t guarantee his actions if he held her much longer. Pulling back, he smiled at her. Her breath came in ragged gulps. “Go to bed. I shall call you if he takes a turn for the worse.”

She leaned her head against his chest. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” He turned her and pushed her gently toward the door.

* * *

Duncan leaned back on the blanket they’d spread on the grass for their picnic lunch and watched Eirica as she strolled to the edge of the loch with Anne. He had been willing to postpone the picnic after the commotion with Angus the night before, but Eirica had insisted she needed to get away from the house and everyone in it. Besides, she didn’t want to disappoint Anne.

Eirica leaned down and said something to the child. Duncan smiled. He had a feeling this was the first time the two sisters had really spent any time together. He let the sun warm

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

his face. His eyelids started to droop and he sat up, shaking his head to awaken himself. He had spent the majority of the night next to Angus' bed. Every time he'd dozed off, Angus had groaned in his sleep and Duncan had bolted upright. He could have used a nap instead of a picnic today, but he couldn't bear to disappoint either Eirica or Anne.

Eirica plopped down on the ground and removed her shoes and stockings. Anne followed her lead.

"Such doings." Nanny McCall looked up from her sewing. "'Tis unseemly."

"They're only going wading. I do no' see how that can be unseemly. No one is about but us to see them." Duncan yawned and stretched. Maybe wading in the cold water would awaken him. It would be an excuse to join the sisters and leave Nanny to her own musings.

He stood and stretched, strolling down to the edge of the loch. He kicked off his shoes and rolled up his breeches' legs. Wading in, he stood next to Eirica, who held her blue woolen skirt bunched up in her hands. Anne stood beside her, her skirts dragging in the water.

"I canno' remember the last time I did this." He smiled at her.

She laughed, the laughter caressing him. "Me, either. It has been too many years since I left my responsibilities behind, even for a few moments. Always there seems to be something to be done."

"Your father seemed better this morning." Duncan remembered his father's death. It had been swift. An accident.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

There had been no sickness or lingering. No nursing. In a flash, he was gone.

He didn't know how she managed everyday to deal with her father's sickness. He had been about only a few days, but he could see Angus was failing and wouldn't be among them much longer. Yet Eirica never wavered. She smiled and pampered him and stood watch at night when he needed her.

Who stood watch when Eirica needed someone?

"He was quietly sleeping when we left. Cory will tend to him." A sigh rattled through her. "Thank you for sitting with him last night. You didn't need to do that."

"I was glad to be of help." He would lift her burden whenever he could. He didn't know how he had come to care so much for her in such a short time. "From now on, we'll make sure only one bottle of wine—and no whiskey—is present at the supper table. When 'tis gone, they'll do without."

Anne leaned against him, her hand inching into his.

She gave him a wry smile. "That'll not please my guests."

He laughed and the sound rumbled across the loch. "Maybe some of them will decide to go elsewhere if you do no' set such a fine table."

"It could be worth a try. The village is already buzzing about my houseguests. What difference will it make if they think I am a poor hostess?" She kicked one foot in the water, making swirls.

"Those who know you well will know 'tis for your father's sake. He is of more import than any guests." He shoved his

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

hands into his pockets, wanting to brush her wind-blown hair from her face.

"I must think of him first."

Anne fished in the water and picked up a rock. "Isn't this pretty." She held it for Duncan to study.

"That's very nice." He smiled at her, then turned back to Eirica. "Is Eachan going to continue to stay?"

She shook her head. "He'll leave before supper or dare the ride home after dark. I've had enough of his company." She looked out across the loch. "He did it on purpose."

"What?" Duncan reached out and touched her shoulder. Her back was rigid.

She looked back at him. Anger shone from eyes ringed with tears. "The incident."

"You've never told me of the incident." He rubbed the side of her face with his thumb. "It happened so long ago it really canno' mean much any longer."

"It changed my life. I became a pariah. No one would wed me."

He laughed. "Your father has changed that."

"Yes, but 'tis not me they wish to marry. 'Tis my sheep farm."

He wanted to erase the pain from her eyes. A young girl of sixteen would have been hurt severely to become an outcast. "True, but you do no' have to wed any of them. You are of an age to make your own decisions. Especially since your father no longer can."

"Yes. I will wed none of them." She squared her shoulders.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I've no intentions of putting Anne and I in a position of becoming penniless because of some man who wants nothing more than my property."

Anne tugged on his arm. "Can I wade out more?"

"Be careful." Eirica twisted the material of her skirt. "Pull your skirt from the water."

Duncan watched Anne wade out until the water came to her knees. "You still have no' explained how Eachan caused you trouble in the first place." His curiosity had been piqued from the beginning about the "incident" of which she and Angus had spoken.

"'Twas not much, but the village made a great deal of it." She sighed again. "'Twas a long time ago."

"The memory still hurts." He brushed the hair from her face. "Maybe sharing it will make it less so."

"He took me on a picnic. The wheel broke on the carriage and then it started to rain. We had traveled quite a distance and couldn't walk home. Especially in the downpour." She looked away from him.

He turned her face towards his. "You canno' be held responsible for an accident."

"That's not how others saw it." She gave him a small smile. "Anyway, so as not to catch our death, we found an abandoned cottage and spent the night there. In the morning, Eachan's father sent some of his men and they found us."

"You were no worse off." He smiled. He had never found it reasonable that in such a situation, the girl should suffer. 'Twas not her fault the carriage wheel broke and she couldn't

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

be returned home. Others always blamed the girl and assumed she was “spoiled.”

“Anne, you’ve gone far enough.”

Anne turned and smiled at them. “I promise not to fall in.”

“Please come back,” Eirica said.

Anne frowned and kicked the water as she waded back toward them.

He smiled at the look on the child’s face, but he wanted to know the rest of the story. “What happened?”

“Nothing. Eachan built a fire to keep us warm and we had the food left from our picnic. The cottage was dusty, but Eachan gave me the blanket to lay upon and he sat up all night.”

“He offered for your hand. Why did you no’ wed him?” Duncan didn’t care much for Eachan, but he seemed to be a fair catch.

“My mother was so upset, she bore Anne a few days later and died.” Eirica wiped at the tears forming in her eyes. “I couldn’t think of wedding with Father so upset and a new babe to be tended. Father couldn’t manage anything, so it all fell to me.” She looked away again. “Eachan wouldn’t understand that I wished to wait. His temper flared when I wouldn’t agree to an immediate marriage. He broke...”

Duncan took her hand in his and squeezed it. “’Twas a long time ago. It does no’ matter anymore.”

“Oh, but it does. He broke my mother’s crystal vase. The one Father had bought for their anniversary. The one she loved so much. She always filled it with flowers from her garden. He

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

picked it up and flung it against the fireplace because he didn't get his way."

"Then you're best off without him." He wouldn't want one as sweet and generous as Eirica married to a man of violence. Not that Eirica didn't have the strength to stand up to those about her, but at sixteen, she wouldn't have been as strong. 'Twas the years of managing that had made her what she was.

"I always believed that. Father didn't take it well that I wouldn't wed Eachan. He feared I would be a spinster and have no one to care for me." She laughed. A genuine laugh that caressed Duncan's ears.

"Which brings us back to your current problem." Duncan wrapped his arm about her waist and pulled her close.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Yes. Father is still afraid I shall have no one to care for me. He doesn't realize 'tis I who cares for him and the farm, but that doesn't matter."

"He also does no' realize you will no' bend to his will." The lilac scent of her hair caressed him. He rubbed his cheek against the silkiness, holding back a sigh. He wanted all of Eirica, but... 'Twas not his place.

"No, that isn't a point worth arguing with him. He wouldn't remember anyway." She placed her hand against his chest. "Not only do I have to put up with those Father invited, but now Eachan has reappeared." She shook her head, tickling his nose as she moved. "I can't believe he'd have the nerve to show his face after what he did."

"What did he do?" Eachan was the cause of the "incident"

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

that had tarnished Eirica's reputation, but accidents did happen and he had done the honorable thing in offering for her hand. Not that it took much to offer for Eirica's hand. 'Twas such a lovely one, belonging to a lovely lady.

She pulled away and looked him in the face. "Why he broke the wheel on purpose and stranded us so I'd have to wed him."

Duncan blinked at her, unsure he had heard her correctly. "He..."

"He staged the whole thing because I'd been stalling. At sixteen, I didn't wish to wed and be responsible for a household. I wanted to wait. I wanted a while longer to be a carefree girl." She laughed, a hard laugh. Duncan shook his head. He didn't like Eachan. Something about the man made his skin crawl, but to deliberately ruin a young woman's reputation to force her into marriage. A gentleman would never stoop so low. Then again, Eachan obviously was not much of a gentleman. "I see why you do no' want him about."

"He thinks Father will agree with him that he has first right to wed me. If Father knew..." She shook her head. "I shall never wed Eachan. The moment he threw Mother's vase I made that decision."

Water flicked across Duncan's face. "You two seem to be having all too much fun together." Anne stuck out her bottom lip at them. "This is my picnic."

"So 'tis, lass." Duncan leaned over and splashed water at Anne.

She squealed and ran from him.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eirica laughed and scooped up a handful of water. She threw it at Anne.

Droplets formed in Anne's hair. She laughed and splashed water back at Duncan and Eirica. Water spots darkened Anne's blue dress. Her hair fell loose from the clip that held it back and covered her face.

Her laughter sounded much like Eirica's. Duncan liked the sound almost as much as he did Eirica's. When he had arrived but a week ago, Anne had been an unhappy child, afraid of losing her nanny. Now she seemed to be able to play and laugh.

Eirica, despite the problems that plagued her, laughed much more often too.

He wanted to believe 'twas because of him. He had brought them joy and a new enjoyment of life. It warmed his heart.

For the first time in a very long time, he felt like he was home. 'Twould only be his home for a few more weeks, though. Then his replacement would arrive and he'd be on his way to a new post with strangers. A twinge squeezed at his heart. He would miss them.

"I want to swim." Anne flicked more water at Duncan.

"We didn't bring any clothes for you to swim in." Eirica brushed the water from her face.

"She could swim in her under-things," said Duncan.

Eirica looked at him. "Not with you watching."

He laughed. "She is but a child and her under-things cover her well."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Nanny will have a fit.”

Duncan glanced back at Nanny McCall. “Her highness would have apoplexy.” He looked back at Anne. Her eyes begged. “I could go for a walk. Then both of you could swim if you wished.”

Eirica nodded. “That would be fun. I can’t remember the last time I swam.”

Duncan rubbed his hand down her back. “I shall see what is beyond that grove of trees.”

* * *

Eirica watched Duncan stride across the meadow surrounding the loch. When he disappeared into the trees, she turned back to Anne. She missed him already and wished he had stayed to swim with them, but that would be pushing propriety too far, even for her.

“Come out of the water, Anne.”

“I want to swim.”

Eirica nodded. “First you must remove your dress and petticoat. Otherwise you’ll sink to the bottom.”

Anne splashed through the water toward Eirica. “Is it all right?”

“Yes. Duncan has taken a walk.”

Anne turned so Eirica could unbutton her dress and let it fall to the ground.

“What are you doing?” Nanny McCall’s voice boomed from behind Eirica and made her jump.

“Preparing to swim.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Nanny looked around. "Mr. MacKinnon is about."

"He won't return until we call for him." Eirica slid out of her dress and petticoats. Wading into the water, she shivered. The coldness crept up her legs as she waded deeper into the loch. She dove in and came up sputtering. After a few moments, the coldness left her and she felt like a young girl again.

"Come here, Anne. I shall show you how to swim." She motioned to her sister.

Anne waded over, laboring through the water. She smiled at Eirica. "I'm glad you came with us today."

Eirica pushed Anne's wet hair back from her face. "I am also. I don't spend enough time with you. Duncan tells me you're quite a delightful child." *Though a bit willful.*

Anne blushed. "I like Mr. MacKinnon." She sighed. "I wish he could stay."

So did Eirica. She liked the feel of Duncan's hands against her skin and his lips upon hers. She wanted to melt into his arms and be held forever. He made her body quiver in a way she didn't know it could.

"What are you thinking?"

Eirica smiled at Anne. "What a wonderful day it is and we shouldn't let shadows of things we can't change fall upon it." She put her arm around Anne's shoulders. "Now. A swimming lesson."

"Be careful." Nanny's voice floated from the bank.

"I shall." Eirica put her hand beneath Anne's stomach and had her kick her feet.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

The child eased through the water.

“That is good. Now, move your hand like this.” Eirica demonstrated, then helped Anne.

“Who taught you to swim?” Anne brushed water from her face as she stood up.

“Father. When I was about your age.”

“I wish he could teach me.”

“I shall have to do.”

Anne frowned for a moment. “Father is very sick.”

“Yes, darling, he is.”

“’Tis my fault.” Sadness flooded her eyes.

Eirica pulled her close and hugged her. “No, Anne. You must never think that.”

“’Tis my fault Mother died.”

Eirica pushed her back and looked into her face. “No. It is not your fault. The baby is not responsible. These things happen.”

Anne stared at Eirica for a moment. “I killed Mother and Father fell sick because of it.”

“Where did you hear such nonsense?”

Anne shrugged. “I hear things.”

“Such things are only the utterances of ignorant and cruel people. You did nothing. Mother and Father wanted you very much. I’m sorry you never knew Mother. She’d have loved you so much.” Eirica laughed. “You were the daughter she always wanted.”

“She had you.”

“I could do none of the things Mother loved. You’ll be an

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

excellent seamstress and do wonderful needlework. You'll learn to play the pianoforte and give teas." Eirica ran her hands through the tangles of Anne's hair. "Me. I was the son Father wanted. I can shear a sheep, but I'll be damned if I can pettipoint."

"Does Father love you?"

"What a strange question. Of course Father loves me. And you. When he remembers he has daughters." She leaned close to Anne's face. "You must remember, Father is not always with us. That isn't his fault."

"He had a bad spell last night."

"You know everything, do you not?"

Anne smiled and nodded. "Is he going to die?"

"Soon, I'm afraid." Eirica loved her father, even when he went on flights of fancy. She didn't wish to lose him, but the time grew near.

"What will become of us?" Anne studied Eirica's face.

"We shall live as we always have. I shall tend what needs tending, and you'll become a fine lady."

"Is that why Father has found you so many suitors?"

"Father thinks I need a husband, but he is confused."

"You won't marry any of those horrid men?"

"Never." Eirica patted Anne's shoulder. "Never."

"I'm sorry I stole your mother and father away from you." Anne looked down into the water.

Eirica lifted her face. "Never say that. 'Twas not your fault. In fact..." She looked up at the sky and back at Anne. "In fact, Eachan MacFie is the cause of all the trouble."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eachan and his broken wagon wheel.

“How?”

“Don’t worry yourself about it. When you’re much older, I may tell you, but don’t blame yourself. Eachan MacFie caused our troubles.” If Eachan hadn’t tried to rush her into marriage, none of this would have happened. Mother and Father would be happily together and she would be wed with a home of her own. Not that she wanted one. “Go and practice your swimming. I shall watch you from the rock.”

Eirica waded out of the water and climbed up on the rock to dry. She watched Anne for several minutes, then leaned back and closed her eyes.

“Nanny, please watch Anne for me,” she called.

What would life have been like if Mother hadn’t died? She wouldn’t have wanted to be married to Eachan. She could have been the one found at the bottom of the stairs. She shivered as though a goose had walked over her grave.

“Help.” Nanny’s scream tore through her. “Help.”

Eirica bolted upright and looked toward the water. She didn’t see Anne. She scrambled down from the rock and raced toward the water.

“She was right there. She went under and hasn’t come up.” Nanny danced from one foot to the other, pointing out toward the middle of the loch.

“Why did you let her go so far?” Eirica searched the water for any sign of movement.

“She kept swimming. I called, but she went under.”

Eirica dove into the water. Something bounced into the

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

water next to her. She saw a dark form swimming strongly. *Duncan.*

She searched for Anne. The white of her under-things should make her easy to see, but the water seemed dim and murky. When she had been wading, it had seemed clear.

The air burned her lungs and she forced herself to the surface, her heart battering against her ribs. As she filled her lungs with fresh air, she saw Duncan come up and dive down again.

Please, please let us find her, she prayed and dove into the water again.

She swam until her lungs were ready to burst, and still she saw nothing. Nothing of Duncan or Anne. She propelled herself to the surface and saw Duncan swimming to shore, Anne being dragged behind him.

Eirica followed and reached the shore moments after Duncan.

“She isn’t breathing,” sobbed Nanny. “My baby isn’t breathing.”

CHAPTER 8

Duncan folded Anne over his arm and pounded on her back. She hung limply, her blonde hair dragging in the dirt.

Eirica wrapped her hands about herself and rocked. She couldn't breathe. Anne couldn't be dead. Not because Eirica hadn't been paying attention. She shouldn't have been daydreaming. She should have been watching her little sister.

She hadn't paid enough attention to Anne. So many things demanded her attention. Father. The farm. Now, on a day they were enjoying together, Anne couldn't be gone.

Nanny's keening filled the air around her, cutting through her like a knife. Eirica sagged to her knees, watching Duncan pound on her sister's back. She pushed back her wet, tangled

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

hair.

Anne coughed. Water spewed from her mouth. Duncan held her as she continued to cough up water.

Eirica took in a deep breath. The color returned to Anne's face. She sat up weakly, leaning against Duncan. He smoothed back her hair.

"Oh, my baby," cried Nanny. She rushed to Duncan and snatched Anne away. Sitting in the grass, she held Anne to her, rocking back and forth, crooning.

Eirica pushed herself up and walked over to Duncan, who still sat in the dirt next to the edge of the loch. She laid her hand on his shoulder. "Thank you."

He looked up at her. His eyes had darkened. He nodded. He trembled beneath her touch.

She sank down next to him. "How did you know to do that?"

He pulled her close. "When I was a boy, one of my friends nearly drowned. The neighbor man happened to be near the loch and rescued him. He beat on his back until the water came out." He sighed. "I never forgot. I never thought I'd have need for remembering."

"I'm glad you knew what to do." She blinked back the tears. What could have been a tragedy had been averted by Duncan. Her father's mistake had more than one bright side to it.

"We need to get Anne home." Nanny's voice was cross. "She'll catch her death. She needs dry clothes and a warm bed."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I don't want to go to bed." Anne squirmed against Nanny's hold. "I'm fine."

"Nanny is right. 'Tis time to go back. We all need dry clothes." Eirica pushed away from Duncan, hating to have his warmth withdrawn from her. When he held her, everything seemed fine. Her responsibilities weren't so heavy.

She walked over to Anne. "Put your dress back on. That and the blanket will keep you warm until we get home."

"I'm not cold. My throat hurts, but that's all."

"You nearly died." Nanny rubbed Anne's hair with the blanket.

Anne tried to push her away. "I shall be fine."

Nanny hugged the child again. "Aye, you will be." She turned to Duncan. "Thank you for saving my baby."

He nodded. Turning to Eirica, he said, "You need to dress before you catch your death."

Heat stole up Eirica's neck and face. She'd forgotten she wore nothing more than her pantalettes. They were stained at the knees and probably the backside. "Gracious." She rushed over to the grass where her clothes lay. She pulled her petticoats on over her dirty pantalettes, then donned her dress, fumbling with the tiny buttons up the front. She brushed down at the skirt, trying to regain her composure.

If anyone found out what had transpired, this would be worse than "the incident." Eachan had never even seen her undergarments, but Duncan had. She let out a sigh. 'Twas too late now to worry about such things. He would be gone soon and he wouldn't tell anyone.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Nanny. Nanny probably hadn't even noticed she was so concerned over Anne. She doubted Nanny would say anything. She had never been a gossip. Lord, she hoped Nanny didn't take it up now.

Duncan put his hands over hers. "She's going to be fine." She looked at him for a long moment. Throwing her arms around his neck, she buried her head against his shoulder. "Duncan, I can never repay you for what you've done." She shook. The lifeless form of her sister hanging over Duncan's arm kept crowding into her mind.

"I'm just happy she's fine." He hugged Eirica. "It would've broken my heart if anything had happened to her."

* * *

Eirica smoothed her skirt as she walked down the stairs toward the parlor. Her hair was still wet, but it didn't show the way she'd pinned it. At least her undergarments were dry and clean. She blushed at the thought of Duncan seeing her in such a state of undress.

She was reaching for the door to the parlor when a knock sounded on the front door. She paused and looked around her. *Where's Mrs. MacAlister?* She didn't see the housekeeper or any of the servants. Letting out a sigh, she turned toward the door. She stopped. *No.* 'Twas not her job to answer the door, and she didn't want to know who was on the other side.

She opened the parlor door and entered. The Andersons were on the couch, but Father's settee was empty and Cory wasn't in attendance. She silently groaned. After last night,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Father wouldn't be coming downstairs, and would have spent the day in bed.

Eachan and Keegan were having a heated discussion in the corner. She didn't care what they discussed, as long as they left her alone. She glanced around for Duncan, but he hadn't yet come downstairs. After last night and this afternoon, she wondered if he would, or if he had decided to retire to his room early.

She backed toward the door, hoping not to be caught. She could retire to her room, then take supper with Father. Maybe, if he was up to it, Anne could join them.

"Why, Eirica, here you are." Eachan crossed the room toward her.

Damn. She smiled and walked over to the chair.

Eachan reached her before she had a chance to sit. He took her hand and tried to bring it to his lips. She yanked it away. He stared at her. "Eirica?"

In the background she could still hear the pounding at the front door. "What're you doing here, Eachan? Do you not have a farm of your own to tend?"

"I'd never dream of deserting you when you need my help." He smiled. "I have those who can manage my farm for a few days."

"I have no need for your help." She sat down. "I don't wish to seem inhospitable, but I must insist you return home tonight. My house has become quite crowded."

A smile flitted across Keegan's face. "You shouldn't leave your matters to hirelings for long. They'll steal you blind."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eachan glared at him. "I have no worry about that. I hire only men I can trust." He turned back to Eirica. "Besides, 'tis dangerous to travel the roads at night."

"You should've left this afternoon." She had enough trouble sleeping, worrying about Father, without knowing Eachan was but two rooms from her.

"I've been waiting for your return." He moved to stand behind her chair and put his hand on her shoulder.

She wished Duncan would arrive. "I was quite safe."

"You shouldn't have gone on a picnic when highwaymen were about." He patted her shoulders.

The knocking on the door increased. Where was Mrs. MacAlister? She shoved Eachan's hands away and stood to ring the bell for a servant. "We fared quite well." She had no intention of telling him of the afternoon's events.

"Where is Angus?" asked Gilliskel.

"He isn't feeling well today and has been resting." Eirica walked over to the couch and perched next to the old man. She took his hand in hers. "I'm sure you have missed him, but by tomorrow, he'll be better."

"I'm glad." Gilliskel smiled at her. "You're such a good daughter."

"Thank you." She liked Gilliskel. He made her father's days brighter, and for that she gave thanks.

Mrs. MacAlister's scream from the hallway made Eirica gasp and put her hand to her mouth. A second scream followed and Eirica bolted up, grabbing her skirts so as not to trip on them. Eachan reached the door first, a dagger in his

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

hand as he threw it open.

On the floor in the hallway lay a man, blood streaming from his shirt. A second man stood in the doorway. "Help us. Please!"

"Stop screaming," Eachan snapped at the housekeeper.

Eirica reached Mrs. MacAlister. She grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her toward the back of the house. "Get rags and water. Send someone for the surgeon." She knelt next to the man. Duncan appeared beside her, thrusting his handkerchief into her hand. She pressed it against the man's wound. "I don't think this is large enough."

He ripped the man's shirt open. "It looks deep, but the wound is to the side." He tore away part of the shirt. "Use this."

Eirica wadded the material and pressed it against the wound. She looked up at the man in the doorway. "What happened?"

"We were accosted on the road." The man with light brown hair wrung his hands in front of him. "My master tried to deal with them and they stabbed him."

"How far from here were you?" Duncan placed his hand over Eirica's.

"Only a short bit down the road. I carried him here after they took our horses and carriage." The man stared at the one laying on the floor. "Will he live?"

"I am no' a surgeon, but I do no' think 'tis too serious." Duncan lifted the cloth.

Eirica sighed. "The bleeding seems to be stopping. Still,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

I'm sending for the surgeon." She shook her head. "The poor man. He's spending more time here than he wishes."

"Is it safe to call him out at this time of night?" asked the man in the doorway.

"'Tis necessary." Eirica rose and looked at the blood on her green skirt. It would never come out of the silk. She would have it cut down for Anne. No sense in completely wasting the dress. At least 'twasn't one of her newer ones.

She shook her head. A man lay bleeding on her floor and she was worried about a ruined dress. Too much had happened. Her mind was wandering like Father's did. She wouldn't have to wait until she became aged to be crazy. The world would drive her to it before her twenty-fourth birthday.

"Grant, Carlton, help carry the man upstairs." Eirica looked at the two men standing in the parlor doorway watching.

"I'm not a servant." Grant held a glass of wine in one hand.

"The man is injured." She glared at him.

"I'm still weak from being attacked yesterday." Carlton turned back toward the couch. "Let the governess and the man's servant carry him upstairs."

"They can't manage by themselves." The man looked quite large.

The other man moved from the doorway. "I can get him upstairs."

"No' without starting the bleeding again." Duncan stood. He put his hand on Eirica's shoulder. "Do no' fret. The two of

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

us will get him settled. Where shall we put him?"

"In the room Eachan used last night," Eirica followed them up the stairs as Duncan took the man's arms and his servant took his feet.

They placed him atop the bed.

"The bleeding has started again," said Duncan.

The other man sank into a chair, his head in his hands.

Eirica patted his shoulder. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

"I hope so."

Mrs. MacAlister appeared with hot water and clean cloths. She removed the rest of the man's stained shirt and washed the wound. Then she pressed more cloth to it. "I've sent for the surgeon."

Eirica stood next to the bed and looked at the man. She'd never seen him before. "Did you have business here?"

"My master was coming to see Angus MacDougall."

Eirica didn't groan. She forced it to stay in her throat. Glancing at Duncan, she saw a smile on his face and could tell he held back a laugh. *It couldn't be. Not another suitor. No more suitors.* She turned to the servant. "You've arrived at the correct place. If you wish to go down to the kitchen, Cook will find you something to eat and the servants will find you a bed for the night."

"I don't want to leave him." The man stared at the pale form on the bed.

"He's in good hands. Mrs. MacAlister will tend to him."

The servant stood, hesitated, then crept from the room. He looked over his shoulder as he closed the door.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

A groan came from the man on the bed. His eyes fluttered open. "Where am I?"

"At the MacDougall farm." Eirica leaned closer.

The man had pale blue eyes and limp brown hair. He struggled to sit up, then slumped back again.

"Don't move. You'll cause your wound to bleed more." Eirica smiled at him. "We've sent for the surgeon."

"My servant, George. Where is he?" The man's voice was so low Eirica had to lean closer to hear him.

"I sent him to the kitchen for his supper. He's fine. He carried you here." She took a wet cloth from Mrs. MacAlister and washed his forehead. "You must rest now."

The man's eyes fluttered shut.

Eirica handed the cloth back to Mrs. MacAlister. A piece of paper peeked from the man's jacket pocket. She looked at Mrs. MacAlister, but the woman had risen to rinse the cloth. Eirica glanced at Duncan, who studied the man's face. She pulled the paper loose and recognized her father's handwriting. She slid it into her pocket and straightened. "Mrs. MacAlister, do you need any more help?"

"No. I'll sit with him until the surgeon arrives." Mrs. MacAlister drew a chair next to the bed. "Not much we can do except wait."

"Then I shall see supper is served for the others and check on Father." Eirica wanted to escape to read the correspondence she'd found. A tiny voice nagged at her about the shame of stealing it, but she had to know what her father had promised.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“What’re you going to do with Mr. MacFie?” Mrs. MacAlister settled in the chair, her hands folded in her lap.

“What do you mean?” Eirica looked at her. She wanted to send him away. Forever. That didn’t seem to be happening.

“You put this man in his bed.”

Eirica smiled. Maybe everything did have a bright side. “Yes, I did. I must go and inform him he’ll have to return to his own house for the night. We are without any extra beds.” She giggled. “Unless he wishes to move to the servants’ quarters.”

Mrs. MacAlister looked at her, her eyes wide. “Mr. MacFie?”

Duncan laughed. “I do no’ see him settled in the servants’ quarters. Unless a maid...” He held the door open for Eirica.

In the hallway, she turned to him. “Where were you earlier?”

“Napping. After sitting with your father most of the night and the excitement at the loch, I went to my room to change and fell asleep.” He looked at her sheepishly. “I did no’ intend to leave you alone with the vultures during supper.”

She smiled and leaned against him, drawing on his warmth. “I plan to take supper with Father in his room. You may join us if you wish. In fact, if he’s up to it, I thought of inviting Anne. She should spend some time with him while he is still with us.”

“That would be an excellent idea.” He wrapped his arm around her. “Things have to improve soon.”

“All is not bad. Anne seems no worse for her accident. The

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

stranger looks as though he will live.” She kissed him on the cheek and smiled. “I get to throw Eachan from my house.”

“Some things are glorious, are they no’?” He kissed her.

She melted against him. When he released her, she let a sigh ripple from her.

“Do you wish for me to go with you to inform Eachan he’s leaving, or should I go and check on Angus and make supper arrangements?” He brushed her hair back from her face, heating the side of her face with his touch.

“I can handle Eachan. You tend to Father’s supper. Invite Nanny to join us if she wishes.” She would scurry downstairs and inform Eachan he had nowhere to bed down for the night, then she would steal to her room to change and read the letter in her pocket.

“Are you no’ going to read the letter you filched from your wounded guest?”

Heat crept up her face. “I didn’t think you saw me.”

“It must’ve been important for you to take it.”

“Father wrote it.” She drew the paper from her pocket and pulled the letter from the envelope. She scanned the writing.

Behind her, Duncan laughed. She poked him in the ribs and he laughed louder.

“’Tis naught to laugh about.”

“On top of everything else, it is.”

* * *

Angus was propped up in bed, a tray in front of him. Anne sat at a small table next to the bed, fairly bouncing because

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

she'd been invited to join them. Duncan sat next to Eirica at the larger table in the room.

"'Tis nice to have my family about me." Angus worried his napkin with his fingers.

"Yes, Father, 'tis nice to have a small supper for a change." Eirica reached for her cup of tea. She had told the servants they weren't to bring wine to her father's room.

"I would like a glass of wine." Angus looked up at Cory.

"Not tonight, Father. Anne is joining us and it wouldn't be proper." Eirica set her cup down and reached for her fork.

"Your mother and I drank wine when you dined with us." Angus let Cory place a bite of food into his mouth and chewed.

"Anne, why don't you tell Father about our picnic?" Eirica smiled at Anne.

"Oh, Father, 'twas wonderful. Eirica taught me to swim." A frown creased her face for a moment, then she smiled again.

Angus smiled back at Anne. "I taught your sister to swim at about your age. Did you go to the loch near the edge of our property?"

"Yes, Father." Anne kicked her feet back and forth as they hung above the floor. "'Tis the most beautiful place. Mr. MacKinnon took me there once on my pony. I love to look at the water and beautiful flowers grow everywhere."

Angus straightened himself and reached for his fork. "'Tis a beautiful place. Your mother loved it. I used to take her there in the buggy. She watched while I taught Eirica to swim." He frowned for a moment. "I'm sorry you couldn't know her."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Anne looked to Eirica, then back to her father. "I have learned nearly all my letters."

Angus smiled again. "That's a good lass. A smart lass you are, too."

Eirica patted Duncan's hand. "You've brought joy to both my father and my sister. I thank you."

"It ha' been my pleasure. To see her smile is a reward in itself."

"To see him smile." Eirica let her hands fall into her lap. "After last night, I feared the end had come."

"Does he often have these spells?" Duncan took her hand back in his.

A warm tingle ran up her arm. She wished her father and sister were away so she might kiss him. "More and more frequently. The surgeon can do nothing. He says Father won't live much longer."

"What will you do when he's gone?" He rubbed his thumb against the skin between her thumb and first finger.

A shiver ran through her. "I shall do as I do now." She shrugged. "I shall have less to worry about." She looked upward and blinked her eyes. "I cannot imagine a world without him in it. He's always been here. I love him dearly."

Duncan squeezed her hand. "Of course you do. He's your father."

"Your own father. Do you not miss him?" She looked into his eyes. Pain flashed through them.

"Yes. When he died, a hole grew in the world. It becomes smaller wi' time, but I truly think it never completely goes

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

away. A part of us goes with them.” He looked away and then back. His mouth curved in a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “You still have your father and must enjoy him as much as possible.”

“He grows frailer every day.”

“Yes, but he provides entertainment.”

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. “What am I to do about wounded Ranald McKay in the guest room?”

“Send him packing.” Duncan’s smile moved to his eyes. “Or let the rest do it.”

“We may find him of sterner stuff than the others can handle.” She shook her head. “I cannot believe Father has done this. Three men. One would’ve been bad enough, but three.” She reached for her cup of tea and took a long drink. “I could use something stronger myself, except I don’t wish to go downstairs where the others may attack me with questions.”

“At least you should be free of Eachan for a few hours.” Duncan rose from his chair.

“Yes. I have no bed for him. ’Tis time he went about his business and tended to his own farm. Mine is not in need of his attentions.” She clasped Duncan’s hand. “Are you leaving us?”

“I’m going to get you a bottle of wine.” He leaned close to her, his lips brushing her ear. “I shall bring it in a new teapot so your father will no’ know.”

She smiled. “Thank you, again.”

“Where are you going, Mr. MacKinnon? You promised Nanny to bring me back to her.” Anne shifted in her chair.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“As soon as I get some more tea for your sister, I shall return you to Nanny and see if her headache has improved.” Duncan gave Anne a slight bow.

Anne turned to her father. “Eirica bought me a new doll. She has the most beautiful green velvet dress with green satin bows on it. I want a dress like it so we can dress the same.” Anne slid from her chair and leaned against the bed. “Nanny says I have too many dolls, but I don’t believe her. No one could have too many dolls. I love each and every one of them.”

Angus patted her on the head. “No, child. No little girl could have too many dolls.”

“Except me.” Eirica walked over and sat on the edge of the bed.

“You didn’t like dolls?” Anne looked at her with wide eyes.

“I had one or two. They sat on the shelf and collected dust.”

“They must’ve been very sad and lonely.” Anne pursed her lips together. “Where are they now?”

“Mayhaps in the attic.” Eirica brushed a wayward curl back from Anne’s face, glad her skin glowed with excitement and felt warm to the touch. A shiver ran up her back and she dropped her hand into her lap. Her heart froze every time she thought of Anne’s still body.

“Can we look?” Anne hopped from one foot to the other.

Eirica laughed. “Yes.”

“When?”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“On the morrow. After lessons.”

Anne turned to Angus. “I shall have another doll or two.” She put her hands on her hips. “I shall love them where Eirica did not.”

“Eirica was busy with me, tending to the sheep.” Angus took Anne’s small hand in his. “She was very good at that, and it must’ve been God’s will or none of us would have survived.”

Eirica looked away from her father. He seldom praised anyone, but she would tuck away his words in her heart to remember when he was gone.

For the moment she wouldn’t let anything dampen the evening. She had her father and her sister, and the suitors were all downstairs where they couldn’t bother her. She had many things for which to be thankful. Not the least of whom was Duncan. He had saved her sister. He had brought happiness to both of them. She would never be able to repay him.

She sighed and looked at Anne and her father. Both of them stared at her. “I was thinking.”

“Happy thoughts, I hope.” Angus smiled at her.

“Yes, Father. Happy thoughts.” The happiest she’d had in a long while.

“Then they were not thoughts of what I’ve done.” He picked at his coverlet.

She smiled at him. “’Tis put from my mind.”

The window banged open and Cory rose to close it.

“I’m grateful for that. You are such a good daughter.” He glanced around the room. “I need to talk with you.” He

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

coughed.

“Yes, Father. What is it?”

“Not in front of the child.” His face had turned ashen.

Eirica took his hand. What could have suddenly upset him? “Everything is fine, Father. Don’t fret. You’ll have another attack.”

Cory plucked the tray off the bed as Angus shifted. Duncan came in with the teapot.

“Please take Anne back to her room.” Eirica looked at Duncan. “Then come back. I may need you.” She turned to Anne. “Father is tired. Kiss him good night.”

Anne kissed Eirica, then crawled up on the bed and gave Angus a hug and a kiss. “It has been a most wonderful supper, Father. I hope you’ll invite me to dine with you again soon.”

Eirica raised her eyebrows and looked at Duncan.

He smiled. “Etiquette is part of the learning.”

After they left the room, she asked, “What is bothering you, Father?”

Angus gripped the edge of his blanket in his skeletal fingers and glanced around the room, as if searching for something. His breathing became rapid.

Eirica feared he would have another spell. She took his hands in hers and smoothed the frail skin. “Everything is fine, Father.”

“No, Eirica. I heard her. Last night I heard her.” He glanced around the room again, his eyes wide.

“Who did you hear?”

He grabbed her arm. “The ghost, Eirica. The ghost and she

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

wishes to harm us.”

CHAPTER 9

Eirica patted Angus' hand. "Father, we haven't a ghost."

"I heard her. At night she makes noises." Fear shone from his eyes.

Eirica shook her head. Every day her father became more fanciful. "Even if there was a ghost, it wouldn't harm you."

He stared at Eirica. "Are you sure?"

"Of course." She would say anything to calm him. She didn't want another night like last. "Cory, bring his medicine. He needs to be settled for the night."

Cory disappeared into the adjoining room.

"Now, Father, you're not to worry about a ghost." She smoothed back his gray hair.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"Eirica, I heard noises."

"We have a house full of guests."

"I hear the noises at night. When everyone is asleep."

Eirica shook her head. "Father, I don't know what you're hearing, but I do know 'tis not a ghost." She kissed him on the cheek. "I'm right next door and Cory is right here. We've heard no noises." She looked up as Cory came back into room.

"I've heard naught, miss." Cory held Angus up so he could drink the medicine.

"Now, Father, you mustn't fret. If anything is amiss, Cory or I shall hear the noises and take care of it." She stood as Duncan returned. "Now you must sleep. If you hear anything, call Cory and he'll fetch me."

"You'll come?" His bony fingers gripped her hand.

"Of course I shall, Father. I don't want you to be frightened."

"Daughter, the ghost might be angry with you."

She sighed. Once her father would never have believed in ghosts. "She isn't angry with me. Why would she be?" If her father didn't look so upset, she would laugh. She talked with him the way she would with Anne if she were scared about something. She patted his hand again. "Do you want me to sit with you until you fall asleep?"

Angus shook his head. "No. Cory will read to me."

"He will be fine, miss. After a few pages, he'll be asleep." Cory pulled a chair next to the bed and sat.

"Call me if there's any trouble." She smiled at Duncan.

"Do you still want your 'tea'?" Duncan grinned.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“More than ever.” She needed something. The day had seemed unreal in too many ways. She wanted a quiet moment where she didn’t have to worry about Anne, her father, or the strange man down the hall.

Duncan picked up the tray with the teapot and followed her from the room. “Where would you like me to take it?”

She wanted to go to her room and sit by the window. That would be unseemly if she intended to share with Duncan. She stopped and looked at him. A smile graced his face and he seemed unruffled by the day’s events. She needed his strength and composure. A coldness still clung to her at the remembrance of Anne in the water.

They couldn’t go to the parlor because everyone else would be there. If they went into her office, they were sure to be found. “I don’t know.”

“Eirica, where are you?” Eachan’s voice drifted up the front stairs. “Come and visit with us. Shortly I shall have to escort the surgeon back.” A footstep sounded on the stairs.

She looked at Duncan. “I can’t face them tonight.”

He balanced the tray with one hand and took her elbow with the other. “We can have ‘tea’ in the garden.”

“What a wonderful idea.” She grabbed the lamp off the hall table and lit it. “How shall we escape?” Her mood lightened at the thought of leaving the men behind.

“We shall go to the third floor and down the back stairs from there.” Duncan winked at her.

She giggled and followed him.

“Eirica.” Grant’s voice followed Eachan’s. “We need to

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“speak with you.”

“They always need to talk with me.” She scurried ahead of Duncan.

“What is this about a ghost?” Duncan took her arm as they exited the stairwell.

“Father thinks he heard a ghost. It has frightened him.” His fingers were warm, even through the fabric of her dress. She enjoyed the moments they walked together.

“Why would he think such a thing?”

“He’s heard noises.”

Duncan slipped his hand down and took hers, squeezing it. “He imagines things often.”

She smiled. “I know.” She stopped for a moment. “I don’t want to become like him.”

“You are far too young to worry about such things.” He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Besides, whatever man is lucky enough to have you as wife will no’ care if your imagination runs amuck.”

She laughed. “Especially if he’s as addle-pated as I am.”

“Quick. We must escape to the garden. I hear someone coming.” Duncan led her toward the back door.

“Probably one of the servants.” She liked his company. Everything seemed so much better when he was with her.

“’Tis better no’ to take a chance. ’Twould be a terrible way to end the evening—trapped by the scarecrow or the scoundrel.”

She liked the way Duncan had names for everyone. She wondered what he called her when she wasn’t in his presence.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He was right. She didn't wish to see either Keegan or Eachan.

As she sat on a bench, Duncan poured her a cup of wine. She took a sip, then set the cup on the ground.

"Feel better?" He leaned back on the bench and laid his arm across the back, behind her.

She rested her head on his shoulder. "Yes." She stared up at the stars. They twinkled as though they hadn't a care in the world. They looked so close she could almost reach up and pick one from the heavens.

"When I was little, Father would take me out at night to look at the stars. Once I told him I wanted one, and he reached up as if to pluck one." She laughed. "Then he said he wasn't quite tall enough, but if he could, he would give me the stars." She looked at Duncan. "He would have given me anything within his powers."

"You were lucky, lass. No' many fathers care so much for their children."

His pain touched her. "Especially their girls."

He nodded.

"Your father...did he not care for you?" Whenever she spoke of his family, his sorrow became apparent.

"My father loved me. As much as the others." A sigh rattled through him. "He was very busy. We had a sheep farm, but nothing the size of yours. I have two brothers and a sister, so, while we had plenty to eat, we did no' often have extras. When he died, my older brother took over the farm."

"And your mother?"

"She lives with my brothers, even though she is no' their

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

mother. They were very young when Father married her. His first wife had died when my next oldest brother was but two. They love her and take good care of her. Also, she enjoys being near her grandchildren.”

“You left your mother with those who aren’t kin.”

His body tightened against hers. “I had no choice. With both my brothers married and each with children, the farm could no’ support everyone.” He paused and stared into the night. “Once Father was gone, I was...my brother...I left.”

Eirica put her hand on his leg. She hadn’t meant to bring him pain after all he had done for her. “Do you not wish to settle down and have a family of your own?” ’Twas a brazen question, but she let her impulse override her manners.

“I have thought about it. As a tutor, I have neither a place nor the money to support a wife.” He took her hand in his and rubbed his thumb across the back of it.

“If you could do whatever you pleased, what would you do?” She wanted to know if he wished to stay.

“I would own my own sheep farm.”

She lifted her head and looked at him. “Really? You wouldn’t wish to have a school and remain a teacher.”

“No. I grew up on a farm.” He laughed. “’Twould be an honorable living, and I could afford a family. I could stay in one place.”

“That’s a lovely dream.” She leaned her head against his shoulder. “I couldn’t imagine living anywhere but on a farm.”

“I have lived many places, but I wish to go back to farm life.” He sighed. “A farm better than the one my brother has.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He leaned his cheek against the top of her head.

“You have no other teachers in your family?” He was a strong man. She’d seen it in the way he had dealt with the suitors, but a gentle man. He handled Father and Anne as easily.

“No. In fact, neither of my brothers can read. They saw no reason to learn.”

“’Tis a shame. One can easily be cheated in business if he can’t read.”

“I told them so, but they do no’ listen to me. I have no’ the years to impress them with my thoughts.”

“Then they’ll suffer for their stubbornness and ignorance.”

“They do no’ see it that way.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. She wanted this moment to last forever. At least she’d etch it into her memory so she could remember it when Duncan was gone. A pain grew in her heart at the thought of him leaving. The world would again be lonely. She sighed and lifted her head. “What am I to do with this new man laying upstairs in my house?”

He sat for several seconds, staring into the darkness. Then he leaned forward and picked up a cup, taking a long drink. “There has to be a way to be rid of all of them.”

“We could spread the rumor of Father’s ghost, who has taken up haunting at night.”

“The thought of riches will probably outweigh the fear of a ghost.” He handed her a cup.

She sipped at it. “I suppose you’re correct.” She groaned. “I’m tired of being thought of as goods to be purchased by

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

marriage.”

His laugh was deep and hollow laugh. “They are a greedy bunch.”

“I could resemble a toad and they’d still be lined at my door waiting for Father to pass on so they might swoop down and take control.” She crossed her arms.

“I am glad you do no’ resemble a toad.” He ran his finger down the side of her face. “You are the most beautiful woman I ha’ ever met.”

She lowered her head.

He raised her chin with his finger. “If I had a pence to my name, I would offer for your hand. Any man would be proud to ha’ you.”

“You haven’t a pence and the rest only want what is mine, not me.” Her father had certainly made a muddle of it this time. She couldn’t even be sure that the end had come. More surprises might await her with the dawn.

“Some man will come along to claim you for his wife.” He touched the side of her face. “Some man you can love.”

One had, but not one she could claim. She stared into his eyes, searching for something that told her he didn’t wish someone else to wed her. In the darkness, she couldn’t tell. “I have no desire to wed and be chattel to a man.”

“No’ all men are that way.”

“Most.” She folded her hands and stared at them for a moment. “Those ensconced in my home have another thing to consider if they think they can wed me and take my land. I shan’t allow that to happen.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He placed his hand over the top of hers. "Once they finish fighting amongst themselves, it'll be easier for you to send them packing."

"I hope so. I'm beginning to feel as though I'm running an inn and not getting paid. There has to be a way to convince them all to depart."

"Maybe another attack by the highwaymen will convince them."

"That is a real concern." She shifted so she could look at him. "We have never had any trouble in or around our village. Now, two attacks have been made."

"There ha' been several others." He took her hand.

"What?"

"I heard the servants talking. None wish to be away from the house. It took Mrs. MacAlister's threats to get anyone to go for the surgeon tonight."

"How many attacks?" Her stomach did a flip. A month ago she would have thought nothing of getting in her carriage and driving into the village to visit or shop. Now, no one seemed to be safe.

"Four or five others."

"The landowners will have to do something about this and the disappearance of the sheep." She squeezed his hand. "The festival is in two days. We shall have a meeting then and find a way to put a stop to this. We can't have men terrorizing our citizens." She stared forward a moment, then looked back up at him. "Though I can't say I am sorry they scared Grant and Carlton." She put her hand to her mouth. "That was a terrible

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

thing to say, but they weren't really harmed."

"It did do my heart good to see them in such a state." He leaned closer to her. "Those are terrible thoughts." He brushed her hair from her face. "Maybe after the festival, they can be convinced to move on."

"Father will miss Gilliskel."

"He can stay. 'Tis the rest who need to leave you in peace."

"I shall speak with the minister at the festival and make sure he realizes I have no intentions of wedding any of them. He knows Father is not responsible." She pulled Duncan's hand to her face and rubbed her cheek against it. She smiled. "I'm going to win the sheep shearing contest this year."

He rubbed his thumb across her cheek. "You are?"

"Yes. For three years I've come in second to Eachan's head shearer. This year I shall beat him." She crooked her head to the side. "I have a plan."

"I am sure 'tis quite a plan." He looked into her eyes.

In the darkness of the garden, his eyes appeared to be dark pools. They drew her to him. She leaned forward.

He met her, his lips against hers. They burned her skin. She pulled her hands from his and wrapped her arms around his neck, leaning into him. He entangled his hands in her hair, pulling it loose, letting it fall down her back. Her body heated and her breath burned in her lungs. She clung to him, knowing she would dissolve if she didn't.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "I should not take such liberties."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She leaned her head against his shoulder, her breath ragged. Finally, she raised her head and looked at him. She leaned forward and kiss him again. She didn't care about propriety or liberties. All she cared about was the taste and the feel of him.

She tangled her hands in his hair and flicked her tongue against his lips. As they parted, she darted her tongue into his mouth. She rubbed her hands down his shoulder and across his chest. Yanking loose the buttons, she ran her fingertips over his bare skin, feeling the softness of his hair.

He gasped against her as her fingers danced over his hardened nipples. He broke the kiss and pulled her against him. "Eirica, lass, we should no'..."

"I'm tired of what I should and shouldn't do. I'm hounded by men I want no part of because of my father. I'm on the shelf because a man chose to tarnish my reputation, hoping to win the golden ring and have all that is mine." She placed her hand against his cheek. "I want something that is mine to remember when I'm old and alone." She kissed his cheek. "Do I ask so much?"

He shook her head. "But..."

"But what?"

"I can promise you nothing."

She looked into his eyes. Eyes that burned with desire. "I want no promise." She smiled. "I want a kiss. A kiss from a man who is handsome, strong and tastes better than any sweet I've ever eaten."

His face turned red and she giggled. Then she leaned

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

forward and nibbled at his lips.

He laughed and pulled her to him. "I shall give you a kiss you'll remember on many a dark night." He captured her lips. His hand slid up her back and rubbed her neck, his thumb stroking behind her ear.

Leaning her back against the bench, he kissed her neck and across her throat. Her breath caught and her body tingled. He unbuttoned the top button of her dress and lazily stroked the exposed skin. She shivered against him. He continued to unbutton her dress until only the lacy material of her chemise that covered her breasts. He reached down and nipped at her nipple.

She took in a deep breath and could not release it. Her body burned and she wanted more of his touches. He continued to nibble at her breast until she grabbed his head and tried to pull him back up to her mouth. She wanted to scream. She wanted him to continue.

He raised his head and kissed her again, his tongue tasting hers. She sighed against him and clung to him. He pulled her into his arms and stroked her back. "'Tis time to go back to the house."

She didn't want to go, but she didn't want to be discovered in the garden like a common serving girl either. She leaned against him for a while, then sat and buttoned her dress. She smiled at him. She kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you."

* * *

Duncan stared at the ceiling. The lamp made circles of

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

light, casting shadows that flitted across the walls. He had no idea what time it might be, but the night crawled by as his body burned. Eirica invaded his dreams when he did manage to fall asleep, her soft body pressed against his. He wanted her. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted a woman as much as he wanted her.

A woman who had everything and he, nothing. He threw back the covers and climbed from bed. There had to be a way to push her from his mind. He took the lamp and set it on his desk. Taking pen and paper, he wrote a letter applying for the position of tutor with a family in the lowlands. *Far, far away from Eirica*. That would be the only way he would be able to keep his hands from her.

He should have posted this a week ago, but he didn't want to leave. This place felt like home. At no other place where he'd held a position had he had that feeling.

He was enjoying it too much. He knew he shouldn't settle in. No permanence went with his positions. The boys grew older and went to school, and he moved to a new position.

He had to leave. *Soon*. While his heart would still let him. It would crack when he left, but if he departed soon enough, there might be something of it remaining.

He sighed and sealed the correspondence. He would put it out for the post tomorrow. He should hear within two weeks. With Gilliskel's recommendation, he should have no trouble attaining the position.

Hopefully, Eirica had set about hiring a governess, but he could not let that worry him. He had to leave. Leave before

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

things happened he would regret.

He blew out the lamp and lay back down on the bed. Her scent lingered where she had touched him. *Lilacs*. Her hair was so soft as it had brushed his skin. *And her lips. Hot*. Wanting him. He wanted her.

He groaned. This wasn't the way to get to sleep. He slugged his pillow several times trying to soften it. He plopped his head back on it and then rolled on his side. She would fit nicely within his arms. He could stroke her, smell her, taste her.

He threw off the covers and sat up, holding his head in his hands. He would never get to sleep. Two nights in a row and he'd be walking about like a creature from the nether world. He ran his hands through his hair.

Maybe a warm glass of milk would help. His ma had always given him warm milk when he had trouble getting to sleep. It couldn't do any harm. He'd sneak down to the kitchen and fix himself some. Cook would never know the difference if he cleaned up any mess he made. The last thing he wanted was Cook upset with him for being in her kitchen.

He pulled on his breeches, dug a candle from the cupboard and lit it. Peering around the edge of his door, he saw nothing in the darkened hallway. A snore issued from one of the rooms between him and the stairway. No noises came from Angus' room at the other end of the hall. At least someone was having a peaceful night.

He crept down the hall, thankful for the carpet runner against his bare feet. He hoped no one else prowled about the

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

house at this hour. He'd hate to be found with his nightshirt tucked into his breeches and no shoes.

A board creaked. Duncan stopped and listened. Halfway to the staircase, he wouldn't be able to get back to his room without being seen. He listened, but he didn't hear any other sound.

He sighed. *Old houses and their noises.* He stepped onto the top stair. The candle barely held the darkness at bay. With little moonlight, the far end of the stairs were black as pitch. Something brushed against his cheek and he started. He put his hand to his chest. He'd laugh, but he didn't want anyone to hear him. To be startled by nothing showed he'd had too little sleep. Angus' stories were nothing more than the ranting of an old man with an unsettled mind.

He walked down the stairs, holding the candle so he could see the stairs. The floor behind him creaked. He turned to see who was behind him. The hall disappeared into blackness. *More imaginings.*

He stepped down. Someone pushed him. The candle fell from his hand and sputtered out. He lurched forward, grabbing for the handrail. Another shove followed the first and his grip on the railing slipped. He plunged forward, his head striking the wall. Pain shot through his temple. He clawed at the railing, but could not grasp it. His knees banged against the edge of the stairs and stabs of pain shot through his legs. He put out his hands, his teeth jarring as he flipped over and landed on his back. The sharp edges of the steps cut into his head, back and legs. He slid until he thumped into a heap at

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

the bottom.

Duncan reached out to pull himself up. The pain crashed through him like a thundering tide. He stood, then crumpled to the floor. He tried to pull himself up again. He needed help. If he hollered, someone would come.

He got one leg up, but the other wouldn't hold him. He teetered, then slumped down the wall. Where was the person who had pushed him?

He scooted toward the hallway leading to the kitchen. The pain increased as he moved and the world spun. He reached out for the wall. The blackness collided with him.

CHAPTER 10

“Cory! Cory,” Angus screamed. “I heard her. I heard the ghost.” He pulled at his blanket. “Cory, come here.”

Cory stumbled into Angus’ room, ran his hand through his hair, then rubbed his eyes. “What’s the matter?”

“I heard the ghost.”

Cory stared at Angus a moment. “Are you feelin’ poorly?”

“No, man. The ghost. In the hallway.” Angus pulled himself to a sitting position, twisting the covers between his fingers. “She’ll come for me.”

Cory shook his head. “I’ll get Miss Eirica.” He lit the lamp next to Angus’ bed.

Angus nodded. “Eirica will know what to do.” He glanced

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

around the room. "Hurry, man, before she comes in here."

Cory padded across the floor toward the door, the lamp in his hand. "Calm yourself. We don't want you to have a spell."

Angus waved his hand toward the door.

"I'm goin'." Cory walked out of the door, his bare legs sticking out from his nightshirt. "A fine sight I be," he muttered.

He stopped at the top of the stairs and listened. A soft sound came from the bottom. He held the lamp high and peered into the darkness. A bit of white reflected from the bottom.

He glanced around the hall. Seeing no one, he climbed down the stairs. "Ghosts. What will the man believe in next?"

Seeing a body at the bottom, he set his lamp down and hurried the rest of the way. "Master Duncan. Oh, scorch it to hell." He bent next to Duncan. "Wake up, Master Duncan."

Duncan didn't stir. Cory scooped him up into his arms and carried him up the stairs. Stopping at Eirica's door, he kicked it with his bare foot. "Miss Eirica? Hurry! There's been an accident."

He shifted Duncan's weight. "You're a bit more to carry than the master." Duncan's arm hung toward the floor and Cory feared he would drop the man. He kicked Eirica's door again. "Hurry. Please, hurry."

Eirica flung the door open, holding a lamp. "Is Father having another spell? I don't hear him." Eirica's gaze flashed to the still body in Cory's arm. Her heart beat rapidly. Her breath caught in her throat.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"Your father is fit. Master Duncan has had a spill."

"Is he...?"

"He lives, but he's mighty heavy."

"Take him to his room. I'll be right there."

"You'd best check on the master before he has one of his fits. He's sure the ghost is after him."

She nodded. "I'll settle Father and be right along. Ring for a maid."

"What's going on?" Grant stuck his head out of his doorway.

"Nothing to concern you." Eirica turned toward her father's room. "Go back to bed."

She scurried into her father's room. "Father, are you all right?"

"The ghost, daughter. I heard the ghost in the hallway." His eyes were bright, and he glanced around the room, peering into the corners.

"What you heard was Duncan falling down the stairs. Not a ghost." She sat and patted his hand. "I must go and tend to him and shall need Cory's help. Will you be all right alone, or do you want me to send a maid to sit with you?"

Angus threw back the covers. "I shall go with you to see Duncan. The ghost pushed him." He struggled to sit up. "I don't know why the ghost would want to hurt Duncan. He isn't of this house." He looked up at Eirica, bewilderment on his face.

"I doubt the ghost pushed him." Eirica stood. "Now you must get back in bed."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I shall go with you." He pushed himself to his feet, swaying.

"But, Father..."

"I shall go."

She reached for his wrapper and helped him on with it. It would take more time to argue with him than to take him along. She put her arm around him to steady him. "Come, Father."

He was heavy and she wobbled as they crept across the room.

"Is he injured badly?"

"I don't know. That is why I wish to hurry." Eirica ignored the spinning in her stomach. If something happened to Duncan, her heart would break. She pressed her free hand against her lips, remembering his kiss of a few hours before. He had to be fine.

Keegan peered around the edge of his door. "What's the problem?"

"There's been an accident." Eirica tightened her grip on her father as he swayed. "Could you help my father to Mr. MacKinnon's room?"

"I would be delighted to help. Let me get my breeches."

"I haven't time to wait. Come here and take him now before we both fall in a heap." She smiled at him. The whole world seemed to be about in nightdress. "No will mind your nightshirt."

Keegan hesitated at the door, then pulled it wide, his face flushing red. The red-and-white striped nightshirt showed

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

spindly legs below his knees.

Eirica suppressed a giggle as he wrapped his arm around her father. "I shall go on ahead."

"He'll be fine, daughter," Angus called after her.

At Duncan's door, she stopped and took a deep breath. If she willed it hard enough, he would be fine. He was a strong man.

She shoved open the door. Never had she been one to shy away from the truth and she would face it now. Her heart lodged in her throat.

Cory stood by the bed. "I rang for a maid."

"Thank you. Go to the kitchen and bring up some fresh water. Make sure Mrs. MacAlister is awake. I need her help." Eirica walked to the bed and stared at Duncan. A large lump had already formed on his forehead.

She reached for a cloth and dipped it into the water on the table near the bed. Softly she washed his face. She saw no blood, but that didn't mean he wasn't sorely injured. "Duncan, can you hear me?"

His eyelids fluttered, but didn't open. She should send for the surgeon. This would be the third time in two days. *Would anyone go before dawn?* She sat on the bed and continued to wash his neck and then his arms. *Has he broken something?*

He moaned.

The door behind her opened. She glanced back. Her father walked quite well leaning against Keegan. "Set him in the chair and get him a blanket, please."

"Gladly, Miss Eirica."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Mrs. MacAlister bustled into the room, her white linen wrapper tied firmly around her waist. "What has happened now?"

"Mr. MacKinnon has fallen down the stairs." Eirica held his hand. Maybe he would realize she was there and would come back to her. *What if he didn't ever awaken?* She blinked. Tears would help nothing at the moment.

"What was he doing up at this hour?" Mrs. MacAlister's nightcap sat awry, her graying hair poking out from beneath it.

"The ghost pushed him," said Angus. "She doesn't like him, but I don't know why?"

"What's he talking about?" Mrs. MacAlister walked over and peered down at Duncan.

"The ghost who has taken up haunting our house." Eirica squeezed Duncan's hand. His flesh still held warmth.

Mrs. MacAlister looked toward the ceiling and shook her head. "All I need is rumors of a ghost pushing people. All of the maids will quit and then where shall we be?"

"No one listens to Father." Eirica couldn't worry about superstitious maids when the man she loved might be dying. "We need the surgeon."

Mrs. MacAlister put her hands on her hips. "Nothing would persuade anyone to go into the village during the dark of a moonless night. If the master himself were dying, they'd rather be turned out on the morrow than ride into town now."

"Even highwaymen have to sleep." She wanted the surgeon to check Duncan. She couldn't just sit and wait.

"It'll be light in a few hours. Then I shall send someone

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

right away.” Mrs. MacAlister laid her hand on Duncan’s chest. “Until then, we shall tend him the best we can.”

Eirica looked at the older woman for encouragement. Mrs. MacAlister had nursed many in her times when the surgeon wasn’t available. “Do you think he’ll be fine?”

“I don’t know, lass. We must pray ’tis not his time to leave us.” Mrs. MacAlister took the cloth from Eirica and rinsed it in clean water. “He doesn’t seem to be bleeding, but his head doesn’t look good.” She pulled open his nightshirt. Dark bruises had formed in stripes across his chest.

“Gracious.” Eirica put her hand to her mouth.

Duncan moaned as Mrs. MacAlister washed his chest. His eyelids fluttered, then came open. “Where am I?”

“In your room.” Eirica squeezed his hand and he squeezed back. “Do you remember what happened?”

“Someone pushed me.” He lifted his head, then let it fall back to the pillows.

“I told you the ghost pushed him.”

Eirica stared at her father. “I don’t think the ghost would be strong enough to push such a large man.”

“Ghosts are very strong.” Angus nodded vigorously.

Eirica turned back to Duncan to conceal her smile. Her father looked so serious.

“’Twas no’ a ghostly hand that pushed me, but one of flesh and blood. A mighty push it was. Twice.”

“Did you see anyone?” First highwaymen, now someone pushing people down the stairs. She couldn’t have her employees and guests in danger. This had to stop. She

THE KILLED GOVERNESS

wouldn't see anything happen to the man she loved. And love him she did. More than life itself. She would give everything she had to have him.

If only he would have her.

Which he wouldn't because of the farm. Everyone but Duncan wanted her because of the farm. It stood between the two of them. Life was such a jumble.

"I heard the floor creak, but I saw naught." He shifted on the bed.

"Do you think you broke anything?" She looked at his legs and arms. They seemed to be straight.

Duncan lifted his right arm and moved it about, then his left. "They seem to work, though my left elbow hurts."

Eirica took his arm and looked at the elbow. "You left a hunk of skin in the hallway."

He bent his arm to examine the spot. He nodded, then let his arm fall onto the bed. He pulled up one leg, bending it at the knee. "That one works. Shall I try the other?" He smiled at her.

"Yes. I would hate to have you broken into bits."

He slid up the other leg. "I seem to be in one piece, but a bit sore."

"You have a goose egg on your head," said Eirica.

He put his hand to his head. "Ouch." He pushed himself to a half-sitting position. "I seem to be in one piece. The rest of you can return to bed. Nothing can be done for bumps and bangs."

"You could've been killed." Eirica folded her hands in her

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

lap.

He took her hand in his. "I was no'. I only took a bad spill. In a few days I shall be none the worse." He glanced over at Angus. "Your father needs to be abed."

"He insisted on coming down here to see to you."

Mrs. MacAlister rubbed her eyes. "We could all use a cup of tea and some biscuits. Cory, come with me to help me carry." She stomped out of the room.

"I did no' mean to put anyone out." Duncan stroked Eirica's arm.

"You didn't. She just wants you to think so. She was as concerned as the rest of us." Eirica wanted to reach over and kiss him, but her father and Keegan were across the room.

"He needs something to make him sleep." Angus pushed his gray hair back from his face. "Go and get some of my medicine, daughter. It will help his pain."

"I shall be fine," said Duncan.

"Fiddlesticks. You have no need to suffer when we have medicine in the house. I can get more." Angus waved his hand in the air. "Go, daughter. Now."

Eirica smiled at Duncan. "He's right." She rose. "I'll be right back."

"I shall walk with you." Keegan opened the door.

"I can walk to the end of the hall alone." She brushed past him.

"I know, but I need to find my breeches." His face flushed red again.

Duncan laughed. "'Tis a sight to see so many about in

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

nightshirts.” He leaned back and watched Eirica leave. He wanted to know why someone had shoved him down the stairs. He posed no threat to any here. Had he been mistaken for one of the suitors in the dark?

A shudder ran through him. Had it come to murder to have Eirica’s hand?

“I must talk with you.” Angus pushed back his covers and rose from the chair, swaying.

“I can hear you from there.” He didn’t want to crawl from bed to help the man. Every bit of his body ached. He couldn’t let the old man fall. He would break something.

“So can the walls.” He tottered as he shuffled his feet against the carpet.

Duncan threw back the covers and eased himself to a sitting position. “Wait and I shall come to you.”

“No. You will stay in bed.” Angus put out an arm for balance as he wobbled. “I can make it.” He pursed his lips together and his brows knitted. He grabbed the bedpost as he neared the bed and used the edge of the mattress to balance. He plopped down next to Duncan, a broad smile on his face. “I told you I could make it.”

“So you did.” Duncan leaned against the pillows. The ache in his head was dreadful. He wanted the tea Mrs. MacAlister had promised and the medicine Eirica had gone to fetch. Tomorrow he would study on what had happened. He had to find who was behind this before someone else was hurt.

“Now you must listen carefully.” Angus glanced over his shoulder and then leaned close to Duncan. “What I have to say

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

is important and I don't want other ears overhearing."

Duncan nodded. Whatever Angus had to say would keep his mind from the pain. It did not matter if it made sense or not. Angus always imparted something interesting.

"I've done a terrible thing." Angus clasped his hands together and looked at Duncan.

"What—"

"Just listen. I'm going to die soon." He waved his hand in the air as if the statement held no import. "I so wanted to see Eirica settled with a husband to take care of her. A woman shouldn't be alone. 'Tis unseemly."

"There's nothing unseemly about a spinster." Angus wanted the best for Eirica, but he needed to understand his meddling had caused her great pain.

"Such an ugly word. I don't want my daughter to be a dried up old prune of a woman who takes care of her younger sister's children because she never had a chance to marry herself." He smiled and nodded to himself. "A woman needs a man to take care of her. Eirica should have children. She'd like that. I would like that." He paused and took a deep breath.

"You should rest, Angus. I shall help you back to the chair. Tomorrow we can talk." Duncan pushed himself away from the pillows that cradled his head and eased the pain.

Angus put a gnarled hand on Duncan. "Lay back. I shall be fine." He took several breaths. "I just wanted Eirica to be happy. I don't know how I got things so muddled." He shook his head. "I don't remember things so well."

Duncan laughed. "Eirica understands."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“That’s how you came to be here.” Angus patted Duncan’s hand. “You have been one of my better mistakes.” He laughed. “The rest. I didn’t know they would swarm like a pack of vultures.” He lowered his head. “I don’t remember promising Eirica to all of them.”

“She knows that.” Duncan didn’t want Angus to spend his last days feeling guilty. The old man couldn’t help what had happened. “She has forgiven you.”

“She is a wonderful daughter. We wouldn’t have survived without her.” Angus sighed. “I have brought more ridicule upon her. That wasn’t my intent. I only wanted to see her settled before I join my Colina.” He looked up at Duncan. “None of them are worthy of her.” He shook his head. “What am I to do?”

“Send them packing.” *Before someone gets hurt.*

“I would hate to see Gilliskel go. I so enjoy his company, but his sons are boorish. And the rest.” He threw his hands up in the air. “Do you think they’d leave if I asked?”

Duncan hoped they would. He would like to see them all gone before he had to leave. Then Eirica would be safe. Surely she would find someone who would wed her. Someone worthy of her. “I do no’ know. You can only try.”

“Might be I can convince her to take Eachan MacFie’s offer. He was the first and can take care of her.” Angus picked at the blanket covering Duncan.

“He is no’ a good choice.” Duncan couldn’t bear the thought of the man touching Eirica. He didn’t want any man to touch her, but Eachan... The man made his skin crawl.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“He was the first. He has land and money. She would want for nothing.”

“She has this farm. She wants for nothing now.”

“Except a husband.”

“She does no’ need a husband. Especially one who would take her land from her, and Eachan would surely do that.” All he had ever wanted was the land. Not Eirica. She deserved a man who could support her and love her, not her possessions.

Angus studied Duncan’s face for a moment. “Eachan thinks he is quite the master, but still, he is from the village and was involved in the ‘incident’ that started Eirica’s trouble. His wedding her would set that right.”

“He ruined her reputation on purpose.”

“What?” Angus’ eyes opened wide and his mouth dropped.

“He broke the wheel on the carriage so they could no’ return and Eirica would be forced to wed him. When she refused, he smashed your wife’s vase.” Duncan took a deep breath to calm the racing of his heart. Eachan had once before been behind the trouble. He might be again. Either way, Duncan wanted nothing more than to bodily throw him from the house and inform him never to return.

Angus’ eyes narrowed and he sat silently for a moment. “She should have told me.”

“She did no’ know herself until he showed up a few days ago.”

“I shall have the man removed from my house.” Angus straightened himself. “I shan’t abide his being about my daughter after the way he treated her.” He stared at his lap,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

picking at his nightshirt. After several moments, he looked up at Duncan. "You must take care of Eirica."

"You are still here and as long as you are, she is in no danger." If the matter weren't settled before Angus' death, she would have a time trying to get rid of the suitors. The carrot dangled before them would then be within their reach.

"I don't know how much longer I shall be among you." He shifted on the bed. "I feel so weak and so often I don't know what's happening." He reached out and took Duncan's hand again. "You cannot know how terrible it is to not remember your own kin or what happened a moment ago. I am a useless, old man who can no longer cut his own meat." He laughed hoarsely. "I suppose I should be glad I can still chew it."

"Look at your blessings." Duncan patted the frail hand.

"Eirica is my most cherished blessing. I cannot rest if I don't know she's taken care of."

"She can take care of herself." Of all the women he'd ever met, she was the most capable of taking care of herself. That was part of why he loved her. She had starch and a spark about her not many had. No matter what was thrown her way, she didn't let it beat her under.

"You must promise me that you'll take care of her." Angus squeezed Duncan's hand. "Then I shall be able to rest."

"I cannot take care of her. I am but a tutor...and a penniless one at that."

"Money doesn't matter." Angus smiled. "I have seen the way she looks at you. 'Tis the same way Colina looked at me." He sighed. "She loves you."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I canno' take care of her."

"You must promise me to take care of her. You must." Angus tightened his grip on Duncan's arm. "She won't be safe if you desert her." A wild gleam came into his eyes. "I shall make it possible for you to wed her. Yes. I can do that." He nodded.

"I shall no' take money to marry your daughter." He wouldn't be lumped in with the rest. Never would he marry a woman for money. Not even the one he loved.

Angus stared at him for a moment as if he didn't understand what Duncan had said. Footsteps sounded in the hallway. "I would never sell my daughter. I can make it possible." He nodded again.

"What you need to worry about is that those men want to rob your daughter of her inheritance. She must be safely guarded from them." He had to make Angus understand while he still had a grasp on reality. "That I canno' do."

"They won't get her land." He chuckled. "Never." He leaned closer to Duncan. "You must promise to take care of her and see she's safe. You're the only one who can."

The door behind them opened.

He gripped Duncan's hand with his frail fingers. "Please. You must promise."

Duncan glanced at the door and back to Angus. He couldn't wed Eirica, but he would make sure the others did her no harm. "I promise she and her land will be safe."

CHAPTER 11

Eirica glanced at the tables set up around the village square. The festival at sheep shearing season was her favorite. Food for sale abounded as well as crafts made by the women. She smiled to herself. She wanted to bounce about and dance from foot to foot as Anne did, but it would be unseemly. Especially since she had to be in the church in a few minutes with the other landowners to discuss what to do about the highwaymen and the disappearing sheep. “May I go and look?” Anne pulled at her sleeve. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the coins Eirica had given her earlier. “I want to look for something.” She clutched the doll Eirica had found in the attic in her arm. “My new dolly might like a hat or a new

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

blanket.”

“I don’t think they will have anything to fit your dolly.” Eirica laughed. “Stay with Nanny. I have business to attend to with Father.”

“I shall. I won’t get out of her sight.” Anne grabbed Nanny’s hand and dragged her toward where the wares were set out on the tables.

Eirica wanted to shop also, but it would have to wait until after the meeting and sheep-shearing contest. “Cory, take Father over to the church. I shall meet you there in a moment.” She moved off toward a table set up to register for the contest. The suitors followed her.

As she nodded to the villagers, they parted to allow her group through, staring openly. Eirica held her head high. She refused to let them intimidate her. Duncan appeared at her elbow as she reached the table. She wanted to take his arm, but decided the villagers had enough gossip.

“Your father is settled and waiting for you. May I do anything else for you?”

Eirica leaned closer to him. “Figure out how to get them to stop following me.” She inclined her head toward the suitors.

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “You could offer to feed them.”

Eirica pulled money from her pocket. “Food would probably keep them happy for a while.”

“Eirica, you can’t be planning to enter the sheep shearing contest.” Grant frowned.

“What will people think?” Keegan moved to stand beside

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

her. "Tis unseemly."

"I've entered for the past five years and no one has said a thing." She wrote her name on the list and paid her entrance fee. She'd also donated ten sheep for the contest. The money from the wool would go to the church, as would the money from the mutton when it was sold. With the amount she donated, no one really dared say anything. At least not within her hearing.

She turned. "Where's Gilliskel and who is taking care of him?" She looked from Grant to Carlton.

"We left him with Angus." Grant shoved his hands in his breeches' pockets, looking over Eirica's head.

"My father has a meeting to attend. Gilliskel cannot be left by himself, and Father needs Cory. You'd best go and find him. I shall buy you all some dinner."

"I can't take money from my intended." Ranald tried to squeeze between Keegan and Eirica. "I shall pay for your dinner, Miss Eirica."

Eirica stifled a groan. At least the newest suitor, recovered enough to come to the festival, wasn't a complete wastrel. "I need to attend the meeting with Father. He really needs—"

"Tis not a woman's place to attend to such matters." Ranald reached over and took her hand. "Let me go in your place to discuss the unpleasant business. 'Tis my duty as your future husband."

She smiled through clenched teeth. "I've promised to wed no one." She tried to extricate her hand from his.

"Your father—" said Ranald.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"Canno' be held to his word." Duncan glared at Ranald.

Ranald stepped back.

"Pay no mind to the governess." Carlton pushed Ranald aside. "Mind you, she has been promised to our father and she will wed him."

"She's to be my bride." Keegan wedged himself next to Eirica, knocking her into Duncan.

Duncan put out an arm to balance her. "Gentlemen," he hissed, "you're creating a scene and damaging Miss Eirica's standing in her village. Why would she want to wed anyone who'd make her the laughingstock among her friends?" He looked from one to another. "Now"—he thrust money into Ranald's hand—"go and have some dinner. I shall find Gilliskel and bring him to the tables, while Miss Eirica attends the meeting." His eyebrows knit together and his mouth formed a thin line.

"But..." Grant stopped after a glance from Duncan.

Duncan offered Eirica his arm and moved her from among the men.

"Thank you."

"'Tis my pleasure." He glanced over his shoulder. "They are no' following us."

"They're contemplating their stomachs." She leaned her head briefly against his shoulder. "I must go. Thank you for tending to Gilliskel. I can't believe those sons of his. He could become lost or hurt. I should have had brought a servant to take care of him."

"The servants are entitled to enjoy the festivities. 'Tis the

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

sons' responsibility to care for their father." Duncan patted her hand. "I shall see to him while you're in the meeting. Then I shall meet you at the sheep shearing."

"Are you coming to cheer me on?" She would do her best to beat Eachan's head shearer to impress Duncan. *Would being the best shearer in the village impress a man?* She didn't care. This year she would win.

He smiled and wiggled his eyebrows again. "I shall be there to beat the pants off of you."

She stopped, dropping his arm. She stared at him, then laughed. "We shall see. We shall see." She glanced around to see if anyone watched them, then kissed him on the cheek. "I wouldn't count my winnings yet." She flounced away from him. She would show him. Her footsteps felt light. If only she could leave the suitors in the village, all would be right with the world.

She reached the steps to the church and lifted her skirt to climb them.

"Eirica, wait a moment," Eachan called to her.

She let her head fall forward. Peace was so fleeting. She turned. "I'm in a hurry, Eachan."

"I wish to speak with you."

"Anything you have to say will have to wait." She turned away from him.

Eachan grabbed her arm. "It can't wait. It must be settled now."

"I have nothing to discuss with you." She pulled against his grasp, but he tightened it. "You're hurting me. If you don't

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

release me, I shall create a scene.”

Eachan dropped her arm. “Then speak with me.”

“I’m not a child to be ordered about.” *The man had more nerve.*

“You’re a woman.” He stepped in front of her. “This nonsense with these men has gone on long enough.”

She nodded. In that she had to agree with him. She wished she could wave her hand and they would disappear.

“That governess. He must be dismissed forthwith. ’Tis not seemly.”

“Who I have in my employee is none of your business.” She stepped to the side to go around him.

He stepped sideways. “I’ve arranged with the minister to wed us as soon as the meeting is finished. A quiet affair. Then the rest will be sent packing. Including the governess.” He sneered as he spoke, his upper lip curling.

“I shan’t wed you, Eachan MacFie. I told you that seven years ago and the answer has not changed.” She folded her arms in front of her. She glanced about, hoping someone would arrive for the meeting. She didn’t wish an altercation with him. Not alone.

“You have no say in the matter. Your father will agree with me that ’tis the proper thing to do. It will reinstate your reputation within the community.” He smiled and reached for her hand.

She stepped out of his reach. “’Tis too late for you to try and save my reputation. Seven years too late.”

“After the meeting is through, I shall inform your father of

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

my plans and our two estates will be joined. Then you'll be protected from those who wish to steal your property."

Who would protect her from him? She shook her head. "Eachan, let me pass."

"You don't need to check on your father. He's fine." He stepped down until his breath caressed her face.

"I'm not going to check on Father. I'm going to the meeting." She wouldn't let him best her. She wouldn't back up any more. She had nothing to fear. There were too many people near them. He wouldn't dare to harm her. A shiver ran down her spine.

"Gilliskel is seated with his sons enjoying his meal. He wants to know when Angus is joining him." Duncan's voice swept around her like a blanket and the shivering stopped.

"I shall have Cory bring Angus shortly. As soon as we're finished with the meeting."

Duncan's hand pressed against her back.

"Eirica, you aren't planning on attending the meeting, are you?" Eachan eyes widened. "'Tis for the landowners."

"I run the largest farm about." Eirica picked up her skirts and walked around Eachan.

He glared as she passed. "'Tis not seemly for a woman to be involved."

"You weren't concerned about seemly seven years ago. Why should it bother you now?" She stomped up the stairs, holding her head high.

"Eirica, you can't go in there. 'Twill not be allowed."

She turned and stared at him. "'Twill be, if the village

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

wants help from us to stop the highwaymen. Nothing my father pledges shall I honor if I'm not in attendance."

"My future wife shan't involve herself in such matters."

A dark shadow passed over Duncan's face.

Eirica smiled from the top of the stairs. "Your future wife isn't involved."

"Your father will honor my wishes." Eachan started after her, his arm outstretched.

Duncan placed a hand on Eachan's shoulder. Eachan put his hand up to brush away Duncan's. Duncan nodded to Eirica. She sped into the church.

* * *

"We shall put up two hundred pounds toward the reward to capture the highwaymen." Eirica perched on the front pew, turned so she could see the men seated behind her.

Angus nodded from his wheelchair. "My daughter is correct. That is a sufficient amount."

"The rest of us cannot match that," said Mr. MacIntyre, a small farm owner.

"We don't expect you to. Everyone will promise what they can afford. The MacDougall farm is the largest, so we expect to give the most." Eirica smiled at the men. "The more money we offer in reward, the more likely someone will be willing to try and stop the highwaymen."

Pastor MacLean stood. "We can also put up the McShane Farm. No one has come to claim it since Mr. McShane passed away."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“’Tis going to ruin,” said Eachan. “Who would want it?”

“The land is good.” Eirica placed her hand on her father’s shoulder. “With the money offered, it could be repaired. I think there are sheep wandering on the property still.”

“Someone should take the animals.” Eachan stared at Eirica.

“The farm now belongs to the village, as do the sheep.” The pastor looked from one man to the next. “If you decide to give the farm as reward, whoever earns it will need the sheep.”

“I, for one, think ’tis a sound idea,” said Mr. MacIntyre.

“What if it doesn’t work?” asked Mr. MacDuff, a young man new to the area.

“Then we shall try something else.” Eachan rose and paced back and forth in front of the pews.

“A reward is the best we can do.” Angus picked at his blanket.

“If the reward doesn’t work, we must hire someone to patrol our roads until the problem is solved.” Eirica faced the men.

At first they had been resistant to her being part of the meeting, but when she had directed Cory to take her father out, they’d agreed to allow her to stay. Her stating that she wouldn’t honor any agreement her father made without her had helped also. Especially when Father had stated he needed Eirica there to remember what he promised for his memory had been slipping lately.

It had cost Father his dignity to confess such in front of the others and she hoped it would be one of those things he didn’t

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

remember. She loved him dearly and didn't want to see him suffer, either in mind or body.

He had become so frail. Her heart ached when she looked at him. She wished she could take him in her arms and hold onto him forever. She sighed softly. Soon it would be only Anne and her.

"Who would want the job?" asked Mr. MacIntyre.

"We have plenty of strong men who'd be glad for the coin," said Eirica.

"I shall put up a hundred pounds." Eachan stopped in front of Eirica. "'Tis enough money to inspire many of the men hereabouts. It's more than most see in their lives."

She looked away from him. He could well afford more, but he'd never been one to part freely with his money. He always donated half of what she did. If she were to wed him, the festival would be hard pressed to have enough sheep for the contest.

"I shall donate twenty-five. 'Tis all I can afford." Mr. MacDuff rose and stretched.

"I shall follow," said Mr. MacIntyre.

Several others joined them. Eirica looked around to where the minister sat. She needed to talk with him before Eachan did. She rose and walked across the room.

"Eachan shall be the one to hold the money," said Mr. MacDuff.

Eirica turned. A coldness swept through her. "The minister should keep the money."

"You don't trust me?" Eachan walked over and reached for

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

her arm.

She stepped aside. “’Twould be better if the money was left here at the church.”

“That’s an excellent idea.” Angus looked up. “The minister will be in charge. Then none of us have to worry about it.”

The men looked at Angus for a moment. They thought of disputing his statement, but he still held some authority.

A dark look crossed Eachan’s face. He opened his mouth, then closed it. Even he couldn’t cross the views of the largest landowner. Everyone had looked to Angus for years. Until he died, he would still be looked upon as the leader of the community.

The honor would pass to Eachan when Father died, and Eirica didn’t cherish that thought. Eachan didn’t have the wisdom nor the honor to be a leader. She couldn’t take her father’s place and Eachan owned the second largest farm.

Of course, the suitors would gladly welcome the honor along with owning her farm and her. She needed to speak with Pastor MacLean. She moved away from Eachan while he concentrated on the men.

“Angus is right. Pastor MacLean shall hold the money,” said Mr. MacDuff.

“Pastor, I need to speak with you.” She took his arm and steered him toward the back door.

“Mr. MacFie has been here to speak with me of your wedding this afternoon.” He patted her arm. “So have the Andersons.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She let her head fall forward for a moment, then looked up and smiled at the pastor. "Father has been very busy of late."

"So I gathered, child. He means well." Pastor MacLean laughed. "He leads everyone astray."

"I have no plans to wed." She needed the pastor to understand. Disaster could be averted with his help. She took in a deep breath and let it ease out to stop her pounding heart. She couldn't battle him also.

"You've made the correct decision not to wed Gilliskel Anderson." The pastor shook his head. "His sons aren't to be trusted. They are from the lowlands and know nothing of sheep."

"I'm so glad you agree." She breathed easier.

"However, Eachan has a good point. He hasn't been a widower for long, but your father is failing and you need someone to protect your interests once he's gone. Eachan would be the best choice. I shall be more than happy to wed you this afternoon. Your father is here."

"I don't wish to marry Eachan." She balled her hands into fists. "I don't wish to wed anyone. I'm quite capable of caring for the farm by myself."

"Now, child"—he patted her arm again—"you need a man to protect you."

"No."

"Pastor, we're ready," called Eachan.

Pastor MacLean walked up the aisle to the front of the church. "Do you wish to invite the rest of the men to stay for the ceremony?"

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"What ceremony?" Angus looked up, letting the edge of his blanket fall from his fingers.

"The marriage of Eachan and Eirica." Pastor MacLean picked up his Bible from the altar.

"My daughter is not marrying Eachan." Angus pushed himself upright in the chair. A frown creased his face. "Never shall I allow that man to wed my daughter." He waved a hand in the air. "Cory, take me outside. Eirica, come along."

Pastor MacLean stood with his mouth gaping.

"'Tis arranged. 'Tis the only thing that makes sense." Eachan stomped after Cory.

Angus touched Cory's arm. "Turn my chair." He faced Eachan. "You stay away from my daughter. You've caused her enough harm." He folded his hands in his lap. "Stay away from my farm. You are no longer welcome." He waved one hand at Cory. "Take me out."

Eirica smiled. Happiness swelled in her heart. It would be a good day. Her father had protected her. Not that she couldn't have protected herself, but he had been the father who had loved her when she was small. The sun shone brightly.

She would beat Duncan at the sheep shearing.

She floated down the steps of the church. "Cory, please take Father over to eat with Gilliskel. That'll make both of them happy." She reached in her pocket and pulled out several sovereigns. "If Anne is in need of more money, give her what is left after you buy dinner for you and Father. No wine."

"Of course not." Cory reached for the coins. He smiled at her. "I shall keep him safe."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Thank you.”

“Daughter, come and eat with us.”

She reached down and kissed his cheek. “I can’t, Father. I entered the sheep shearing contest and I need to go to the pens.”

Angus looked at her. His face beamed. “You’re an unusual daughter, but I love you. Show them what I taught you.”

She laughed. “I shall, Father.”

“We’ll come and watch the final rounds after we’ve eaten.” Angus shifted in his chair. “Cory, make sure we go to watch the finals.”

“I shall, sir.” He pushed Angus toward the food tables.

Eirica pushed her hair back from her face. *Poor Father*. He didn’t even trust his memory to remember he’d promised to watch her. He would be there even if he didn’t cheer for her.

She walked to the wagon and pulled a bundle from beneath the seat. Then she went into the inn. No one would be about and she could change. This year she wasn’t going to shear sheep in her dress. That was what had caused her to come in second. The skirts got in the way.

She would wear her breeches, and the gossips be damned. They had so much now to talk about, what would a bit more harm?

She smiled and squared her shoulders as she ducked out of the inn and made her way to the sheep pens. Eachan’s overseer announced the first round. He called Duncan’s name, but not hers. There would be three separate groups. The three fastest from each group would go on to the next round.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She wove her way through the crowd to stand in front of Duncan. The knot on his head was a nasty purple. His ribs had to be the same color. How he would be able to hold the sheep was beyond her. She watched while he waited for the judge to holler "Start." The muscles in his arms rippled against his shirt sleeves as he held the shears. He was intent on the sheep.

He was a man of many talents. She didn't understand why he didn't work on a farm instead of as a tutor. He had done an excellent job with Anne, but he also knew so much about sheep.

The judge started the round. Eirica gripped the top rail of the fence, her toe tapping against the bottom rung. She held her breath as she watched Duncan remove the wool in quick, even strokes. She glanced to the side to see how far the others had gotten.

"Done." Duncan stood.

The man next to him yelled "Done," and stood also.

With the third done, the judge yelled, "Round finished."

Eirica smiled as Duncan looked at her. "That was very good."

He walked over to the fence and smiled at her. "I told you I'd beat your breeches off."

She laughed. "'Tis to be seen yet. We've only begun."

He caressed the side of her face. "I see you ha' dressed for the occasion."

"Tongues can only wag so much."

"I hear them calling you." He lifted himself over the fence. "I shall cheer you on." He leaned close. His breath caressed

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

her cheek. "I'd hate to win the competition in the first round."

"Hah." She walked away to find which stall was hers.

After she finished first in her round, she let Duncan help her over the fence. "Shall we get some dinner before the second round starts?"

"Dressed like that?" He appraised her head to toe.

"You don't wish to eat with me dressed in breeches?" She hadn't thought he would care. Her heart skipped several beats.

"You look spectacular." He appraised her head to toe again. "I much prefer you dressed this way."

"You do?" She stared at him. She looked at the dirt down the front of her. "I'm in such disarray. I don't know why you'd prefer me in this manner of dress."

He winked, put his hand at the small of her back and smiled. "Where shall we eat?"

"As far from the others as possible. Not only do I not wish to see them, I don't wish to hear their comments about my dress."

Duncan found her a seat. Several of the women stared at her. She stared back.

"I shall get us plates." He walked away from her.

"Wait." She reached in her pocket and realized she had left her money in her dress.

"I'll get it." He smiled at her.

She watched him disappear. His breeches hugged his backside and she wanted to run her hands over them. Her face flushed. No wonder he preferred her in breeches if her backside looked anything like his. She looked away and

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

studied the people wandering around her. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. Children played. Adults talked and shopped.

“Here.” Duncan set a plate in front of her and slid in beside her. He set a bottle of wine in front of her. “With Angus elsewhere, we ca’ ha’ a drink.”

“You want to slow me down.” She brushed her cheek against his shoulder.

“I shall imbibe as much as you, so we shall have an even chance.” He opened the bottle and poured her a glass. “Whom do I have to beat beside you?”

“Eachan’s head shearer.” She cut off a piece of mutton.

“He didn’t seem so much.” He chewed on his mutton. “Have you never beat him?”

“My skirts got in the way.”

“You wore skirts while shearing?” He laughed. “I’m surprised you did no’ shear yourself.”

“The first time I did take a hunk from my skirt.” She put her hand to her mouth as she giggled. “’Twas a brand new dress and couldn’t be repaired. I spent the whole day holding a shawl I bought in front of me to cover the ragged tear.”

“You will no’ have that problem this year.”

“After watching you, I don’t need skirts in my way.”

“Thank you.” He took her hand under the table. “’Tis a glorious day.”

“Your ribs don’t hurt you?” She reached over and touched his forehead.

“They’re like your skirts, in my way, but I canno’ let that

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

slow me down.” He grabbed her hand and kissed her palm. “Did you come up with a plan to stop the highwaymen?”

“Yes. We’re offering a reward. ’Twill be announced after the winner of the sheep shearing. Hopefully, everyone will rest easier.”

“Ready to have your breeches beat?” He smiled.

She wanted to kiss him. For luck. For both of them. Just because. She released his hand and stood. “We shall see whose breeches are beat.”

She strolled across the lawn next to him, wanting to take his arm, but not touching him. She had to keep her mind on the sheep shearing if she was to beat him. She hoped they wouldn’t be in the same group this time, since only one would be chosen for the final round.

She held her breath as they called names. She heard hers and moved to her stall. She didn’t hear Duncan’s name and let out a long breath. Then she settled herself and listened for the judge to start the round. At his command, she concentrated on the sheep in front of her. With long, even strokes, she removed the wool, then hollered “Done,” and stood. She had heard no one else call out yet.

“Miss Eirica wins the round,” called the judge.

She did a little dance, then let Duncan help her over the fence. “Now ’tis your turn.”

“I’ll be in the final round to see who is the best.” He smiled at her and walked over to a stall as the judge called his name.

Anne grabbed her hand. “Are we too late to watch you?”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I'm in the final round. You can watch both Mr. MacKinnon and I, if he wins his round."

"He can't beat you. You're the best." Anne squeezed her sister's hand.

"He's very good." Eirica saw her father coming towards her.

"Daughter, you'll be the talk of the village." He smiled at her.

"Am I not already?"

"Yes, but that was my doing. This is yours."

She smoothed her father's hair back from his face. "We can watch Duncan. He is up now."

Cory pushed Angus over to where he could see Duncan. The suitors formed a semi-circle behind Angus. Grant and Carlton glared at her. Her breeches were not to their liking. Ranald stared, his mouth gaping. Remembering Duncan's preference in her dress, she tried to move in front of someone so Ranald couldn't stare at her backside. A shiver ran through her and her face flushed.

Duncan stood and yelled, "Done."

"Did he win?" Anne bounced up and down, pulling at Eirica's arm.

"Yes, darling, he won." The contest wouldn't have meant as much if Duncan wasn't in it.

He bounded over the fence. "Who shall be the third?"

"Eachan's head shearer," Eirica said.

Anne threw herself at Duncan. "You won." She smiled up at him. "You won't beat Eirica."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"We shall see, little one." He ruffled Anne's hair.

"She shouldn't be in such a contest." Carlton crossed his arms. "'Tis not seemly."

"Leave the child alone," said Gilliskel. "If she wishes to shear sheep, let her."

"Father, your bride shouldn't be dressed in breeches and shearing sheep."

"She isn't my bride and she's of an age to do as she pleases. She's no longer a girl in the school room, but a woman grown."

Grant reached out to his father. "Now, Father—"

"Hush. Your behavior of late has been reprehensible." Gilliskel turned away from him.

Eirica turned away from him. She waited until the next round was finished. Eachan's head shearer had won. Her stomach did a flip. She wanted more than anything to beat him. She also wanted to beat Duncan.

* * *

Eirica wiped her hands on her breeches and focused her mind on sheep. Neither the suitors nor Duncan could invade her mind. She had to beat Eachan's head shearer. She heard her name called and moved forward.

Duncan walked next to her. He put his hand on her shoulder, bent and kissed her on the cheek. "Good luck."

She smiled at him and walked into her stall. A large ram was in the stall, glaring at her. "All right, sheep. You will behave." She picked up the shears and waited for the signal.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

As the judge yelled “Start,” she grabbed the sheep and removed strips of wool. She let her years of practice take over as she finished the body and removed the wool from the front legs. She finished the back leg and heard Duncan yell, “Done.”

She grabbed the last leg and stripped off the last of the wool. “Done,” she yelled as she stood.

“Done,” yelled Eachan’s head shearer.

She looked over at Duncan. A broad smile creased his face. He patted his backside and the heat crept up her face. Again she’d come in second. At least she’d beaten Eachan’s head shearer. She looked toward her family.

Eachan stood behind them. He glowered and pushed his way through the crowd. He leaned over the fence toward her. “This is not finished.” He glared at her. “You’re lucky your father can buy you a husband. No one would want a woman as wanton as you.”

CHAPTER 12

Eirica climbed down from the wagon, ignoring the hands held out to help her. It had been a long day, but one of the better festivals. Cory helped Father from the carriage and Duncan saw to Gilliskel. Nanny tried to rouse Anne and finally engaged one of the men to carry her upstairs.

The suitors would probably want a late supper, but Cook wasn't going to be in a mood to fix it. She had had Mrs. MacAlister buy some mutton and pudding at the festival so they could serve a cold supper.

"Mrs. MacAlister, please set out the food. I have some things to tend before I come in, but the men can go ahead and eat. If Father wants anything, send it up to his room. He needs

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

to rest now." Eirica pulled her shawl about her to ward off the cool night air.

"Come in the house." Keegan stepped up beside her. "You've had a long day. Your men can tend to anything out here."

"Yes, Eirica. We have seen little of you today. Come to supper with us." Carlton reached for her arm.

She sidestepped him. Part of the charm of the day had been seeing little of all of them. "Go and eat. I'm not really hungry. I shall see you on the morrow."

"You must eat and we need to discuss certain matters." Grant took his father's arm and helped him toward the house.

"We need to settle this business of a wedding and the buying of sheep." Ranald limped, his man servant coming to his side to help him.

"No business will be conducted tonight." Duncan appeared at her side. "Miss Eirica is tired. On the morrow will be soon enough."

The suitors glared at him.

"What business is it of yours what we discuss with Miss Eirica?" demanded Carlton.

Duncan stared them into silence. "Mrs. MacAlister can probably find an extra bottle of wine to go with the cold mutton."

"That's a good idea." Eirica wanted to laugh at the looks on the suitors' faces. They might argue with Duncan, but none of them would risk bringing out his anger to the point of blows. They feared him enough to leave her alone.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She walked toward the sheep pens. She really didn't need to tend to anything, but she couldn't face a meal with the suitors. They grumbled behind her as they made their way to the house.

"You're tired, lass." Duncan put his hand on her shoulder. "Why do you no' go to bed? Mrs. MacAlister would send you up some supper."

"I know, but I don't want to go in yet." She glanced over her shoulder. They were alone. She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Will you sit with me for a while in the garden?"

"'Twould be my pleasure." He entwined her arm with his.

"I nearly beat you today. Another half a minute faster and I'd have won." She laughed. "I've wanted to win for so many years. I finally figured a way to beat Eachan's head shearer, and you come along."

"A fine day it would be when a woman was the best shearer in the area."

"Mighty proud of yourself."

"Yes. The governess beat the head shearer." He pulled her close as they walked. "Why does no' your head shearer enter the contest?"

"He is good, but his hands have become stiff. For years, though, he always won." She leaned into Duncan. "He retired before someone beat him."

Eirica pulled Duncan down onto the bench and laid her head on his shoulder. "At least I came in second to you and not Eachan's head shearer again." She took his hand in hers. "I finally beat him."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"After how many years?" He laid his cheek against her head.

"Five." She enjoyed being next to Duncan. The only beau she'd ever really had was Eachan, and he hadn't been one to kiss her. He'd never sent tingles through her. Not the way Duncan did. "Even if I didn't win the sheep shearing, Father did tell Eachan he wasn't welcome in our house any longer. I don't know what got into him."

"We had a talk while you were out of the room the other night. He must've remembered it."

She shifted and stared at Duncan. A smile graced his face. "You told Father. No wonder he was so upset. Father is an honorable man and expects others to be as well. That's why he gets upset when things get in a muddle because he doesn't remember. He plans to stand by his word, but I can't always allow that. Especially when he's giving away the farm and his daughter."

Duncan caressed the side of her face. "At least you're shed of Eachan."

She leaned toward him. "Yes. He won't bother us." A shiver ran up her spine remembering his earlier threat, but she wouldn't let it spoil the moment. He couldn't carry it out.

She brushed a kiss against Duncan's lips. They were warm and he tasted of sweet wine. "Do you think me so very brazen?" Not that she cared if she was brazen. She wanted to capture every moment with Duncan she could.

"Yes, lass. Very brazen." He put his hand behind her head and pulled her head to his, kissing her again. "I like it."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She pulled back and brushed the side of his face. "Are you always so forward with the mistress of the house?"

He put his hand to his chest. "Me? Why, never." He leaned back his head and laughed. "The mistress is most often married to the master, and some no' so pleasing to the eye."

"Why, Duncan, what a horrid thing to say." She giggled. She couldn't help it. Those with money truly didn't have to worry about being pleasing to the eye. The suitors would want her if she had warts on her nose. They wished to wed her for the most common of reasons—money.

"'Tis true. You're a most comely lass. One whom a man could gaze at all day long and never tire in the gazing."

Heat came to her cheeks and she ducked her head. "Are you still in much pain?"

He lifted her head and planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. "My head throbs and my ribs torment me whether I lay, sit or stand. In a few days, though, the pain will be gone."

"I shall get some more of Father's medicine. It did help, did it not?"

He nodded. "I do no' need it however. A good stiff drink and I shall feel better."

"I should get you out of the cold night air. That can't help." She cupped his hand to her cheek.

"I'm in no hurry. The others will still be about."

"I know. What am I to do with the latest? He expects to buy several hundred head of sheep at a ludicrous price. I can't afford to do so."

"Ranald will learn, as the others have, that your father is

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

no longer in charge.”

“I feel sorry for him. He genuinely was injured by the highwaymen.”

“That’s no reason to give your farm away.” He stared into her eyes.

“I have no intention of doing so. On the morrow I shall discuss it with him.”

“Sell your sheep at a reasonable price.”

“I hadn’t planned on selling any of them. I’d thought to increase the size of the flock. More sheep, more wool, more profit.” She let out a rush of air. “Then we’ve lost close to twenty of them.”

“Do you suppose the highwaymen are also stealing sheep?” He pulled the pins from her hair and let it spill down her back.

“It seems odd. It also seems odd that the sheep started disappearing and the highwaymen appeared at the same time the suitors arrived.” Tingles ran through her as his hand touched her neck. She wanted more than to sit on the bench next to him, but with so many about, stolen kisses was all she could have.

“What do you know of these men?” He continued to rub the back of her neck.

“Naught more than you do. They arrived with letters from Father. I don’t even know how he posts them.” She snuggled closer to Duncan.

“Mayhap you should see what you can find out about them.” He kissed the top of her head. “Even so, you should

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

consider selling Ranald some sheep. 'Twill make him happy and maybe get him to depart."

"Not when he finds the price has changed and I'm not part of the deal."

"Happier than getting nothing."

She laughed. "I suppose. I shall consider it." She gazed at his face. She wanted to hug him, but feared hurting him. She leaned forward and gave him another kiss, careful not to lean against his chest.

"You need no' be so careful. I shall no' scream out in pain."

"I might for you. I saw your chest." She shivered. "'Twas awful."

"I did no' mean to distress you."

"What distresses me is the fact someone pushed you." Someone had deliberately tried to harm Duncan. In her house. In the middle of the night. If Eachan had been about, she'd have suspected him, but he had returned to his own house. The others? Carlton and Grant were too much the cowards. Ranald had been unconscious in his bed. Keegan—a scarecrow of a man, but not one who seemed to have a mind for violence. "You saw nothing?"

"I was concentrating on going to the kitchen for milk. I heard the floorboards creak twice, but I saw no one."

"'Tis a puzzle. One we must get to the bottom of before someone else is injured." She stroked the side of his face with her fingertips. He shivered beneath her touch. His beard had started to grow and the stubble was rough against her skin.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She pressed her cheek against his, letting his beard rub her cheek.

“Whoever it was could’ve mistaken me for someone else.” He turned her face and nibbled at her ear.

She shivered. “Who and why?”

He breathed into her ear. “The suitors trying to make the pack dwindle.”

“Makes no sense. They start turning up dead, then the last one will be the murderer. Or, with my luck, I’ll be blamed.”

He nuzzled her neck. “Never. Anyone who knows you would know you could no’ hurt anyone. No’ even that lot.”

She leaned her head back and let him kiss her neck. She unfastened the top button of her dress. His lips were hot against her flesh and she could think of nothing but his touching her.

He trailed kisses down her skin to the tops of her breasts. Then he lifted his head and smiled at her.

She pulled her dress closed. “After wrestling the sheep earlier, you should be in bed. I’d hug you, but I fear causing you pain.”

“A little pain would be worth it, however, as much as I want you, you are no’ mine for the taking. No’ here in the garden.” He kissed her again.

Stolen kisses would be all she ever had. “Have you applied for another position?”

“Yes.”

Her heart skipped several beats. Soon he would leave. A great deal of the brightness of her world would go with him.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“There’s no rush.”

He brushed hair from her face. “Yes, lass, there is. I do no’ know how many meetings in the garden I can have before I lose my resolve and something will happen we both might regret.”

“I wouldn’t regret it.” It would be the only time she would lay with a man. She wanted to know what it felt like to lay in Duncan’s arms. He would make her body tingle and melt. She wanted the experience before he departed.

“You might in the light of the morning.” A darkness crossed his eyes. “Have you made arrangements for a new governess?”

“I haven’t started.”

“I canno’ stay forever, Eirica.”

Her heart ached. It always seemed what she wanted was never within reach. “I know.” She leaned back against the bench. Staring up at the stars, she wished she could reach up and capture one. She wanted to be a small girl again whose father took care of her.

She sighed. She was the one to take care of the others and all the wishing in the world wouldn’t change that. No more than it would change the fact the man she loved would leave. Because he had nothing. Because she had everything.

“Miss Eirica, where are you?” called Mrs. MacAlister.

“What can be the problem now?” Eirica buttoned her dress. “Have the suitors come to blows?”

“It must be important if Mrs. MacAlister is hunting for you. Your father may have had a bad turn.” Duncan stood and

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

took her hand.

She looked at him for a moment, then kissed him on the cheek. “Yes, Mrs. MacAlister, I’m coming.” If her father needed her, she must hurry as much as she didn’t want to leave Duncan.

She rounded the hedge that blocked the garden and nearly ran into Mrs. MacAlister. “Is Father ill?”

She shook her head and put her hand to her chest. She breathed heavily. Through gasps for air, she said, “Mr. MacFie is here.” She leaned over, holding her side. “He has forced his way into the house and gone to speak with the master. Mr. MacDougall told me earlier I wasn’t to allow him entrance, but I couldn’t stop him.”

Eirica put her arm around Mrs. MacAlister. “Of course you couldn’t stop him. The man has no manners.” If Eachan upset Father, she would have his hide. “You did the right thing in finding me. Now, catch your breath and I shall attend to Eachan MacFie.”

“Be careful, miss. He’s an angry man.” Mrs. MacAlister put a hand on Eirica’s shoulder. “He isn’t to be trusted.”

“Yes. Cory is in the room.”

“I shall be with her also.” Duncan hooked his arm in Eirica’s as they headed for the back door.

* * *

Angus lay propped against the pillows. Cory had taken his plate away, but he had his glass of wine. One glass was all Eirica allowed him. He sipped at it, enjoying it.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

What a glorious day it had been. His daughter had done him proud, both in the town meeting and in the sheep shearing. Most fathers wouldn't be proud of a daughter who could shear a sheep with the best, but he was.

He wished he could convince Duncan to stay and wed his daughter. He saw how they looked at each other. So did the rest of the hovering men. Which was probably why harm had come to Duncan. He was a good man. A man who would truly care for Eirica and Anne.

Anne had turned into quite a lively child. *So unlike Eirica. Colina would have loved Anne.* Teaching her all the things for which Eirica never had the patience and she adored Duncan. With him about, both of his daughters would bloom.

He hated the fogs that beset his mind. They kept him from taking proper care of the estate and his children. *Thank God for Eirica.* Without her, they'd have all ended up in poverty.

She was a good daughter. That was why she only allowed him one glass of wine. It was for his own good. He remembered that now, but not always.

She had tended him and Anne. She put everyone before herself. She needed to wed and have a family of her own. He had always hoped for grandchildren, but he would never see them. His time grew so short and still nothing was settled.

On the morrow he would send the rest of the men packing. They had no need to be here. Eirica wouldn't wed them. He would never allow it. They didn't want his daughter. They wanted her farm. A farm they would never own.

He had settled with Eachan today. *The rest tomorrow.*

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"Cory, remind me in the morning to send our guests away. 'Tis time to clear out the house and have some peace." He didn't trust his memory until dawn, but Cory would remind him.

"Yes, sir. Do you wish anything else?" Cory set his own glass of wine on the table.

"Yes. Please, read to me." Angus had always loved to read. Now it tired him so to hold the book. Cory had a fine reading voice and every night Angus fell asleep to a story.

Cory reached for the volume and opened it. His voice filled the room.

Angus let his mind wander from the story. He remembered the stares his daughter had received in her breeches and he smiled. It had been quite a sight and most unseemly, but she'd finally beaten Eachan's head shearer, though not Duncan.

What could he do to convince Duncan to stay and wed Eirica? They were meant for each other. If they were married, he could die a happy man.

A knock sounded at the door. Cory rose.

Maybe Eirica had come to say good night. He could tell her again how proud he was of her. Before he forgot.

It was a dreadful thing not to remember. No one understood how unhappy it made him when he couldn't recall what he'd said or done. Or remember who people were. When one of the fogs descended, he didn't know, but afterwards he worried about what he had done. His actions caused Eirica pain and he hated that.

"Mr. MacDougall is resting," said Cory to whomever was

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

at the door.

"I don't care." Eachan pushed past Cory and entered the room. "I shall speak with Angus tonight."

Angus took another sip of his wine, then carefully set the glass on the table next to the bed, his hand trembling. "You aren't welcome in my house. Leave." He nodded to Cory.

Cory put a hand on Eachan's shoulder. Eachan shoved him aside. "I shan't be put off by a feeble old man or his servant." He glared at both of them.

Cory balled his hands into fists at his side and looked at Angus.

Angus pulled himself up in bed and waved his hand at Cory. "I shall hear him." He stared at Eachan. "I don't know how you can show your face to me after what you did to my daughter."

"I've done nothing." Eachan crossed to the bed.

"You purposely ruined her reputation." Angus forced himself not to pick at the blanket. 'Twas the habit that showed weakness and he hated it. He placed his hands flat on the blanket to still the trembling. He didn't want Eachan to think he feared him because it wasn't fear that caused the trembling. Anger fed it.

"If she'd wed me, her reputation would've been reinstated."

"She was right in refusing your offer. I wouldn't see her wed to the likes of you." Angus would never have wanted Eirica married to a man so filled with anger. Anger that turned outward on others. He had heard talk.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eachan took a step toward Angus. "She couldn't do better."

"*You* couldn't do better. You see her farm as yours. It'll never happen." He would not see his girls penniless and at the mercy of some man more interested in their inheritance than them.

"I love your daughter." Eachan's smile was hollow, dull.

"You love no one but yourself. You want my farm." Angus struggled to sit up straighter. "I'm not yet in my grave and the farm isn't for you to have." He pointed toward the door. "I want you out of my house. Forever. You leave my daughter alone."

"I shall wed your daughter. There's no one else." Eachan shoved his hands in his pockets.

Angus shakily took in a breath. His head started to pound. He wanted another sip of wine. He looked to Cory who stood behind Eachan.

Cory came around the bed and picked up Angus' glass and held it for him. Angus nodded his thanks, then looked back at Eachan. The man stood, watching him. A coldness came over Angus. He had to see Eirica wed to Duncan. Once he was gone, he couldn't stand between her and this man. Eachan would cause her harm if she didn't have a protector.

Tomorrow he would talk with Duncan again. There had to be a way. As soon as Eachan left, he would tell Cory to remind him.

He put his hand to his head.

"The master is tired. You must leave." Cory went to stand

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

next to Eachan.

Eachan didn't even give Cory a glance. "Not one of those men in your house is worthy of your daughter. I'll see them out of here on the morrow, then I shall take Eirica back to the village to wed me. I don't need your approval."

"I'm still her father and she may not wed without my approval." The fog threatened to descend. The pain increased in his temples. "Go." He waved toward the door.

"I shall be the largest landowner once you're dead and that'll be soon. Then you cannot stop me from marrying Eirica. Nothing can stop me." Eachan took a step closer to the bed, his fist raised.

Cory grabbed Eachan. He took a swing at Cory. Duncan grabbed Eachan's arm.

The bedroom door crashed open.

"What's going on here?" Eirica flew to the bed and put herself between Eachan and her father.

"I'm speaking with your father. Arranging our wedding on the morrow." Eachan struggled against Cory and Duncan.

"You seemed to be attacking an old man." Duncan tightened his grasp on Eachan and twisted his arm behind him.

"Remove him," Angus whispered.

"Gladly." Duncan shoved Eachan toward the door.

Cory followed him.

Eirica sat on the bed. "Are you all right, Father?"

"My head." He grasped his head between his hands. The pain tore through him like a lightning bolt.

"I'll get your medicine." She rose and sped into the other

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

room. In a moment, she held a glass against his mouth.

He drank, the bitter taste making him shiver. He leaned back against the pillows. He had to tell her something. Something important. The fog swirled around the pain. "Do not marry that man. I forbid it."

"Thank you, Father. I had no intention of marrying him. Now you must rest. Duncan has taken care of him. He and Cory will be back in a moment, and we'll sit with you until you fall asleep." She washed his face with a cool cloth.

He grasped her arm. "You're such a good daughter. You've taken care of me and ignored your own needs."

"I love you, Father. I could do nothing less."

"You must marry, Eirica. You must marry..." He could not remember who. He looked past Eirica. *Colina*. He saw Colina standing there, holding out her arms to him. She smiled at him. He wanted to be with her. How he had missed her. "I cannot go. I must tend to my daughter's needs first."

Eirica looked behind her. "What are you talking about, Father?"

"Your mother is waiting for me."

Eirica bathed his face again. "'Tis the medicine and being upset. You're seeing things. Rest, and tomorrow you'll be better."

He grasped her arm again. "I have to tell you. Something about the farm. About getting married. I could not tell Cory because Eachan was here. Now I cannot remember."

"It'll come to you. Tomorrow we shall talk of it." She put her hand over his.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Lights went off in his head. The pain blocked out everything, then it subsided. He looked at Eirica. Colina stood behind her and beckoned to him. He reached out to her.

* * *

Eirica held his hand. The skin was cool and so very fragile. If she hadn't gone to the garden, she would have been in the house and been able to avert the meeting between Eachan and her father.

He leaned back against his pillows. Hopefully, the medicine had started to work and he would fall asleep. It had been a long day. Much too much excitement for him, but he would have been heartbroken if she hadn't allowed him to attend the festival. He had been so happy seeing her in the sheep-shearing contest and he had enjoyed himself. He got so little enjoyment out of life.

His hand went limp against hers. He slept. She reached over to pull the pillows from behind him and settle him in bed. He slumped to one side.

She looked at him. He didn't breathe. "Father." She shook him. He slumped farther to the side.

She straightened him against the pillows. "Father, don't leave me." She laid down on the bed next to him and wrapped her arms around him. "I need you. Do not leave me."

She heard footsteps coming. She sat up and smoothed his hair back. His forehead was warm. He looked at peace. No longer would the madness bother him. He would be happy.

She wrapped her arms around herself to stop herself from

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

rocking. He was gone. She was truly alone. Alone to care for Anne.

The door opened and she turned to look at Duncan. "He's gone."

"Yes. We've put him out and posted several of the men to make sure he doesn't return."

She shook her head. "Not Eachan. Father." She looked back at the still body on the bed. "Father is gone."

Cory clumped around to the other side and stared down.

Duncan put his hands on her shoulders. She leaned back against him. She let his warmth seep into her to fight the cold washing over her. *Alone. So very alone.* She didn't want to be alone. She wanted her father to open his eyes and look at her. She wanted him to smile and tell her again how proud he was of her.

He was gone.

"I am sorry." Duncan pulled her into his arms, hugging her.

Cory wiped at his eyes. "I'll get Mrs. MacAlister."

"In a moment." Eirica buried her head against Duncan's chest. She held on to him. As long as he was still here, she wasn't alone.

Soon he would be gone too.

As Father was gone.

Then she would be alone.

CHAPTER 13

Duncan watched Eirica push her breakfast around her plate. Grant and Carlton entered the room. He looked at the door, waiting for Gilliskel to follow. "Where is your father?"

"He's so upset, he's eating in his room." Carlton plopped into a chair. "Things have to be settled now."

Eirica looked up and blinked. "I need to go into the village and arrange the funeral."

"We'll be glad to go with you." Grant helped himself to food from the sideboard. "We can discuss the wedding at the same time."

Duncan gripped the edge of the table. "Now is no' the time. The mistress of the house has other matters to attend."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He watched Eirica while she continued to play with her food. She hadn't cried. Not a tear. She just stared straight ahead, anguish in her eyes, not seeing what was in front of her.

Grant glared at Duncan and ate.

Mrs. MacAlister entered from the kitchen. She leaned close to Eirica. "Miss, I hate to bother you, but a line is forming at the back door."

Eirica looked at her. "People to pay their respects? At the back door?"

"No, miss. Merchants from the village. They want their money."

Eirica blinked and stared at Mrs. MacAlister, who worried the edge of her apron.

"The coal man is most insistent. As is the storekeeper. They say the accounts have to be settled immediately."

"Why? I pay them the first of each month. 'Tis only the middle of the month." She set her fork on her plate.

"This is what happens when you have no husband to care for things." Grant stood and helped himself to more food.

Keegan wandered in and picked up a plate. "There is quite a commotion out back."

Eirica slid back her chair. Duncan laid his hand on her arm.

"Go upstairs and lay down." He smiled at her.

She gave him a blank stare.

"Go upstairs and lay down. Mrs. MacAlister will bring you some tea and scones."

"I must take care of the creditors." She folded her hands in

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

her lap.

“Mrs. MacAlister, take her to her room and make sure she rests.”

“But those people...” Mrs. MacAlister looked from Duncan to Eirica.

“I shall tend to the people at the back door. You tend to the mistress.” He rose and pulled Eirica to her feet. He turned her toward the hallway.

She glanced back at him. Mrs. MacAlister took her arm and led her out of the room.

Duncan strode through the kitchen and out the back door. Several men milled around. “Might I help you?”

“We has come to see Miss Eirica,” a gray-haired man said, pulling at his beard.

“I’m sure you all wish to pay your condolences, but she is no’ receiving at the moment.” Duncan folded his arms across his chest.

A slightly stooped man looked down at his scuffed boots. “We’re sorry her pa passed, but we came to collect on our accounts. Now that he’s gone...”

“Now that he’s gone, what?” Duncan glared from one to the next. “Who has paid you all the last seven years? ’Twas no’ Angus MacDougall. No. ’Twas Miss Eirica. Was she ever late or short?” He looked around and the men glanced away from him. “No. I thought no’.”

He tapped his foot. “Now that she’s facing a great sorrow, you show your faces and demand payment. What type of neighbors are you? Your women should be offering her help

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

with the arrangements.”

“With no man in the household...” The gray-haired man shifted from foot to foot.

“What matter is that? Miss Eirica tends to matters and always has. She will continue to do so. On the first, she will send payment as she always has.”

A young man with his hat in his hands stared at Duncan for a moment. “My pa said not to come back without payment.”

“What does Miss Eirica owe your pa for?” Duncan met the young man’s gaze until the young man looked away from him.

“Sharpening the shears.”

Duncan nodded. “Have you a bill?” He reached out his hand.

The young man gave him a slip of paper.

Duncan glanced at it. “If you wait, I shall see that you’re paid.” He folded the paper. “However, tell your pa his services will no longer be needed at this estate.”

“But...but Pa has always sharpened for Miss Eirica. For as long as I can remember.” The young man’s mouth fell open.

“Miss Eirica has always paid him and on time, has she no’?”

The young man nodded.

“If your pa canno’ trust her, she has no need for his services.” Duncan looked from one to the next to the next. “Any others wish to be paid at this moment?”

The men lowered their gazes, unable to look him in the eyes. “I thought no’.” Duncan took a step closer to them. “You

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

should be ashamed of yourselves. Miss Eirica would ha' sent her condolences and a basket of food to help out if one of your families had suffered the same tragedy. What does she get? The lot of you clamoring for money."

The men turned away from the door. The young man remained.

"I shall see to your money now." Duncan turned toward the house.

"Wait. I'm sure Pa wouldn't wish to upset Miss Eirica." He reached out for the bill.

Duncan contained his smile and handed the slip of paper back to the lad.

* * *

Eirica watched as the last of the people left the parlor. She walked out into the garden. She hadn't seen Duncan for hours. Then again, even the suitors had made themselves scarce while her neighbors paid their condolences.

Father was buried next to Mother. He was at peace now. He had missed her mother and now they were together again. She walked toward her mother's garden. Sitting on the bench, she stared in front of her. Now she truly was in charge. No one could any longer assume Father was really taking care of things.

It didn't matter. Duncan had sent those who wanted money packing. They wouldn't appear again until it was time to pay them. Not that she couldn't have paid them that day, but she saw no reason why she should suddenly be treated differently.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

The real problem was the suitors. Now Father was gone, she couldn't keep them in the house. What little reputation she had left would be ruined. Keeping Duncan about would probably be as bad.

She looked up as she heard a twig snap. Her stomach flipped. Surely no one could find her here. She didn't wish to talk with any one.

Duncan came into sight. She sighed. *Except him.*

"Am I disturbing you?"

She shook her head.

He joined her on the bench and took her hand. "'Tis hard to lose a parent."

She nodded. A great emptiness had crawled inside of her and she didn't know how to fill it.

"Anne feels the loss as well." He stroked the back of her hand.

She nodded again and looked at him. His gaze offered her compassion. She didn't know if she could stand that. The thin shell holding her together was as fragile as an egg. If even a crack started, it would shatter...and her with it. "I know not what to say to her."

"You need say nothing. Sit with her. You're the only family she has."

A sigh rattled through her. "I'll go up in a while."

"You should rest. 'Tis tiresome to have to talk with all those who wish to visit at such a time. Being owner of the largest estate in the area, everyone wants to offer condolences." He gave her a smile. "Especially after the other

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

morning when the men made asses of themselves. They sent in their women to right things with you. They fear losing your business.”

The smile seeped into her, shoring up the edges of her fragile existence. “Where else would I trade. ’Tis a far piece to the next village.”

“They canno’ be sure. Insulting you worried them.” He reached over and pulled her close. “The pain will be less with time.”

“Do you miss your father any less?”

“A wee bit.” He tightened his grip on her.

She wrapped her arms around him. If he held her long enough, tight enough, maybe the world wouldn’t seem so bleak. “Father would’ve loved today. All those people in attendance.”

“He was an important man in the area.”

“The sun was out. He loved the sun. He’d have loved to sit in the garden with Gilliskel and talk of the war.” She took in an unsteady breath. “A war he never participated in, but it didn’t matter.” The sun still shone. The perfect day. Only the sun didn’t seem as bright as normal. A haze seemed to have fallen over her world.

“Those two surely enjoyed their talks.”

“I’m glad Gilliskel came to visit Father. His last days were happier than they would have been without him.” She felt a tug at her heart that she couldn’t have made her father as happy, but then a friend could talk of things a child couldn’t.

“You made him happy and proud, Eirica. Never think he

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

did no' love you greatly." Duncan rested his head against her hair.

"He's happier now. He was in pain so often and so befuddled." She wished Duncan would stay forever. She felt safe in his arms. Something she had not really felt in a long time. Not that she really felt unsafe, but he was someone there to help, without wanting her property. It had been such a long time since anyone had helped. "Thank you for what you've done."

"'Twas my pleasure." He lifted her face to look at him. "Maybe on the morrow we should take Anne out to the loch. 'Twould do both of you good."

"I shall sit with her a while. Will you join me?"

"I shall walk you to the nursery, but I shall no' go in. The two of you need time alone. I shall see if Nanny would care to join me at tea. I'm sure she can use a break."

She looked up into his eyes. Stay with me, her heart pleaded with him. Stay with me forever. She had given her heart to this man. Four others hung about, ready to wed her as soon as she said yea. The one man she would share her bed and her life with would never ask. The crack in her heart caused by her father's death widened.

* * *

Duncan sat bolt upright in bed. What was that noise he had heard? *Angus's ghost*. Of course only Angus had heard the ghost and Duncan hadn't believed in ghosts since he was a wee lad.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He had heard something.

He threw back the covers and picked up a candle. He didn't know if he wanted light, but he might. He peered outside his room. No one was in the corridor.

He heard a noise again. It sounded like boots against the stairs. *Damn. Is one of the guests getting a drink? Or have the highwaymen broken into the house?*

Surely it was only one of the guests. If someone had broken in, the servants would have heard something. Someone other than himself would have.

He strode toward the stairs. Stopping at the top, he peered into the darkness. A light flickered at the edges of the bottom door.

Fire.

"Fire!" he yelled, racing down the hall to pound on Eirica's door.

Cory's sleepy head appeared around Angus' door.

"Get Anne and Nanny."

The man stared at him, rubbing his eyes.

"Now, man. The house is on fire." He pounded on Eirica's bedroom door again. "Eirica, get out! The house is on fire."

He heard a door open behind him. He glanced back and saw Grant holding a candle. "Get Eirica and your father out of the house. Tell Carlton and Keegan to come to the kitchen and help me."

He grabbed the railing and jumped down three stairs at a time. At the bottom, he saw the flames licking at the wall.

From the kitchen, he grabbed a bucket of water and threw

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

it on the flames. They continued their assault on the wall.

He refilled the bucket from the pump. Where were the rest of the men? He ran back and threw the water at the wall. A sharp pain spiked through his head. He weaved. *Damn*. He fell forward. The heat of the flames licked at his face.

* * *

Duncan coughed and sputtered as cold water splashed over him. He opened his eyes.

“Oh, thank God. He’s alive.” Eirica touched the side of his face. For a moment, she’d thought she’d lost him, as well as her father. It would have been more than she could have born.

He sat up and looked about him. “Who put out the fire?”

“Cory...with help from me.” Eirica sat on the wet floor next to him.

“Grant was to get you out of the house.” He rubbed the side of his face.

Eirica reached for his hand. “Don’t touch. You’ve been injured.”

“That’s nothing compared to what could’ve happened to you. Why did you no’ leave the house?”

“And let it burn?” She shook her head. It was hers, and she would do whatever necessary to save it. She looked at the damage. “How do you think it started?”

Duncan stood and put his hand to his head. Reaching down, he pulled Eirica from the wet floor. “Someone set it.”

She held his hand. It was cold. A shiver ran down her back. “Why would someone try to burn my house?”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He shook his head.

"It had to be an accident."

"Eirica, it was no'. I heard something. When I came to the top of the stairs, I saw the flames." He pulled her into his arms. "There's nothing here tha' would burst into flames." He stroked back her hair. "Besides, I smelled kerosene and there'd be no reason for that."

"Why?"

"I do no' know, lass, but it has to have something to do with your father's death and the suitors. Someone's trying to force you into a situation where you have to wed."

It didn't make sense. "Without a house, I'm not nearly as good a catch. It would take a great deal of money to rebuild."

"Then someone could buy your farm for a pence."

She pulled away from him. "That makes no sense either. The suitors want the farm and the house."

"Except Eachan. He has no need for the house. Only the land."

"He left with the other well-wishers this afternoon."

"I do no' know, lass. From now on, we shall post guards about the place to make sure it does no' happen again." He put his arm around her shoulders. "You should go and change into dry clothes."

"There are other things to tend to." She smiled at him. The side of his hair was singed and one eyebrow was mostly singed black, but other than that, he only had a slight burn on his cheek. "I shall have Mrs. MacAlister tend to your burn. What happened that you came to be on the floor?"

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Duncan rubbed his head. "Someone knocked me on the head."

"Again?"

"It seems to give someone great pleasure."

"Let me see."

Duncan bent his head and she examined the spot. A large lump had appeared.

The back door burst open and the Andersons entered, followed by the others. Grant and Carlton glared at Eirica as she parted Duncan's hair.

"What's going on?" asked Carlton.

"The fire is out and all is safe." Eirica looked at them. If she didn't know better, Carlton looked red enough in the face to be ready for a fit of apoplexy.

"That isn't what I meant." He stomped across the room.

"Mr. MacKinnon was injured fighting the fire. I wanted to see how serious it was."

"He looks fine to me." Carlton stared at the side of Duncan's face. "How do you know it wasn't him who set the fire so he could save you?"

"And knock himself on the head?" *What a buffoon.*

Duncan straightened and glared at Carlton. "Either you've had too much to drink or your mind has quit you."

"What?" Carlton took a step closer to Duncan.

Duncan looked down at him. "I would never put Miss Eirica or Miss Anne into danger."

"Duncan!" Anne raced in the door and threw herself into his arms.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He lifted her. "Are you safe, little one?"

"I am. Are you?" She reached out and caressed his cheek. "You're burned."

Eirica wished she could crawl into Duncan's arms the way Anne did. No one thought a thing of the child hugging him and drawing strength from him. But her... She had no one to hold her.

"'Tis not much."

Anne looked at Eirica, her eyes wide. "He was hurt saving us."

Eirica touched Anne's arm. "Yes, sweetheart, he was."

"Will it scar?" She placed her face directly in front of Duncan's. "It would make you look quite the rogue."

"Where did you learn such a big word?" Duncan smiled at her.

"Nanny." Anne snuggled her head on Duncan's shoulder.

Eirica felt a tug at her heart. She wanted the smile for herself. She chastened herself. Jealousy of her own sister. 'Twas the hour and all that had happened. She needed someone to be her strength.

She sighed. It did her no good to think such thoughts. She had herself and that was it. She had to be strong to keep everything going. Too many people relied on her.

"I still think he is behind this." Carlton took a step back. "Why else would he be the one to sound the alarm?"

"A noise woke me." Duncan set Anne down. She clutched his hand.

"We're to believe that?" Grant helped his father to a chair.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I thought 'twas Angus' ghost."

Eirica choked. "Why would my father be haunting the house?"

"No' your father. The ghost he heard. 'Twas such a strange noise I went to investigate. After all that has happened, I did no' know." Duncan rubbed the side of his head.

"'Twas a good thing you did." Gilliskel pulled a blanket around his shoulders.

"Take your father to bed." Eirica looked from Grant to Carlton.

"If it's safe." Grant helped his father.

"All is settled for now." Eirica looked at the burnt wall. It could have been much worse. They all could have died in their sleep.

If that happened, who would get the property? No other heirs lived. of whom she knew. Would it go up for sale? Who would get the money? She should find out. "Nanny, take Anne to bed. Everyone else may go except Mrs. MacAlister." She smiled at the housekeeper. "I need you to tend to Dun...Mr. MacKinnon."

* * *

Duncan stood by Eirica's bedroom door and smiled at her. "Good night."

She touched the bandage on his face. She looked down the hallway. All seemed to be quiet, with all returned to their rooms. She opened the door and dragged him inside with her. With the door closed behind her, she wrapped her arms around

THE KILLED GOVERNESS

his neck and kissed him. "I don't know what I'd have done if something had happened to you."

He leaned back against the door. "Nothing is going to happen to me."

"Someone seems set upon bashing in your skull."

He laughed. "It does seem that way, but I have a very hard head. My brothers will attest to that fact."

"'Tis not a laughing matter. You could've been killed. If not from the bash on the head, from the fire."

"The fire concerns me more." He held her chin in his hand. "Why did you not get to safety? The house is not as important as you are."

She snuggled against him. "I had to help."

"The men could've managed."

"Cory helped me. The rest were too far away."

"I told Carlton to have Grant come and help." Not that he had really expected those two swains to put themselves in danger, but the scarecrow could have lent a hand.

"When I came out of my room, Carlton was helping Gilliskel down the stairs. Keegan was right behind them with Ranauld limping along. Grant did run up to the nursery."

"He's of more worth than I had hoped."

"It could be none of them who set the fire." She laid her head against his chest. "Nor the servants. They wouldn't do such a thing."

"You must be careful." He liked the way she fit into his arms. She shouldn't feel so good against him.

"I can't believe everyone would turn against me because

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Father died. 'Tis not as if he has had his wits about him for the last several years."

"That might be, but he was still among the living and they could believe he was the squire and they truly were not dealing with a young woman."

"Stupidity. Pure and simple."

"It might be, lass, but 'tis the way of the world."

"I don't care. I've run this estate for years and shall continue to do so." She looked into his eyes.

"Yes, lass, you will. They'll come around."

Her lips turned in a slight pout and he couldn't resist. He reached down and captured her lips with his, nibbling at them. Soon he'd be gone, but, for the moment, she needed him and he would stay. While he did, he would hold her and taste her.

Nothing more.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue begging entrance into her mouth. She parted her lips for him, sighing against him. Her wrapper and nightdress hid none of her curves. Her breasts pushed against him, and he wished he could carry her to her bed. That was not his right.

She draped her arms around his neck and kissed him again. He stroked her back, feeling the curve of her hips. His body ached with his wanting.

He pulled her braid loose and tangled his hands in her hair, holding her head as he kissed her. She smelled of smoke, but tasted as sweet as spring honey.

The heat from her body increased. He felt as though he were being singed again. He broke the kiss and pressed her to

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

him, knowing she would feel his desire, but not caring. She would eventually wed another, but he wanted her to remember him.

He nuzzled her neck and she shivered beneath his touch. "You are so beautiful, Eirica."

She smiled at him, a glorious smile. "I want to be in your arms forever."

"It canno' be so." As much as he wanted it himself.

"Then stay with me tonight."

He crushed her against him. "No, Eirica. 'Twould no' be proper."

"I don't care."

"On the morrow you might."

"I shan't."

He kissed her again. Her lips burned against his. He wanted her. The heat coming from her body told him she wanted him.

'Twas not to be.

"'Tis no' the time." He brushed her hair from her face. Brushing his lips against hers, he turned and closed the door behind him, leaning against it. He glanced down the dark hall and walked toward the steps. A bottle of whiskey would be in the parlor. It wouldn't chase away the desire, but it would help numb his mind so he didn't think about the beautiful woman wanting him upstairs.

Or who had tried to kill him again and why.

CHAPTER 14

Eirica sat in the parlor, staring out the window. She enjoyed the peace and quiet and watched the finches flitter from one bush to the next. Her father had loved to sit and watch the birds.

She glanced over at the empty settee where her father had spent his last days. His tartan blanket lay across the end. One of the maids had folded it and placed it where her father had always been able to reach for it. She sighed.

Life really hadn't changed much. She would tend to the farm and household, and everything would continue to run as it had. She would pay the debts and sell the wool. She would make sure Anne was tended.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She would be alone.

At least with Father alive, she hadn't been totally alone. He'd sat at the table most nights and they'd had a conversation of sorts.

Now, she would be eating alone as soon as she got the suitors out of the house and Duncan went to his new post. Maybe she'd allow Anne to eat with her. It would be better than dining alone, and Anne would learn to be a proper lady.

Then Anne would wed and she would truly be alone.

Eirica sighed. Feeling sorry for herself would do no one any good. She had a farm to tend and guests to evict. She stood and brushed down her black skirt. She'd change into her working clothes and go see about the sheep. The man who had purchased the wool would be arriving on the morrow and she wanted to make sure everything was ready for him. Besides, she had no desire to run into the suitors.

The door behind her creaked as it opened. She turned, expecting to see Mrs. MacAlister.

"Good morning, Eirica." Eachan sauntered across the room, looking about as though he was seeing the parlor for the first time.

"You are not welcome here." She wanted to run. She hadn't the strength to fight with him. She had no choice. She took in a deep breath and steadied herself.

He walked over and kissed her on the cheek. "That's no way to treat the man who is going to be your husband."

She stepped away from him and rubbed her cheek. This whole repetitive conversation had become ludicrous,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

reminding her of a magpie's constant mind-numbing chatter. "Eachan, I'm not going to discuss this with you again. Leave my house."

"Now I can't do that. You aren't safe in this house and I'd be remiss in my duty if I left you and Anne here another night."

"What in heaven's name are you talking about?" She stared at him. The man had taken leave of his senses. That was all she could figure.

"The highwaymen breaking in here last night and setting your house on fire." He took a step towards her. "As long as they're still on the loose, I must insist you move to my house, where you will be safe."

She opened her mouth, then shut it. She shook her head. "What nonsense! I'm perfectly safe in my home and I have no intentions of leaving."

"Be reasonable, Eirica. Someone is out to do you harm. You must move somewhere safe."

She placed her hands at her waist. "Do not speak to me in that tone, Eachan MacFie. I shall do as I please, and I please to stay in my own home."

"No." He reached out and took her arm.

She pulled away from him and took a step back. "The only person trying to hurt me is you."

"How can you say that after last night?" He reached for her arm again, his fingers biting into her skin.

She jerked, but he wouldn't release her. She breathed in slowly. If he didn't unhand her, she'd scream and that would

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

bring the rest of the suitors. "We had a small accident last night is all. The highwaymen didn't break in here. Carlton went to the kitchen to get a drink, tripped and drop a lamp. Yes, we had a small fire, but he quickly doused it and we're none the worse." She glared at him. "Now let go of me."

"I, for one, say we find Eirica and settle this matter once and for all before something else untoward happens." Keegan's voice drifted in from the hall. "What is going on?"

Grant rushed to Eirica's side, glaring at Eachan. "Are you in need of assistance?"

For once she was glad to see the mob. "Mr. MacFie was leaving." She jerked her arm away and rubbed where Eachan's fingers had pressed into her skin.

Keegan raised a fist and pointed it toward Eachan's nose. "You dare harm the lady in her own house?"

Eachan smiled and took a step back. "I was doing no such thing. I've been speaking with Eirica of the arrangements I've made to move her to my house, where she'll be safe."

"Who will protect her from the likes of you?" Grant flanked Eachan on the other side.

Eirica stepped away from the men. She didn't care if they came to fisticuffs in her parlor. She planned to replace the furniture anyway. Something that didn't remind her of Father.

"She needs no protection from me." Eachan squared his shoulders and glared at the other men.

"It didn't look that way to me." Ranald hobbled across the room. "The lady looked quite distressed." He turned to smile at Eirica. "Are you all right?"

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I am now. I thank you." She moved closer to the door. She intended to escape.

"Then we shall see him out." Carlton took a step closer to Eachan.

"You can't think she'll be safe in this house after what happened last night." Eachan clenched his fists.

"We're here to protect her." Grant glared at Eachan. "Nothing happened to put her in harm's way."

Eachan looked to Eirica. "These men need to be removed from your house. How do you know one of them didn't intentionally start that fire?"

"I told you what happened." She smiled, hoping none of the others would offer an explanation. "Please see him out. I have things to tend to."

"As soon as he's gone, we wish to speak with you." Grant laid a hand on Eachan's shoulder.

He shrugged it off. "This is not finished, Eirica."

"Oh, but 'tis."

"Your father's last wish was for you to wed me."

Eirica started to laugh. The sound had a touch of hysteria to it. "You're the one who caused my father to have one of his spells and die, and you want me to believe he promised my hand to you?"

"I did nothing to hasten his death." Eachan strode toward the door. "I shall be back in a few hours with a wagon and carriage to help you move." He flung open the parlor door and nearly collided with Mrs. MacAlister.

She stared at him. Then she smoothed down her apron.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Miss, you have company. I put them in your day room.”

Eirica groaned. “Now who?”

“Some of the neighbor ladies.”

Eirica let her head drop for a moment, then she squared her shoulders. “Please serve tea and scones, or whatever we might have.”

“Eirica, we need to speak with you and put an end to this nonsense.” Grant’s voice followed her into the hallway.

She waved a hand over her shoulder. “Later. I must see to my guests.” As if she didn’t have enough problems at the moment, the ladies had to descend upon her today. She could just imagine what they wanted. A lone woman couldn’t tend a farm and raise a young girl without the help of a man. Why would no one give her credit for what she had been doing?

She breezed into the morning room and stifled a gasp. She had expected people from the village. Instead she had the minister’s wife, and the wives of two of the landowners with good-size acreages.

“Good morning, ladies.” Eirica crossed the small room and took the wing chair next to Mrs. MacLean, the pastor’s wife. “’Tis so good of you to call.”

“We’re concerned about you.” Mrs. McCauley folded her gloved hands in her lap. “A woman alone is easy prey to those who are of poor scruples.”

Eirica pasted a smile on her face. “I’m quite fine, and most capable of attending to the affairs of the farm.”

Mrs. MacDonald leaned forward. “We heard about the fire. You could’ve been killed.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eirica waved her hand. "Twas nothing."

Mrs. MacAlister entered the room with a tray.

"Would you care for tea?" Eirica went over to the table. "I shall pour." She smiled at Mrs. MacAlister.

Mrs. MacAlister set the food down and left the room.

"I shall have a little tea and one of those cakes. They look wonderful." Mrs. McCauley lifted her head to get a better look at the food.

Eirica laughed as she passed the woman her food. Mrs. McCauley's girth assured her the woman never skipped a chance to eat.

"I'll just have some tea." Mrs. MacLean's pink woolen morning dress tucked in tightly at her trim waist.

Eirica passed Mrs. MacDonald a plate and cup and sat back in the blue wing chair. She took a sip of her own tea. She looked at the pastries on the tray. She hadn't been able to eat for the last few days.

Mrs. MacLean reached over and patted Eirica's knee. "This had been a terrible tragedy. Now that you're alone, we've decided that something must be done."

Eirica looked from one to the next. They looked so earnest. "I'm fine here. I have nothing to fear."

"Someone tried to burn you out. Others will try other things." Mrs. MacDonald shivered. "Unspeakable things."

Eirica swallowed a laugh that threatened to erupt. "I don't think anyone will break into my home to ravish me. I have many who would prevent it." The suitors weren't about to let any harm come to her before one of them claimed her as wife.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"That is another thing. 'Tis unseemly to have those gentlemen under your roof with no male relative in attendance." Mrs. McCauley set her cup delicately on the saucer. "You have...had a bad time before. You would not want the gossips to..."

Eirica took a long sip of her tea. Maybe she could use that line on the suitors to get them to leave. "I'm perfectly safe. After all, there are enough of them to make sure my reputation remains unsullied."

"'Tis not proper." Mrs. MacDonald clucked.

"I don't know what to do about it." Eirica would listen to any suggestions they had on removing the men from her house. "My father invited them here and they seem intent on remaining."

"I shall have my husband speak with them." Mrs. MacLean poured herself some more tea.

"I don't think that will help the situation. Each of them wants to speak with him on his own behalf." Eirica set her cup down, afraid she would spill it as her hands shook.

"We cannot have you marrying some stranger to our village." Mrs. McCauley reached for another cake.

"Mr. MacFie, even though he has only been a widower barely six months, is the one you should wed," said Mrs. MacDonald.

Eirica straightened in her chair and folded her hands together to keep them still. "I have no intention of marrying Echan MacFie."

"He was the one involved..." Mrs. MacDonald's face

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

turned red.

“He orchestrated the situation in the first place.” Eirica glanced away from the women. She didn’t want them to see the anger she knew flared in her eyes. Her arm hurt from where he had gripped her earlier.

“He’s the perfect husband for you. I spoke with him just this morning.” Mrs. MacLean took a sip of her tea. “He said he was arranging for you and Anne to stay at his house after having the highwaymen break in here last night.” She set the cup down. “I told him that was highly improper, but he said he would arrange for the two of you to be wed by the end of the week.”

“I really think you should come and stay with me,” said Mrs. MacDonald. “It would be more seemly, until Mr. MacFie makes arrangements for the wedding. It will be a simple, quiet affair under the circumstances.”

Eirica stood. If it weren’t for Anne, she wouldn’t care at all what the old biddies thought or said. For her sister’s sake, she had to keep some kind of decorum. “I’m of an age that it really doesn’t matter much about my reputation. I have been on the shelf for a while and I intend to stay there.” She looked at each one of them. “I know you mean well and are only thinking of me, but I can take care of myself and my sister.

“I have been doing it for years since my father fell ill. I don’t need any one to protect me.” She took a deep breath. “I have no intentions of wedding Eachan.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Contrary to the stories Eachan is spreading, my house wasn’t violated by the highwaymen. ’Twas a simple

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

accident that caused little damage.”

She looked at the women who gasped. “Please, feel free to finish your tea. I have business to tend to and must excuse myself.” She walked out of the room.

She balled her hands into fists and stomped down the hallway to her office. How dare those women think they could dictate to her? She flung open the door and it banged against the wall. She reached for the door and stopped. Duncan sat behind her desk.

“Having a bad morning?” He pulled the bell for the maid. “Would some tea help?”

“What are you doing?” She picked up a pillow from the wing chair in front of the desk and threw it across the room.

Duncan rose and walked around to her. He laid his hand on her shoulder. “I did no’ mean to intrude.”

“What were you doing?” Everyone seemed to have decided she couldn’t take care of things by herself.

“I was sorting your correspondence.” He smiled.

“I can do that.”

The maid entered.

“Please bring some tea and scones.” Duncan took his hand from Eirica’s shoulder.

She stared at the maid as she disappeared out the door. “I have had enough tea for this morning.”

“You have no’ been eating. You need to keep up your strength.”

“For all of those who depend upon me.” She stomped over behind her desk and sat down. All her correspondence was

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

stacked neatly. The bills to be paid were in one pile. Correspondence from those she did business with were in another. A third pile were condolences from neighbors. "You're very efficient as a secretary."

"I thought it would be easier if you did no' have to worry about everything at once." He lounged in the chair with the missing pillow. "Besides, Anne is too distraught to learn and I did no' know what to do with myself." He leaned forward. "If I've taken liberties I should no' have, I am sorry."

She stared at him. She wanted him to take other liberties. Going through her correspondence really caused no problem. "I would have gotten to it."

"Yes, but you have other things to tend to at the moment."

The maid brought in a pot of tea and plate of scones. Setting them on the table, she disappeared.

"Let me help you, Eirica. If nothing more, let me answer those letters you got from your father's friends. 'Twill be easier if you do no' have to deal with them."

"When your father died, did you receive many letters?" She didn't want to read those letters yet. She pushed them away. Reading how sorry others were would only make the pain worse.

"Few. My father was no' as wealthy as yours." He picked up the letters and stacked them, then laid them on the far corner of the desk. "I know it upset my mother greatly, the few she received."

"I would appreciate it if you'd answer them." She laid her hands on the desk. "There's so much to do." She looked at

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

him. His blue eyes offered comfort and she wanted to take it. "I don't know where to start."

"With that which is most important, and let the rest wait." He stood and walked around the desk. He rubbed her neck and shoulders. "Why do you no' lay down and this can all be dealt with later."

"I can't sleep when I do lay down." She kept seeing her father laying still on his bed. The emptiness within her haunted her nights and was heavier than during the day. She wanted to cry, but no tears came. No peace.

"Then lay on the settee and rest." He continued to rub her neck.

She leaned against him. "Maybe if I tend to some of the business, I shall be tired enough to sleep tonight."

"Then the most important is on the top of the middle pile." He leaned over her and reached for a letter.

She took it from him. He smelled of soap and liniment. "How is your cheek?"

"Twill heal."

"Your eyebrow will grow back." She reached up and touched the half eyebrow. "You look rather like a rogue."

He gave her an impish smile. "The worst sort of rogue."

She laughed. A normal laugh. He always made her feel like life was worth living. "What is this?"

"A letter from the man with whom you contracted to sell the wool."

"He is due tomorrow. I shall have to check to make sure all is in readiness." Once the wool was gone and the money in the

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

bank, she could rest easier. There would be enough to see them through the winter, and everyone could stop being nervous about her being able to pay her accounts.

"There's a problem." Duncan moved and sat on the edge of the desk.

She stared at him. A coldness seeped into her.

"He has changed his mind about the price."

"I have it in writing."

"His correspondence states that, with the demise of your father, he'll be paying three pence a pound less."

"What?" She opened the letter and stared at the writing. "He can't do this."

"He can."

As the old biddies had predicted. Many would try to take advantage of her now she no longer had a man to protect her. As if her father had been any protection. He kept trying to sell at what prices had been twenty years ago. "I shan't sell to him."

"What options do you have?"

She looked at Duncan. "Are you saying I shall have to take his offer?"

"No, lass. I am asking what other options there are. Who else will buy the wool?" He stroked the side of her face.

She let the heat from his fingers seep into her and push back the chill. The chill that seemed a permanent part of her when she wasn't with Duncan. "He offered the best price."

"No longer." He took her hand into his. "The Scarecrow wanted to buy the wool."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“At a worse price than offered in this letter.” She wouldn’t have her wool stolen. It would keep until she could find a buyer. One willing to pay the price she wanted.

“Keegan might be willing to come up on his price.”

“As long as I’m part of it.”

Duncan laughed. “I do no’ think he’ll require you to be part of it. He will be doing quite well to buy your wool. That might be enough.”

“’Tis worth a chance.” She leaned against Duncan. “Do you think he might leave if I offer to sell him the wool?”

“It canno’ hurt to ask.”

She pulled the bell for the maid. “I do know I shan’t sell to the other. I shall send a message to the village inn that he need not present himself on the morrow.” She reached for a pen and piece of paper.

The maid peeked around the door.

“Please have Mr. MacCallum come here. And I have a letter to be taken to the village. Have one of the men carry it in immediately.” Eirica wrote her message and blew on the ink. Then she folded the paper and dripped wax on the back. Using her father’s seal, she imprinted his mark on the paper. She giggled. “I loved doing that when I was a wee child. He would let me seal all his correspondence and reseal all he received.”

Duncan kissed her on the cheek. “He loved you dearly, lass.”

“And I, him.” She had been her father’s daughter. He had taught her well and she had proved to be better at business than he. He wouldn’t have minded if he had realized it. “I

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

wish I could have one of those confusing conversations with him now.”

Keegan entered the room and glared at Duncan. Duncan moved around the desk and sat in the chair with the pillows leaving the other for Keegan.

“I have a business proposition for you.” Eirica smoothed her skirt, then folded her hands in her lap.

Keegan sat on the edge of the wing chair.

“I have some wool I wish to sell and you’re in the market.” She folded her fingers together. “However, I’m not selling at the price my father quoted you. As you well know, my father’s mind was...”

“Slipping.” Keegan leaned forward, his fingers resting on the edge of the desk.

“Yes. Slipping. I am, however, willing to sell it to you for three pence a pound over the price he quoted.” She smiled and wished her stomach would stop flipping. She wouldn’t make as much as with the original offer, but two pence a pound less to have it taken care of at this moment would be worth it.

Keegan looked at her, then at Duncan. “Why is he here while you are doing business?”

Eirica stared at Keegan. Maybe she’d just keep the wool and look elsewhere. “Because I asked him to be a witness to any business since he’s the only one about who doesn’t have an interest in me.”

Keegan looked back at Duncan. “Probably a wise idea. The others wouldn’t believe I wasn’t up to something.” He sighed and drummed his fingers against the top of the desk.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“The market price is five pence more than what your father offered to sell it to me. I can’t cheat you under the circumstances. I shall pay the five pence more.”

“Then you’ll be on your way?” Maybe there would be one less suitor to contend with.

“Oh, no. I shall send a correspondence by the next post so payment and picking up the wool will be arranged.” He smiled. “However, I have no intentions of leaving so the Andersons have the advantage.” He slid forward in his seat. “Marry me, Eirica. I shall make you a fine husband. I’ll take good care of you and your sister.”

“That is sweet, Keegan, but I have no wish to wed.” She lowered her head. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings. “At the moment, with everything that has happened, I can’t make any decisions about the future. I’m in mourning.”

Keegan took her hand. “I know, Miss Eirica. Things will seem better as time goes on. I shall wait.” He hurried toward the door. “I must find one of your men to take my correspondence to town.”

“One problem resolved.” Duncan poured Eirica a cup of tea. “You are looking awfully pale. You should rest.”

She shook her head. “How am I to get rid of them, Duncan?”

He kissed her cheek again. “I know how to get rid of one.”

She raised her head and smiled. “That is a start. Which?”

“Ranald. He does no’ seem to have much spirit for this game. All he wanted was to buy some of your sheep. If you sold him fifty head, he would gladly pack his bags and escape

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

this insanity.”

“I have no wish to sell any of my sheep. I’ve lost twenty already and given ten to the church.”

“How many lambs were born this year?”

“Sixty-eight.”

“How many survived?”

“All of them.”

“If you sell Ranald fifty head, you are only twelve less than last year. Next year you will have even more.” He picked up her account book. A tinge of red crept up his cheeks. “I looked over your records.”

She snatched the book from him and glared. “Seeing what the spinster is worth?”

“Eirica, you know better than that. I thought bribes might get rid of some of them.”

“I doubt it. They want it all.”

“’Tis quite a bit.”

“You want none of it.”

He looked at her for a long moment. Pain shone from his eyes. “None.”

She laid her hand on his arm. “I beg your forgiveness. Everyone seems to want something or wants to tell me how to manage my life.”

“I offer only suggestions.”

“I know.” She sighed. He was the only one from whom she cared to hear any suggestions.

“Your land can support only so many sheep. At that point, you start losing sheep, wool and money. By selling Ranald

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

some, your sheep will continue to be healthy and well-fed.” He opened the book and pointed out figures, figures she’d written in a neat, precise handwriting.

She nodded. The expanding flock would soon reach the limit of what her land could support. “I shall make the offer. Besides, after all he has suffered, ’tis the least I can do.”

“He shows no real interest in staying about, except to heal from his wounds.”

“The poor man. He did walk into the middle of quite a muddle.” Eirica put down the ledger. “How am I to get rid of the Andersons, Keegan and Eachan? None of them listen to me when I say to leave. Eachan has the pastor and his wife convinced I shall be safer staying with him, and he’s bound that he’ll move Anne and I to his house this afternoon.

“Keegan has already declared he won’t leave. Carlton and Grant wouldn’t be evicted by an order from Queen Victoria herself.” She sighed. There had to be a way to be rid of them. If she were married to someone else, then they would have to leave.

That’s it. She would marry. She looked up at Duncan. *Of course. It would be perfect.* She would convince him to marry her. Then he couldn’t leave her. Once they were married, he would see reason and stay with her forever.

She would be free of the rest. “I have the perfect plan.”

He took her hand. “What might that be, lass?”

“I shall wed you. Then the rest will have to leave.”

Duncan’s face turned ashen.

CHAPTER 15

“No. Absolutely no’.” Duncan stared at Eirica, looking into her green eyes. She was serious. Very serious.

“Duncan, ’tis the only way. If I’m wed, everyone will leave me be.” She touched the bandage on the side of his face. Then she smiled. “It will work wonderfully. I shall have a husband and all the suitors will have to leave.”

He took her hand in his. “I shall no’ marry you. I have nothing to offer.”

“That doesn’t matter. I have everything we need. You can help me with the farm. You know a great deal about sheep. Anne loves you.” She clung to his hand.

“Eirica, sweet Eirica.” He kissed her fingers. If he were to

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

wed, it would be to Eirica, but he wouldn't wed a woman he couldn't support. Nor would he be clumped with the other suitors and be accused of being after her money and land. "I canno' do it."

"You must. Otherwise I shall never have any peace."

"We could no' go to the minister and be wed anyway. There would be a line telling him why it could no' be and Spoiler of Reputations would be the first in the line."

"We could elope. Go to Gretna Green." Her eyes implored him.

A twinge attacked his heart. He had promised Angus to make sure she was fine, but this? This he couldn't do. No matter that Angus had told him what had happened to Eirica. No matter that Eirica wanted him to do it. It was to get her out of the predicament that Angus had caused with his clouded mind. Duncan didn't marry a woman for those reasons, and he wouldn't wed until he could support a wife. "Eirica, this is insanity."

"It runs in my family." She stood and placed her hands on his shoulders. "'Tis my only hope."

"I shall no' wed you." He let out a long sigh.

Her face fell. "What am I to do? The suitors will never leave. The old biddies in town will hound me until I submit and they wish me to marry Eachan. They think him the best match." She sank back down into her chair.

He shoved his hands into his pockets. He wanted to take her into his arms and tell her he would make everything turn out right, but he couldn't. "I shall no' wed you, but I shall help

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

you be rid of the suitors. Then you can decide what choices you wish to make.”

“How do you plan to be rid of them?” She laid her head against the desk’s top, her hands in her lap.

“We shall have a charade.” He wouldn’t wed her for real, but...

She peeked at him from under long lashes.

“We shall pretend we’ve eloped and are wed. Once the others have left, then I, too, can move on.” He would leave his heart behind, but he would leave. Even pretending to be married to Eirica would be painful, knowing it could not be real.

“That won’t convince Eachan, and he won’t be leaving the area.” She sat.

“Even he will tire in time. I’m sure he’ll find another wife, as he did before when you refused to wed with him. He is no’ the type to wait long.” He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. Eyes that reminded him of the sea at sunrise.

She studied his face for a moment. “If you won’t wed me for real, then I shall take what I can get.” She sighed. “At least I shall be shed of the suitors.” She took his hand and rubbed it against her face. “When shall we leave?”

“Tis quite a drive. First thing in the morning.”

“We mustn’t tell anyone. They’ll try to stop us if we do.”

“I shall drive you out to inspect the sheep.”

“Won’t they wonder if we take the buggy and I’m not in my breeches?” She frowned.

“We shall leave before breakfast so no one will notice.” If

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

he hadn't promised Angus to protect Eirica, he would never agree to this charade.

She smiled at him and then frowned. "Do you think we'll run into the highwaymen?"

"We'll be heading away from the village. Most of the trouble has occurred between the village and here or on the far side." He hoped they wouldn't meet the highwaymen. He didn't wish to put her in danger. "We shall pray they're busy elsewhere."

* * *

Duncan sat in the garden and watched the moon crest. Eirica had retired, hoping to rest before they set out on the morrow. He leaned his elbows on his knees and rested his head in his hands. Something more than a line of suitors plagued this household. The bandage on the side of his face attested to that.

He wanted to know who wished to harm Eirica. *Who would try to burn her house and why?* Her farm was worth a great deal of money, but burning the house wouldn't make it more valuable. She could have been killed. Then who would inherit the land or would it go on the auction block?

It seemed that Eirica alive would make it easier to obtain the land. Unless someone planned for Anne to own the land. Then he could become her guardian and have control of the property until she came of age.

It had to be one of the suitors. No one else would gain anything by doing her harm. *Maybe the fire had been set to*

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

frighten off the rest. Who could have done it? They had all been in their rooms when he'd sounded the alarm.

He wouldn't find the answers sitting in the garden. Tomorrow he and Eirica had a long trip in front of them. He'd best get some sleep.

Their whole plan was crazy. Maybe just crazy enough it would work and Eirica would have peace once again.

Then he could get on with his life and forget the woman who had stolen his heart, if that was possible.

He meandered back toward the house. Sleep had eluded him since the fire. He kept listening for any untoward sound, fearful for their safety. Knowing that men stood guard around the house didn't help.

A twig snapped behind him. He froze and listened. It could be one of the men set to guard the house. "Who goes there?"

No reply came. He listened for any sound. Surely if one of Eirica's men was patrolling, they would recognize him and speak. "Hello there."

A crackling noise came from beside him. He threw up his arm as he turned. Something crashed against it. With his other hand, he grabbed the stout stick and wrenched it from the person on the other end. A black mask hid the man's features, but he stood nearly as tall as Duncan.

Doubling his fist, he shoved it into the man's stomach. An ooof issued forth as the man doubled over, but he grabbed for Duncan's jacket. Duncan hit him again, connecting with his jaw. A cracking sound followed the punch.

The man reeled backward and fell against a bush. He

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

righted himself and drew a knife from beneath his jacket. He lunged at Duncan.

The moonlight glinted off the blade. Duncan jumped to the side and backward, avoiding the knife. He rammed his arm across the man's back and set him reeling. Duncan turned as the man did. He'd readied himself for a second attack. The man lunged, grazing Duncan's arm, slicing through the material of his coat and into his arm.

Duncan bit down on his lip. He whirled around and waited for the man to lunge again. He couldn't let him get that close again.

"Hey. What's the ruckus?" Humphrey shouted.

"Over here." Duncan kept his gaze on the knife. His arm stung and he didn't wish to have it touch him again.

The sound of men stomping through the brush came from behind him. "Mr. MacKinnon, where are you?"

"Here."

The intruder hesitated, then turned and ran.

"After him," shouted Duncan.

Humphrey and two other men crashed past Duncan to follow the man. Holding his arm, Duncan followed Humphrey. A warm, sticky substance met his fingers and he stopped. Pulling his hand from his sleeve, he looked at the blood. The man had tried to kill him. His knees wobbled and he sat down in the dirt for a moment.

Why? Why would anyone want to kill him?

Had someone seen him with Eirica? Had someone seen them kiss? Did one of the suitors see him as a rival to be

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

eliminated?

He would have to take extra care on the morrow. He might be taking Eirica into danger.

Maybe he could convince her to give up this idea. Then he could leave and maybe the incidents would stop happening.

Then maybe not. He had promised Angus he would make sure Eirica was safe.

He rose. He'd been hurt worse than this in the past. His own brothers had done more damage to him. He would tend to his wound. Tomorrow he would take Eirica away from here. At least for a couple of days she would be safe.

He wished they could take Anne with them. He would worry about the child until they returned. He couldn't even tell her where they were going. The house might very well have ears. They couldn't take the chance.

He sighed and ripped his sleeve away from the cut. It was bleeding freely. Using the rags of his sleeve, he pressed them against the wound. It would need to be stitched and that he could not do alone, but he wouldn't let Eirica know.

He heard the men clomping back through the brush. He wrapped his arm to stop the bleeding and waited for them.

"He got away." Humphrey held a hoe in his hand. "On the other side of the sheep pen he had a horse."

Duncan wanted to laugh. All the men were armed with farm implements and 'twas probably better he'd escaped. They might have ended up harming each other. "You did a fine job. Keep an eye on the house. Hopefully he will no' return this night."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"Do you think he planned on attacking Miss Eirica?" Humphrey removed his hat and wiped his brow.

"I do no' know, but we want to make sure no one gets into the house who does no' belong there." He didn't think the man was after Eirica, but he would take no chances.

"We can get extra men. They won't mind protecting her." Humphrey leaned against his hoe.

"We're probably safe for tonight, but a few extras will no' hurt." He motioned the men closer. "Nothing of this incident is to be heard by Miss Eirica."

"Oh, no, Mr. MacKinnon. We would never wish to alarm her," said Humphrey.

The other men nodded.

"Good." He started toward the house.

"You're hurt. Do you need help?" Humphrey caught up with him.

"'Tis nothing. I shall get Mrs. MacAlister to tend to it."

"Then good night, sir," said Humphrey.

"Thank you." Duncan laid a hand on the man's shoulder. "You saved my life."

"We did nothing but scare him away."

"That was enough." Duncan could have bested him in the end, or so he would like to believe, but he was just as glad he hadn't had to find out.

He eased the back door to the house closed and crept toward the servants' quarters. He didn't wish to awaken anyone else in the household. He rapped softly on Mrs. MacAlister's door.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"Coming," a sleepy voice said through the door.

She peeked around the edge and stared at Duncan. "What do you want?" She tucked her hair under her nightcap. "Is someone hurt?" Her eyes widened. "Miss Eirica?"

"No, me." He held out his arm.

"Gracious. Let me get my things."

"Bring needle and thread. It needs to be stitched."

Mrs. MacAlister joined him at the table in the kitchen. He washed the blood away with cold water and inspected the wound. It ran from his shoulder to his elbow, but was clean and not jagged. The knife had been sharp. A shiver ran through him. Goosebumps formed on his arms.

She looked at the wound and shook her head. "What happened?" She patted the wound with a dry cloth, then threaded her needle.

He told her about the attack through clenched teeth as she sewed up the wound. Then she spread salve on it and bandaged it. Taking a damp cloth, she wiped the sweat from his face.

"You're looking like an accident victim." She stoked the fire in the stove and put on the tea pot. "Tea will calm your nerves and mine."

"You must no' tell Eirica about this." He didn't want her frightened.

Mrs. MacAlister worried the edge of her wrapper. "She will notice you're injured again."

"No' if I keep my shirt sleeve over it and you do no' say anything. Only Humphrey and two others know of this. Until

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

we find the man behind the attack, I do no' want her to know."

"I shan't tell her." She poured them both tea. "Why are they doing this, Duncan?"

He smiled at the use of his first name. She was the housekeeper and above all the other servants and he was nothing more than a servant. "If I knew, we could put it behind us."

"Protect her. That's what the master would have wanted. I know he pleaded with you to marry her and take care of her." She looked at him for a long moment. "Pride can be an evil thing. Don't let it cause harm." She took a long sip of her tea. "Don't let her wed that man."

"The Spoiler of Reputations?" He smiled at her over his cup. The woman was wiser than any of them knew.

"Yes. He's an evil man. I knew that when he first bid for Miss Eirica's hand. I told Mr. MacDougall not to allow the match. He was taken with Eachan MacFie, as was the missus. He couldn't understand how Miss Eirica could turn him down." She set down her cup and rose. "Miss Eirica is a wise one and would never give her heart to a man unworthy of it. Remember that." She left him sitting at the table.

* * *

"Without the magistrate's signature, no one will believe we are wed." Eirica held the piece of paper in her hand as she sat on the edge of the bed. The inn room seemed stuffy and small. There hadn't been much available and they could only ask for one room as they had supposedly just eloped.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Duncan took the paper from her and walked to the small wooden desk in the corner. "No one will know whether the signature is real or no'." He opened the bottle of ink and, with the quill, signed the magistrate's name to the bottom of the marriage certificate. "All legal and proper." He blew on the ink, then left the form to dry.

Eirica put her hand to her mouth and giggled. "They won't be able to prove otherwise?"

He shook his head. Turning the chair, he looked at her.

She glanced down at her hands. Never before had she been alone with a man in an inn. Besides the chair that Duncan sat in, only a bed and an armoire were in the room. Of course, they had nothing to hang since they had brought no extra clothing with them. They were supposed to be in the village and everyone had expected them to return by late afternoon yesterday.

Eirica glanced out the window. Darkness was all she could see. "Do you suppose they found the note we left?"

"Anne would have gone to my room to find me when I didn't come to pay a visit. I'm sure she found the note." Duncan rose and went to stand by the window. "I hope so." She went and rested her hand on his shoulder, leaning her head against his back. "I don't wish Anne to be scared."

"I'm sure she will worry until we return, but no' over much if she has found the note." He turned and gazed into her eyes.

She smiled at him. She wanted him to take her into his arms and kiss her. She wanted him to touch her. Being near

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

him started the butterflies that churned in her stomach at his touch.

Duncan brushed the side of her face.

A shiver ran through her and she leaned into his hand. She turned her face to kiss his palm.

"I'm sorry about the accommodations." He stroked the side of her face with his thumb.

"It couldn't be helped." She lifted herself to her tiptoes and kissed him.

He pulled her close and deepened the kiss. She groaned. This might be her only chance of spending the night with a man and, since everyone would assume she had, she truly didn't want to waste the opportunity.

He broke the kiss and trailed soft pecks across her cheek and down her neck. He nuzzled against her neck and a shiver coursed through her. She wrapped her arms about his neck as her knees went weak.

He pulled her arms from his neck and crushed her to him. "'Tis but a sham and we need remember that."

She nestled her head against his chest, hearing his heart racing. "It doesn't matter. 'Tis the only wedding I shall ever have." She pulled back and looked up at him. She smiled. "I wish to once experience what men and women share."

She didn't wish to see her face. It would be bright red. Never had she been so brazen or wanton, but she didn't care. She wanted to be in his arms.

"Eirica, one day you'll find a man to be your husband."

She had found the man she wished to wed. Even though

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

her marriage was nothing more than a ruse to fool others, she wanted this to be her wedding night. She wanted to spend the night in his arms. "I don't wish to wed another."

He held her for a long moment. "Eirica, we have a long trip tomorrow and you should rest."

She looked at him. "I don't wish to rest. I'm too excited."

"Excited? What are you excited about?" A warm smile lit his eyes and wrapped itself around her, making her feel safe and loved.

Did he love her?

She didn't know. At the moment, she didn't care. She only had this moment. She wouldn't let that cast a dark shadow on her. She danced across the room and picked up the marriage certificate. "I am a bride and my handsome husband stands before me. How could I not be excited?"

"Eirica, 'tis but pretend."

She curtsied. "And pretend I shall. Does not my handsome husband want me?" She turned her bottom lip into a pout, then giggled. The coldness and emptiness that had pervaded her since her father's death a week past had deserted her. She didn't want it to return. At least not yet.

"Any man would want you." He laughed.

"Then pretend to be my husband." She glided across the room toward him.

He looked her up and down, his gaze burning through her. "I can only pretend so far."

She lifted her chin and stared him in the eyes. "It's been a very long time since I pretended, but I've watched Anne of

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

late and I think I have figured it out.” Pretending to be Duncan’s wife would come easily to her.

She stopped when she was barely a hair’s breadth from him. His breath caressed her face. She traced a line across his burnt eyebrow. “Rogue. A rogue husband. That is what I shall pretend.” She kissed him quickly.

He laughed. “What shall I pretend?”

“That I’m your wife and you wish to bed me.” She held his gaze, even though she wanted to glance elsewhere. She was far from home. She could be brazen. She could take what she wanted. Once they returned to her house, she would no longer be able to pretend. Reality would return.

“I do want you, Eirica.”

“Then take me.”

“I canno’ despoil you.”

“Why not? Eachan has the world convinced he did.” She cocked her head to the side. “I might as well have something to go with my reputation.”

“Eirica!” His mouth fell open.

“Are you offended?” She took in a deep breath to steady herself. Trying to be forward was harder than she had imagined and if she made him hate her for it, she would curl into the emptiness of yesterday and follow her father to the grave.

“Nothing you could do would offend me.” He pulled her close. “I wish I had the right.”

“I give you the right.” She leaned back so she could look into his eyes. “Make me a woman, Duncan. No other man ever

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

will. Please.”

He lifted her into his arms and set her on the bed. “I cannot take you. It would not be right.” He worked the buttons loose on the back of her gown.

“I care nothing for right.”

His hands burned a path down her back. As the last button came loose, he lifted the dress over her head and laid it across the chair. He untied her petticoats and slipped them down her legs. Soon she lay in nothing but her chemise and pantaloons.

She shivered and fought the urge to cover herself. Only her maid had ever seen her wearing so little clothing.

“You are beautiful, Eirica. The most beautiful woman I have ever met.” He laid beside her, cradling her in his arms.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. Her body burned for his touch, but she wanted to cover herself also.

He kissed her, deepening the kiss until their tongues danced together. Her body turned to liquid and she clung to him. He kissed her neck, pushing against her neck until she felt as though their hearts beat as one.

Then he trailed kisses down her neck and across her chest. He nibbled at the top of her chemise, kissing the top of her breasts. With one hand, he rubbed her nipple through the material.

Eirica gasped and dug her fingernails into his shoulder. Slowly he pulled the ties loose holding her chemise closed. She wanted to reach up and yank them free.

He pushed the material aside with his cheek and took her nipple into his mouth. She sucked in her breath and held it.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She had never felt anything so exquisite. She tangled her hands in his hair, letting the silkiness caress her hands.

He pushed the material away from her other breast and nibbled at it, while he rubbed the taunt nub of the first with his thumb. She arched her back, trying to force him to rub harder. Her insides swirled and her body tingled. She wanted more.

He sat back on his knees and looked at her. "Beautiful."

Eirica clung to the blanket beneath her, stilling the urge to cover herself. She could see the passion in his eyes. She wanted him to touch her more.

After several moments, she reached out to him. "Touch me again."

He pulled the string of her pantaloons loose and pulled them over her hips, his fingers burning a path as he touched her. He kissed the inside of each ankle as he pulled her garment free. After tossing it to the floor, he let his fingertips drift back up her legs until they met in the middle.

Gooseflesh covered her body. She couldn't breathe. The heat from his hands set her flesh afire. He continued to rub the top of her legs, running his fingers through the hair at the apex of her legs. He nudged one leg over and rubbed his thumb on a sensitive spot between her legs. Flashes of light exploded before her eyes. She gripped the bedclothes, then reached for him. Then she gripped the bedclothes again.

He lay beside her, never stopping his touch. She squirmed against him. She pulled at the buttons on his shirt and tucked her hands inside, rubbing his chest. She found the hard nubs of his nipples and teased them with her fingers.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He drew in a sharp breath and bent over her, kissing her. He continued to rub the sensitive spot until she thought she would lose her mind. Then suddenly, her body quivered against his.

“Yes, lass. Yes.” He crushed her against him as she continued to quiver, his finger still touching her.

She thought she was dying. She thought her body would come apart.

She wanted more. She wanted to feel him. She tried to breathe. She reached out for him and slid her hand down his chest.

He groaned and captured her hand. “No, sweet one.”

“I want you. I know there’s more,” she gasped. She wanted to feel him inside her. She might be of no experience, but that didn’t mean she didn’t know what to expect.

“I shall not deflower you.” He kissed her and hugged her. “Give you pleasure, but that is all.”

“What of you?” She clung to him. Parts of her body still quivered. Her mind wouldn’t focus.

“I shall get my pleasure from yours.”

She tried to pull back and look at him, but he held her tightly. She shivered and clung to him. “I want to give you pleasure also.”

“You have, lass. You have.”

“I want you to pleasure me again.” She rubbed her face against his chest. “All the way this time.”

Duncan groaned.

CHAPTER 16

Anne threw herself at Eirica as she and Duncan entered the back door. "Where have you been?" Tears filled the child's eyes.

Eirica hugged Anne and hoped she wouldn't be able to tell she lied. "To Gretna Green to be wed."

Anne looked up at her sister, then at Duncan. "Truly?"

"Truly." Duncan ruffled the child's hair.

"We've been so worried about you." Anne wiped at her eyes as she let loose of Eirica.

"We left a note in Duncan's room."

"I found no note. You should have left it in a better place." Anne put her hands on her hips. "'Twasn't nice to worry us

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

so.”

Duncan laughed. “I hear Nanny McCall in that speech.”

Anne poked her chin in the air and tilted her head to the side. “She was worried also.”

“I apologize.” Eirica bent down and took Anne’s chin in her hand. “If we’d told anyone, someone might have tried to stop us. The only way was to sneak away. We truly thought you would discover the note.”

“I shall forgive you.” A smile spread across Anne’s face. “But only because Duncan is now my brother.”

“Right familiar you are with him.” Eirica frowned at Anne.

“I shouldn’t have to call my brother Mr. MacKinnon.”

Duncan laughed again and put his hand on Eirica’s shoulder. “She’s probably right on that account.”

Eirica looked at him and smiled. “You’re of no help.”

Anne grabbed Eirica’s and Duncan’s hands and pulled them toward the front of the house. “Others are worried.” A crease formed across her forehead. “Very worried.” Then she giggled. “Oh, they’ll be very angry. Especially Mr. MacFie.”

Eirica groaned. “He isn’t here?” She had no desire to deal with Eachan yet. She’d rather deal with the others first and send them on their way.

“He has been since you didn’t arrive in the village to meet the wool buyer.” Anne continued to pull them toward the parlor.

Eirica pulled back on Anne’s hand. “What are you doing out of the nursery without Nanny?”

“She had a sick headache and I wanted some milk.” Anne

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

squared her shoulders. "I'm old enough to fetch myself some milk."

"That's what the maids are for."

Anne glanced down at her shoes, then back at Eirica. "I was scared you'd left me and I was alone."

Eirica scooped Anne into her arms. "Never would I leave you." She brushed her hair back from her face. "I'll always be here to tend to you."

Anne looked up at her.

A twinge plucked at Eirica's heart. She should have told Anne rather than leaving a note, but she'd feared the suitors would learn of her plan and follow her and then her ploy would never work. "I didn't mean too worry you."

"You're all the family I have." A hiccup escaped Anne. "I don't want to be alone."

"Sweetheart, you'll never be alone." Eirica hugged her again. "That still does not excuse your skulking about the house without letting Nanny know."

Anne scuffed her shoe against the floor. "No one would tell me anything. They think me a child." She looked up at Duncan. "From the kitchen I can go into the dining room and hear what the men say. Then I know what is happening."

"You are but a child."

"I am seven and quite grown up."

"And deserving of knowing." Duncan swept her up into his arms. "We did no' mean to bring you sorrow or worry. We shall no' do so again."

Anne snuggled her head against his shoulder.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"Now, you must go back to the nursery or Nanny will have apoplexy...and you would no' want to be the cause of that." Duncan set her on the floor. "What happens in the parlor is no' for even quite grown up girls of seven."

Anne sighed. "Fine." She stomped toward the stairs. "I shall be glad when I'm old enough to hear everything."

Eirica laughed. "Sometimes 'tis more pleasant to be left out." She wanted to go to the nursery with Anne. Facing the men in the parlor wasn't something she relished. Would they be able to make their ploy work?

She straightened her shoulders and they stood outside the open parlor door. Duncan placed his arm about her, his hand resting on her waist. She leaned into him, glad he accompanied her.

Mrs. MacAlister stood at the far side of the room, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief and worrying one edge of her apron. "Something terrible has happened to them."

"'Tis that man. The governess." Eachan's face was bright red and his hands were clenched into fists. "Instead of taking her to the village, he took her out into the woods somewhere and ra—"

"I shan't hear such talk." Gilliskel pushed himself off the settee. "Mr. MacKinnon is a true gentleman and would never harm our Eirica."

"She is not your Eirica," snapped Eachan. "We have looked everywhere. No other explanation exists."

"The highwaymen got them," Mrs. MacAlister sobbed.

Grant poured himself more brandy. "The highwaymen

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

have never killed anyone. Only robbed them and left them without transportation. The governess, on the other hand, we know nothing about.”

“I recommended him.” Gilliskel took the glass from Grant and took a deep drink.

“The highwaymen nearly killed *me*.” Ranald wobbled over to the table with the brandy.

“They’re dead. I know they’re dead,” Mrs. MacAlister wailed.

Duncan gently pushed Eirica forward into the room. “We’re alive and quite fine.” His voice boomed around the room.

Everyone stopped and stared at them. Mrs. MacAlister blew her nose loudly. Carlton raised his eyebrows and swore under his breath. Gilliskel walked as fast as his feeble legs would take him across the room and hugged Eirica.

“We are so glad.” Tears shone in his eyes.

Guilt assailed Eirica. When she’d made her plan, she’d never thought about how distraught everyone would become.

Gilliskel looked into her eyes. “You’re sure nothing untoward has occurred?”

She nodded.

“We have been to Gretna Green.” Duncan pulled her close.

“What?” Eachan’s voice held disbelief tinged with fury.

“We eloped.” Eirica raised her head a bit higher in challenge.

Mrs. MacAlister flew across the room and hugged Eirica, nearly knocking Gilliskel from his feet. “Why did you not let

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

us know?"

Eirica waved her hand in a circle. "Because all of these would have done anything to stop us."

"We were so worried." Mrs. MacAlister sniffled. "I had visions of terrible things happening."

Eirica laid her hand on Mrs. MacAlister's shoulder. "We didn't mean to worry you."

"I must tell Anne." Mrs. MacAlister started to turn.

"We met her as we entered the house." Duncan reached out and stopped the housekeeper. "Please, bring some refreshments. We are quite famished after our travels."

"And a round of drinks so we might toast the couple." Gilliskel patted Eirica's shoulder.

"I shan't drink to such a union." Eachan stomped across the room and glared at Duncan. "What right did you have to wed her?"

Duncan shrugged, but his hold on Eirica's waist tightened. "As much as any. I promised Angus before he died that I'd take care of her."

"He wants nothing but to steal your farm." Eachan drew himself up. The side of his neck pulsed.

"You had other thoughts?" Eirica stared him straight in the face. "My reputation, then my land. That's all you ever wanted."

"I...I did it for your own good," Eachan sputtered.

"Hah!" She swept by him. "I would love some sherry. It's been a long journey."

Keegan rose from the settee and offered her a seat.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She glanced at where her father has spent his last days and moved over to a chair and perched on the edge. Grant handed her a glass of sherry. Silence hung like a shroud in the room.

Duncan moved and stood behind her, his hand resting on her shoulder.

Eachan paced back and forth. He glowered at Duncan. "This isn't an acceptable marriage."

"Why?" Eirica leaned back in the chair, drawing strength from Duncan. All they had to do was convince everyone that the wedding was real and she could be shed of the lot of them and return to her life. It hadn't been the happiest life, but at least it didn't have the constant turmoil the suitors caused.

Eachan looked down his nose. "He's nothing—a tutor." He walked over and stood in front of Eirica. "You are a woman of means. He's doing nothing but taking advantage of you."

"So you said." She smiled at him, forcing herself to ignore the pounding of her heart and the sweating of her hands.

Eachan looked up at Duncan. "I shall have the marriage annulled."

"You canno' do that," Duncan said.

"I'll have my solicitor look into it." A smile spread across Eachan's face. "That is what I shall do. He will have this marriage set aside. After all, Eirica is but a female and one in mourning who has made a mistake in judgment. Her grief allowed her to be swept away into such a scheme."

"'Tis too late for that." Duncan patted Eirica's shoulder.

She glanced down. Discussing what had transpired between her husband and her wasn't a pleasant aspect. She

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

didn't wish to have her face turn the shade of a beet. She nodded. "'Tis too late."

Eachan's face became redder. The glass in his hand shattered. "It doesn't matter. He took advantage of you."

"I proposed to him." Eirica righted herself and stared directly at Eachan.

"What?" Eachan sputtered.

"You heard me." She took a sip of her sherry. "Now the matter is closed. I'm wed to Duncan and so it will stay." She set the glass down on the table next to her. "Supper will be served shortly. You may all join us in a celebration of our union." She drew in a long breath. "However, on the morrow, I expect all of you to find other accommodations. We don't wish to have a house full of guests."

Eachan took a step closer to Eirica. Duncan stepped in front of her. Eachan raised a fist and waved it in Duncan's face. "This matter is not closed."

Duncan captured Eachan's fist. Eachan's arm bent backward as he tried to shake Duncan off.

"You will leave our home now." Duncan released Eachan. "You will never threaten my wife again." He took a step toward Eachan.

Eachan stepped backwards, rubbing his fist. "This isn't over." He stomped from the room.

Chills ran down Eirica's back. Eachan would cause trouble if he could, but she didn't know what he could do. They had a paper from the magistrate saying they were married. If only the solicitor would arrive with a copy of Father's will that

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

might help, but she doubted it. Who would inherit Father's land if something happened to her? The land was what all of them wanted. All of them but Duncan.

He perched on the arm of the chair and put his arm around her. "'Twill be all right, love.'" He smiled at her.

She smiled back.

"Such boorishness." Gilliskel raised his glass. "I wish to make a toast to the couple."

"Oh, for God's sake, Father, she was to be your bride." Carlton threw himself down on the settee.

"She's a beautiful young woman who would want no marriage with me." Gilliskel smiled. "Duncan is the perfect match for her. They make a lovely couple."

"Can Eachan do anything about the marriage?" Keegan leaned against the back of the settee where Gilliskel sat.

"If anyone can, he can." Grant took a long drink from his glass.

"Then maybe all is not lost." Carlton smiled. "We shall see."

"Quiet!" Gilliskel's voice rose. "I wish to make a toast." He glared at the men. "I want to hear no more about setting aside a marriage that is right and proper." He paused and looked from one to the next.

"But, Father—" Carlton started.

"No more." Gilliskel fixed him with a glare. After several seconds, he turned to Eirica and smiled. "To the bride and groom. May they find the happiness in marriage that I found and Angus found. He would be most proud. May they have

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

many offspring to care for them in their old age.” He raised his glass.

Eirica raised her glass, then took a sip. She wished the marriage was real and all that Gilliskel had wished them would come true.

* * *

Eirica cut roses to put on the dinner table. She hoped the color would improve her mood. The suitors had yet to leave her house and, even though they seemed to believe she and Duncan were wed, she wasn’t sure that they had yet conceded defeat. Anger had spewed from Eachan like venom and she knew he would try to have the marriage set aside.

With luck, she could be rid of the suitors in the next couple of days. Gilliskel was happy for her, but his sons seemed in no hurry to leave. Gilliskel’s health did seem to be failing ever since her father had passed on. She hoped he wouldn’t join her father just from the sadness.

She snipped a bright yellow rose. *Sunshine and happiness.* What she would have if Duncan were truly her husband. What her father and mother had had, but all she had was a façade.

“Why, Miss Eirica, you look pensive.” Keegan’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

She wanted to groan. She had hoped to be alone in the garden. Alone for just a few moments without listening to everyone bicker. It wore down the soul. “I thought you’d be packing.”

He smiled at her. “I’m in no hurry.” He took her basket.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Come and sit on the bench. ’Tis so quiet here.” He took her arm and led her to the bench across the garden. He set the basket of flowers on the ground.

“I really must put those in water before they wilt.” Eirica still held the yellow rose.

“Nonsense. Sit and visit with me.” Keegan indicated the bench. “You look as though you could use someone with whom to talk.”

She had nothing to say to him, except “Go home.” He didn’t look as though he would listen. “Have you made arrangements for the wool to be shipped?”

“Yes.” He sat and patted the bench beside him.

She remained standing. “When will that be?” Once the wool was gone, Keegan would no longer have a reason to stay.

“The beginning of next week.” He took the yellow rose from her and put it in the basket. “Payment will be here the end of this week.” He smiled. “Now that business has been taken care of, sit and talk with me. We never got a chance to speak alone. The others were always nearby.”

She wondered where the others were and why they hadn’t descended upon them already. “Where are the others?”

“Mr. Anderson is resting and his sons have gone into the village.” He took her hand. “Ranald is also resting.”

She tried to pull free, but he tightened his grip. “I’m surprised they risked going, what with the highwaymen and all.”

“They said they had important business to tend and would be back in time for supper.” He rubbed the back of her hand

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

with his thumb. "It gives us a chance to be alone."

"'Tis unseemly for me to be alone with you, Mr. MacCallum. I'm a married woman and I do not think my husband would be pleased with you holding my hand." She wished Duncan hadn't gone to see Humphrey. Maybe he would come looking for her.

"I shall release your hand if you promise to sit with me for a few moments."

She stared at him. She didn't fear the scarecrow and as long as the others weren't about to argue, she supposed she could show her manners and entertain her father's guest for a few minutes. "Only for a moment. I must get the roses in water and check on Anne."

"She's with her nanny and doesn't need your attention."

"Yes, Mr. MacCallum, she does. Even more so since Father passed on." She sighed and sat next to him. She wanted her hand back.

He held her hand for a moment, staring into her eyes, then released it. "You're a very beautiful woman."

She looked down. "Thank you, but 'tis unseemly for you to be paying me such compliments." She wanted to laugh. Now she and Duncan had announced their marriage, Keegan truly wooed her. Before that, all the suitors had done was bicker among themselves. The whole situation seemed ludicrous.

"Oh, but I can't help myself. Never have I been in the company of such a beauty." He laid his hand on her knee.

"Mr. MacCallum." She made her voice harsh.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Please call me Keegan.” He didn’t move his hand.

She picked it up and put it on his own knee. “I must go in now.”

He put his hand back on her knee. “Now, Eirica, you don’t need to hurry. ’Tis not your responsibility to care for the child. You have servants who are capable of making sure the household runs smoothly.” He gave her a crooked smile. “I only wish a few moments of your time.”

“I don’t know of what we have to speak now that we’ve discussed the wool.”

He pressed down on her leg. “I only told you of the arrangements because you asked. Now that you have a husband, I shall deal with him.”

Anger flashed through her, red hot. Just as the merchants had assumed she wouldn’t pay once her father had passed on, Keegan assumed she would turn the running of the farm over to Duncan without another thought. “’Tis still my farm and I am still in charge.”

“Nonsense.” He patted her leg.

She rose, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her down beside her. “A husband is the one to take charge of the business dealings.”

“Duncan isn’t yet acquainted with the business side of the farm.” She pried his hand from her arm. “Unhand me.”

“If you’ll sit and listen to me.”

“Mr. MacCallum, I have nothing to discuss with you.” She looked toward the house, hoping to see one of the servants. Then she would have an excuse to escape and he couldn’t

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

detain her without causing an incident.

“Keegan.” He smiled.

A shiver ran down her back. He might look like a scarecrow, but at the moment she wished to be anywhere but with him. She wanted to rub her arm where he’d grabbed her, but she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d hurt her.

He shook his head. “I don’t know why you would marry a man such as Duncan. He’s nothing but a tutor. A penniless tutor at that.”

“His financial standing is none of your concern.” She bristled at his comments and wanted to wipe the smirk off his face.

“Of course it is.” He frowned and looked at the ground for a moment. “Your father invited me here, not only to buy the wool, but to be your husband. He understood you needed a man of business to care for you and your sister.”

“I do quite well tending to the both of us, as well as to the business of the farm.”

“A woman as lovely as yourself shouldn’t have to tend to such matters. You should be entertaining the other wives from the neighboring farms and the village. You should engage in more ladylike pursuits.” He nodded as though agreeing with himself. “Yes. You should tend the roses and have tea.”

“What I do with my time is my own business.” Men always thought a woman should sit in the parlor and entertain or sew. She found nothing of interest to talk about with other women. They didn’t understand sheep and she didn’t much

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

care for sewing or household management. Mrs. MacAlister did a fine job of keeping the household running and she left the job to her.

He looked at her. "But, Eirica, wouldn't you rather not have the burden?"

"I enjoy tending the farm."

"I find that hard to believe." He patted her knee. "You just have known nothing else since your father fell ill. Now you have a chance to have a normal life."

It would do no good to argue with him. "I shall, for now I am married and have a husband to help with the farm."

"He's the wrong husband for you."

She stared into his eyes. He meant what he said. "How do you know that?"

"As I said, he is a wastrel and unworthy of you."

"'Tis not your place to make such a judgment." Keegan didn't know how much Duncan knew about running the farm and what a shrewd businessman he really was. Then, none of them saw anything but the fact Duncan had come to teach Anne.

"Your father made it my place." He took her hand. "He asked me to care for you when he was gone."

"Things have changed since then."

"Not truly."

She blinked. He didn't seem to want to acknowledge that the contest to win her hand was done. She'd given her hand to another and wouldn't take it back. "Mr. MacCallum, I have chosen with whom I shall spend my days."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“It wasn’t a choice worthy of you.”

“And you are?” She raised her eyebrows as she said it.

“Of course. Otherwise your father wouldn’t have invited me.”

“Tis too late.” Now, she was even more thankful she and Duncan had announced their marriage.

“Tis not too late.” He turned her hand over and drew circles on her palm.

She yanked her hand away from him. “That is not proper, Mr. MacCallum.” She rose. “You must excuse me.”

He grabbed her arm. “Eirica, I want you for my wife.”

“I’m wed to another, Mr. MacCallum and ’tis unseemly for you to act in this manner.” She would have a bruise on her arm. Duncan would be furious if he found out Keegan had put it there.

“Your wedding to Duncan is a sham.” He tightened his grip. “He seduced you into marrying him while you were in mourning.”

“He did nothing of the sort.”

“Now, Eirica, we both know he did. He’s after your money.” A smile flitted across his face. “Being upset about your father’s death, you were taken in by him.”

“No such thing happened.” She couldn’t tell Keegan that Duncan’s pride had refuse to allow him to wed her for true and she hated the fact that others assumed he was only after her money.

“I shan’t argue with you about the matter.” He rose and pulled her to him. “I want you to be my wife. I shall take care

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

of you and see that you want for nothing.”

“I want for nothing now, except for you to release me.” She pushed against him.

He tightened his grip. “Tell the truth and be shed of Duncan. Then you’ll become my wife.”

“There is no truth of which to be shed.” She gritted her teeth and pushed against him.

“Of course there is. You don’t wish to be wed to one such as him. I shall forgive you the fact you have been with him. ’Tis not like you were unsullied anyway. I shall forgive all your transgressions. You’ll become my wife.” He kissed her.

She screamed against his mouth and wrestled to be free of him. He held her tighter, deepening his kiss.

She gagged and beat on his shoulders, but he wouldn’t release her. She stomped on his toe and jammed her knee against him. After years of working with men, she knew how to defend herself. Her father had instructed her at an early age, since she was always at the sheep pens, but she’d never had to defend herself before.

He cried out and released her. She gathered her skirts and ran for the house.

CHAPTER 17

“I canno’ do this.” Duncan sat in the blue wing chair, hugging the pillow, and staring at Eirica in her nightdress. The white garment covered her from her neck to her ankles, but it clung to her breasts in spite of the lace down the front. Her blonde hair hung like a veil around her face. She looked like an angel.

His body responded to her and he kept the pillow in his lap.

“If we don’t share a room, they’ll know for sure we’re not wed.” She clasped her hands in her lap, looking demure.

Damn. What bit of lunacy had gotten him into this situation? “Yes, love, but...” He shook his head. For four

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

nights on the road he had kept his passion in control, but then she'd been dressed in a heavy black wool dress. That had tested his resolve almost to the breaking point. Now she smelled of lavender and soap. The white garment clung to her form when she moved around the room, showing every curve. He wanted her, but he wasn't her husband and he had no right.

"This charade..."

She looked up at him. "This charade was necessary to salvage what is left of my life."

He nodded. This charade would be his undoing. "I want a drink."

"I can ring for the maid." She stood.

He groaned as the nightdress outlined her bottom. "I'll go downstairs and get something." He stood and bolted to the door. "Do you want anything?"

"Some tea and see if any sweets are left from supper." She smiled at him. "I couldn't eat with everyone glaring. Now I'm hungry."

So am I. But not for sweets from the kitchen. "I'll see what I can find."

"Don't take too long." She plumped up a pillow and her nightdress clung to her backside as she leaned over the bed.

"I shall no'." He exited the room and leaned against the closed door, drawing in several deep breaths. This would be the longest night he'd ever spent. How was he to lay next to her and not take her? He couldn't get her with child. That would only immerse them into this charade farther with no hope of coming out the other end.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He meandered down the steps. Everyone else in the house was abed, probably sleeping. He crept about like a thief because he couldn't stay in the same room with his "wife."

As he passed the table in the hallway, he picked up a candle and lit it. No sense in skulking about in the dark. He took several steps, then heard a board creak. He paused and listened. This house had plenty of creaks, but he wanted to make sure that no one else was here. He heard another creak. From the back of the house.

He blew out the candle and listened, while his eyes adjusted to the moonlight. He crept forward in his stockinged feet. Someone else was creeping about the house. It could be a servant or one of the men from upstairs looking for something to eat, but he needed to be sure. He didn't relish being burnt to death in his bed.

Nor would he allow the woman who owned his heart to come to harm.

He opened the door to the kitchen and gave a prayer of thanks when it didn't creak. He slipped into the kitchen. A shadow disappeared out the other door toward the back stairs leading to the third floor.

Duncan followed. He slipped into the hallway as the shadow paused at the bottom of the stairs. Something about the figure didn't appear right. Servants would have lamps and so would the suitors. They wouldn't want to trip and fall in the dark.

He grabbed the figure by the shoulder. It swung at him, grazing his cheek. He punched it in the stomach. An "oof"

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

greeted him. Something crashed to the floor as the doubled-up shadow slithered toward the door. The smell of kerosene wafted toward him. Duncan made another grab for it, but it pushed him away and he skidded to the side, avoiding the broken lamp on the floor.

The shadow disappeared out the door. Duncan raced out, but he couldn't see anyone. Where were the guards? Surely everyone had been told Eirica had returned and they no longer looked for her but guarded the house.

He walked down the path a ways, then turned back to the house. After bolting the back door, he found a towel and wiped up the kerosene. He had to find out who was set on burning down Eirica's house. None of them would be safe until he did.

He stood in the kitchen for several moments, then lit a lamp. Eirica would wonder what had happened to him and he didn't want her wandering about the house at night. No one seemed safe. Tomorrow he would talk with Humphrey and make sure more guards were posted. Whoever was behind this liked the cover of darkness. Maybe, he'd do guard duty himself. It would be better than laying next to Eirica.

He sighed and stoked up the fire to make his "wife" some tea. Then he dug around to find something to eat. He'd take up food for both of them. At least that would keep them busy for a bit.

Arranging the tray, he blew out the lamp and walked back to the bedroom. He knocked softly. The glow from the lamp framed Eirica as she opened the door and it also illuminated

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

her body beneath the fine linen material. He steadied the tray and took a deep breath.

“I was about to go searching for you.”

“I had to heat the water.” He would tell her of the incident later. She had enough matters to concern her. He set the tray down on the small table.

She sat in the chair across from him. “Thank you.” She poured herself some tea. Then she picked up a piece of cold mutton and took a bite.

He laughed. “I forgot a knife and fork.”

Her face glowed. “No matter. We can eat with our fingers. There are none about to scold.” She held a piece of meat to his mouth.

He took a bite. The light shone about her head like a halo. He looked down at the tray. If he stared at her too long, he would be lost. He picked up a tart and held it up for her.

She took a bite and berries squirted out the side and down his fingers. She giggled, then licked the sticky filling from the side of his hand.

Her tongue against his skin melted his resolve. He stared at her mouth and rose from the chair. He pulled her lips away from his hand and kissed her. She tasted of berries.

She laughed, and it was a sound filled with happiness, something he seldom heard coming from her. She picked up a tart and held it to his mouth. “You may have your own. You don’t need to steal mine.”

“It tastes so much better on your lips.”

She dipped her finger in the filling and smeared it on his

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

lips. Reaching up, she kissed him. Smiling, she leaned back. "You're right. It tastes better on your lips than alone."

Duncan picked up a napkin and wiped her face and hands, then wiped his own. She leaned her head back and pursed her lips, then ran her tongue from one side to the other. "Getting the last of the berries." She arched her eyebrows at him.

"Oh, Eirica, what am I to do?"

She rose and put her arms around his neck. "Love me."

"I have no right."

"I give you the right."

He nuzzled her neck and pressed his lips against her neck where he could feel her heart beating. She shivered against him.

He scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Laying next to her, he pulled her tight. "You are so beautiful."

She pressed her lips against his neck. He rubbed his hand down her back, feeling the dip just before her hips flared. He pressed her against him, his body aching to take her. "I should—"

She pressed her finger against his lips. "I love you, Duncan. I wish nothing more than to lie with you once before—"

"If you become—"

"Shh." She kissed him and ran her hands over his chest.

He leaned her back and kissed her neck. Unbuttoning the front of her nightdress, he kissed a trail down her flesh. She smelled wonderful, the scent of lavender filling the air around him. He'd never wanted a woman the way he wanted her.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He'd touched her and pleased her, but he wanted all of her, even though he knew he shouldn't.

She drew in her breath sharply as his lips brushed the top of her breasts. He folded back the material and looked at her skin in the soft glow of the lamp. Her taunt rose nipples made a sharp contrast with her white skin. He laved her nipple with his tongue, feeling her writhe beneath him. Her moan made his body tense.

He pulled up the material of her nightdress, running his fingers along the inside of her leg. She gasped. His hand slid between her legs, touching her, making her wriggle more.

Erica tugged at his shirt, pulling the buttons free. She slid her hands inside and rubbed his nipples. He drew in a sharp breath. He wanted her. He needed her.

He continued to rub between her legs, letting her wetness cling to his hands. He slid his fingers into her and she raised her hips to him.

"Please, Duncan. Please."

He captured her breast as he continued to slide his fingers in and out of her. Her softness caressed his fingers. She pulsed around his fingers and he thought he would lose control.

She pulled at his trousers and unbuttoned them. Wrapping her hand around him, she ran her fingers down his length. He gasped.

Rolling her on her back, he sat up and shed his pants. With her nightdress bunched up around her waist, he knelt over her. He lowered himself and entered her slowly. Pulling her to him, he held her as he pushed himself into her. He held his

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

breath, forcing himself to control the waves of need and want that flooded him. When he felt resistance, he stopped and captured her lips with his. Then he plunged into her as she cried out against him.

He lay still for several moments, rubbing the side of her face. "'Tis over." He moved slowly out of her, then back in again. She shuddered, then raised her hips to meet him.

He plunged into her over and over, until nothing but feeling and need filled him. He felt her pulse around him and he raised his head and roared, spilling his seed into her.

He collapsed to the side and pulled her with him. "My God, you are so beautiful."

She lay across him, her body trembling. He stroked her back. She clung to him, her fingernails digging into the flesh of his arms.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He stroked her hair. For a moment, he could dream she was his wife. He would always have this moment to remember. He pulled her close and kissed her.

* * *

Eirica sat in the garden watching the baby finches hopping in and out of their nest. She laughed as they chirped and pecked at each other, then hopped back to the safety of their home.

She folded her hands in her lap atop her black linen dress. The sun bore down on her, but she didn't feel truly warm. Once she had felt safe in her home like the baby birds. Now,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

she wasn't sure. Even with Duncan here, she didn't feel truly safe. Someone wanted to do her harm and she didn't know why.

She missed Father. Even in his addle-minded state, she wished he were here to cause her trouble. She wanted to share the little happiness she had with him.

The happiness Duncan brought to her. The happiness Duncan would take with him, for he still insisted he would leave as soon as he could do so without causing a terrible stir. Of course, if the suitors would go home, that would help matters. Instead, they had taken up residence at the village inn for the last two weeks. All, except Ranald, who had had the good sense to depart for his home.

Since that first night a fortnight ago, Duncan had refused to share her bed. He slept in the chair and often had disappeared before she awoke. He tended to Anne and to much of the work around the farm, giving her time to do what she pleased. Unfortunately, she didn't please to do much. She had spent hours in the garden watching the birds.

Father had loved this time of year. Everything was in bloom. The baby finches were up to their antics. He would sit where she sat now, watching.

Father was gone and she needed to go on with her life. She didn't know what would happen, but she couldn't spend the rest of her days sitting and watching birds. She had a farm to tend and a sister. She would go and write the letter and see if she could engage a new governess. She had put it off long enough. Duncan would leave when he felt things were well in

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

hand, whether they had a new governess or not. Besides, as her husband he shouldn't be Anne's governess. She sighed and leaned forward. She brushed at a spot on her black skirt. Black. A terrible color for a new bride to be wearing, but then, she wasn't really a new bride.

The door to the parlor crashed open behind her and she stood to see to the commotion. Eachan pushed past Mrs. MacAlister.

"Sir, Miss Eirica isn't receiving guests today." Mrs. MacAlister tried to move in front of him, her hands folded across her chest.

"Out of my way, woman. I shall see Eirica now." He reached out to shove the housekeeper aside.

"Eachan!" Eirica shouted. She entered the parlor. "How dare you act so in my house."

He glared at Eirica. "Tell her to be gone."

Eirica studied his face for a moment. The anger came from him like a great black wave. She shook her head. "I think not. She will stay." She had been alone with him before when he had been in such an ire and she knew him capable of harming her. She didn't relish being alone with him again.

Eachan stormed across the room toward Eirica. "I have business with you that you won't wish your servants to be privy to."

Eirica laughed, a rough sound. "As if the servants are not privy, whether they stay in the room or not." The chill that clung to her seeped into her bones. She wanted to be out in the sun again.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"Mrs. MacAlister may go." Duncan strode into the room. He went to Eirica and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

The front door slammed. Carlton, Grant and Keegan rushed into the parlor.

"Have we missed anything?" Carlton bent over, his hands against his knees, panting.

Eachan glared at the men.

"You could've waited." Keegan leaned against the door.

Eirica groaned. "Why have you burst into my home unannounced and uninvited?"

"To prove to you that...that this man cares nothing for you, but is using you to obtain your property." Eachan held a paper in his hand and waved it in Duncan's face.

Duncan made a grab for the paper, but Eachan moved out of his reach.

Eachan smiled at Eirica. "I told you I would have my solicitor take care of this matter and get you out of this dreadful marriage."

Eirica leaned against Duncan. If Eachan held an annulment, she and Duncan could handle that. She could go to the magistrate and swear she didn't want her marriage to Duncan annulled. What wasn't couldn't be set aside anyway. But none but Duncan and she needed to know that. "I don't wish to have my marriage annulled."

"He doesn't hold an annulment." Grant smiled and walked over to where the whiskey bottle sat. He poured himself a drink and took a long swallow.

Eirica held her breath. What else could Eachan know?

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

A sly smile creased Eachan's face. "No. This isn't an annulment." He waved the paper in the air. "What I have here is proof that a fraud has been committed."

"A fraud?" Duncan's arm tightened around Eirica's waist. "What type of fraud?"

Eirica let her breath out slowly, refusing to gasp in front of the suitors. She wouldn't show her feelings to them. She would face them down, even if her heart did threaten to burst. Clutching Duncan's hand, she forced herself to smile. "Whatever are you speaking about?"

"Your marriage to Duncan. 'Tis a fraud." Eachan's face lit up. Eirica couldn't remember when he'd looked so satisfied.

Her hands sweated against Duncan's. His breath came hot on her neck and her stomach flipped. "How can that be? I was in attendance. We had the ceremony, the magistrate signed our certificate and we left. 'Twas a normal wedding as far as I could tell." Lying had never been one of her strong points, but everything depended upon her telling the story and sticking to it. She would never be free otherwise.

"A beautiful bride she made." Duncan pulled her against him.

"Dressed in mourning." Eachan stared at them.

"Of course," said Duncan. "She had barely put her father in the ground. It would have been unseemly to wear anything but mourning clothes, even on such a joyous occasion as our nuptials."

"Therein is the problem." Eachan folded his arms across his chest.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Hurry it up, man.” Carlton crossed the room to stand near Eachan.

He glared at Carlton. “You had no need to attend me in this mission.”

“Of course we did. We have as much invested and as much right as you.” Grant strode across the room to stand next to his brother.

Keegan pulled at his cravat that seemed to be strangling him. “We wouldn’t allow you to tell her, then whisk her away without her having the choice. We all are invested and shall protect that investment.”

Eachan turned his back on the others in dismissal.

Eirica swallowed. Somehow they’d found out the truth. After a fortnight of peace, she would be back where she had begun. Men clamoring for her to make up her mind and wed one of them. If not for Carlton and Grant, she might marry Gilliskel just for the peace. He would want nothing of her and she would only have to be his wife for a short time.

The thought of burying him pulled at her heart. She couldn’t bear losing another and she had grown fond of the old man.

No. Marriage to Duncan was the only way out and they had to convince the suitors their marriage was valid.

The magistrate would surely remember a bride in mourning. She should have pushed Duncan harder to truly wed her. Then none of this would be happening.

“I don’t know what magistrate you went in front of, but none remember a woman in black.” Eachan had a triumphant

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

look on his face.

Keegan smiled and moved toward Eirica. He placed his hand on her arm. "We know you were taken in by his smooth talk. A young innocent woman in the throes of grief can't help being taken in by a swain." He gave her a look of concern. "I know you...well, I would still be honored to take you as wife."

Duncan removed Keegan's hand and pulled Eirica to his side. "This is my house now and I demand that you leave."

Eachan reached out to pull Eirica from Duncan's arms. Eirica stepped closer to Duncan.

Eachan frowned at her. "You have nothing to fear. I shan't allow him to harm you."

"I'm not afraid of Duncan. He's my husband. He would never cause me harm."

"He has truly soiled your reputation." Carlton took a sip of his drink. "Truly. But..." He looked over the edge of his glass at her, a smile crossing his face. "We have kept this man's doings from my father. He will still wed you as your father requested and make an honest woman of you." He took a step closer and lowered his voice. "'Tis the only way. Otherwise, your sister will live in the shadow of your shame."

Eirica wouldn't give up the game. Too much was at stake. She wouldn't be wed to these men and she wouldn't lose Duncan. Not yet. She pointed toward the door. "Out. Out of my house. I shall hear no more of this."

"You will." Eachan folded the paper and put it into his pocket. "I've called the constable. I shall have this man

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

arrested.”

Duncan stiffened behind her. “I shall gladly answer any questions the constable has to ask.”

“He has done nothing without my knowledge.” Eirica wrapped her arm around Duncan’s waist. They would stand together in this.

“You aren’t properly wed.” Eachan tightened his fists at his sides. “I shall see this man in jail and you wed to me, as it should have been. It was your father’s dying wish.” He took a step closer.

Duncan swirled Eirica around and looked into her eyes. She studied his expression. She leaned her head against his chest.

“She has made up her mind.” Duncan stared over her head at the others. Hugging her tightly, he took in a deep breath. “She is my wife and will stay my wife. Nothing you can do will change that.”

“I shall.” Eachan raised a fist.

Duncan moved Eirica to the side. “To come into her home and cause violence is no’ the way to woo her. That is why she wants no truck with you.” He looked down at Eirica. “Come to the village with me. The pastor will make sure we are well and truly wed.”

She looked into his eyes. Anger flashed. She didn’t want him to truly wed her because he was angry. “I don’t know.” She wanted it, but she wanted it forever, not for a moment.

“We have no choice.”

“What are you speaking about?” Grant drew closer.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Duncan frowned at him.

Eirica nodded. "Let us be away."

Duncan took Eirica's hand and they pushed past the men. In the hallway, they met Mrs. MacAlister.

"We are off to the village to see the pastor." Eirica called to her as they rushed past.

"Oh, my," said Mrs. MacAlister.

The clomp of boots followed them.

"Come back," Eachan said. "We aren't through."

Duncan and Eirica gained the back door. Eirica had to run to keep up with Duncan's long strides. He ordered the carriage and, while they waited, the men caught up to them.

"Where are you going?" Keegan stepped in front of the couple.

"To the village." Duncan wrapped his arm around Eirica.

"It will save me from having to send for the magistrate." Eachan stood on the other side.

"Call whomever you wish." Duncan took Eirica's arm and helped her into the carriage.

CHAPTER 18

Duncan held Eirica's hand as they stood in front of the pastor. *This was insanity.* He should never had suggested they wed in front of the pastor. Now he would be her husband. Yet he couldn't stay with her. He still had nothing to offer. How could he leave?

How had he come to this situation?

He could curse Angus. He had caused these events to happen. In his dreams, Duncan had seen himself wedded to Eirica and raising a brood, but he'd never thought to take a wife he couldn't support.

When he left, she could have it annulled. If he stayed away from her bed, she would have cause for the annulment.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Would it ever be safe for him to leave? Eachan would still be here. Surely, once Eachan was convinced they really were wed, he would look elsewhere for a wife, and Eirica could have her life again. She truly didn't need a husband. She could manage her farm alone.

He looked at her, her blonde hair fastened in a simple knot at her neck. The black dress she wore was simple and respectful to her father.

"Miss Eirica, why do you wish to wed this man?" asked Pastor MacLean.

"We are wed. We wish to have you confirm that fact." Eirica smiled at the man.

"Mr. MacFie says your wedding is but a sham." Pastor MacLean folded his arms across his chest. "He says you have been duped by this man." He inclined his head toward Duncan.

"Mr. MacFie knows not of what he speaks." She sighed. "He only wants my marriage to Duncan set aside so he might wed me in his place and take control of my farm."

Pastor MacLean tsked several times. "Now, Miss Eirica, you have no reason to speak ill of Mr. MacFie. He's a fine gentleman and well respected in the community."

"He is a rogue." Duncan moved closer to Eirica.

Eachan paced behind them. He clenched his hands into fists and glared at Duncan. He took a step closer to them.

Pastor MacLean waved him back. "You, sir, are not from around here. You know nothing of the people who live here."

"That might be, but of Eachan MacFie I know more than I

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

care to. When I say he is a rogue, I know whereof I speak.”

Pastor MacLean frowned. “I cannot conscience this.”

“Pastor, please. ’Tis what my father wished.” Eirica wiped at her eyes.

Duncan hugged her. “Do no’ fret, love.” He turned to the minister. “I could tell you tales about your fine, upstanding citizen, but that is no’ why we are here. My wife is tired of being harangued by those who wish to put aside what has been joined in God’s eyes. I do no’ know how you can refuse to perform the ceremony once more for us, for all to witness.”

“Mr. MacFie has a paper saying you were never wed.” Pastor MacLean looked from Duncan to Eachan and back.

Duncan held up the marriage certificate. “We have a paper which says we are.” He smiled. “Since we have been so for more than a fortnight, ’tis too late to annul said marriage.”

Pastor MacLean’s face turned red. “If there is a child...”

“We do no’ know.” Duncan hoped to God there wasn’t. He had only taken her once, but once might seal his fate. If she were with child, he couldn’t leave. He would have to stay, even though he would never be more than a servant in the house.

Pastor MacLean looked at Eirica. “You swear before God that you are wed to this man.”

Eirica swallowed several times, then nodded. “Yes, pastor.”

A dark veil seemed to descend upon Duncan. He had sealed his fate. No matter what happened, he would burn in hell for ruining this woman and making her swear to untruths.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He hugged her.

“Then I shall perform the ceremony, although ’tis unusual.” Pastor MacLean shook his head. “Most unusual. No banns have been posted. Miss Eirica is in mourning.” He tsked again under his breath. “Most unseemly.”

“If Eirica had no’ been hounded by these men”—Duncan inclined his head toward the suitors who stood behind them—“and the village women, she would no’ have been forced into wedding immediately after her father’s passing.”

“Well...” Pastor MacLean looked down at his scuffed shoes.

“All she wanted was to be left alone to her grieving. but none could see anything but a young woman without a man for protection.” Duncan continued to stare at the pastor. “So she wed for protection. Wed the only man who did no’ care about her farm and the money she brought into the marriage.”

Pastor MacLean looked up and studied Duncan’s face. “You gain what the others have lost.”

“I gain nothing, for I take nothing from my wife. The farm is hers to do with as she pleases.”

Pastor MacLean stared at Duncan for a moment. Then he nodded. “We shall begin.”

A ruckus sounded from the back of the church. Duncan turned to see who else had come to stop the wedding. Anne came flying down the aisle.

“Walk, miss,” admonished Duncan.

She flung himself into his arms. “You would wed again and not invite your own sister?” She stuck out her lower lip to

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Eirica.

Eirica laughed and kissed Anne on the cheek. "We were only doing this to prove to Mr. MacFie and the rest."

Anne squirmed out of Duncan's arms. "I don't care. You should've stopped at the nursery. I didn't even have time to change my dress." She looked down at her simple black dress. A spot from dinner was at the waistline.

"'Tis fine. We cannot dress in finery. 'Twould be irreverent to Father." Eirica tucked a strand of hair behind Anne's ear.

Anne tugged Eirica over so she could speak into her ear. "I could've put on a fresh dress and combed my hair. I only get to see my sister married once." She put her hands to her hips. "You tried to sneak away again." She looked from Eirica to Duncan and back. Then she shook her head. "Being your only family, I should be treated better."

"Oh, Nanny has been complaining on the way to the church." Duncan smiled at Anne.

Nanny McCall walked up behind Anne. "Come and sit, miss."

Eirica shook her head. "Let her stand with us. She's my only family." She took Anne's hand. Anne beamed.

Duncan turned and faced the pastor. He had condemned his soul to hell, but the look on Eirica's and Anne's faces made it all worthwhile.

"You can't wed these two." Eachan's voice echoed around the church.

"Oh, sit down," snapped Mrs. MacAlister.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Close your mouth,” added Nanny McCall.

“Aye,” said Humphrey. “We wish to hear the pastor.”

Duncan smiled. He had family. For a moment. Too bad it couldn’t be forever. He gave his attention to the pastor.

Eirica became his wife in truth.

* * *

Duncan arose with a start. He heard it again. The unearthly sound he’d heard moments before he had been pushed down the stairs the first time. He shook his head and rubbed at the sleep in his eyes.

The moonlight shone through the window. Eirica lay on her side, her blond braid hanging over her shoulder, her hand beneath her cheek.

Nothing seemed out of place in the room. It must have been a dream, but the hair on his arms and neck prickled.

He rubbed his arms. *What could be wrong?* They actually were married. Keegan had made plans to leave the village. Gilliskel said they would leave as soon as he had a chance to give them a party. Angus would have wanted that.

Eachan was furious, but he couldn’t cause any more trouble.

Duncan shifted in the chair and pulled the blanket up over him. Closing his eyes, he tried to drift back to sleep. The moment he started to relax, he heard that noise again. It was like a tapping, only quieter. Or maybe a moaning.

He was being fanciful. Angus’s stories of a ghost were affecting him. He shifted in the chair. He didn’t believe in

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

ghosts. What he needed was a good night's sleep without Eirica haunting his dreams.

He heard the noise again. He couldn't figure what it was, but the hairs on his neck prickled more. He reached for his robe. He'd investigate. Then maybe he could sleep.

He didn't want to disturb Eirica with his fanciful dreams. He had to know what was making that noise. He crept down the hall. The acrid smell of smoke greeted him as he reached the stairway to the third floor.

The nursery.

"Fire!" he hollered. "Fire!" He raced back to the bedroom and threw open the door. "Get up, Eirica. Fire!" He grabbed the pitcher of water from the table and ran toward the hall. "Wake the servants and get out."

Cory came out of Angus' room as Duncan entered the hall.

"Fire. Get water and go to the nursery." Duncan took the stairs two at a time, the water pitcher clutched in his hand, his robe flapping around him. He gained the nursery to see flames flickering up the doorway.

Anne and Nanny McCall were trapped behind the burning door. He pounded on the wall. A shadow caught his glance going toward the servant's quarters. Or the back stairs. Boots clomped against the wooden floor.

He turned back to the fire and yelled, "Stay back from the door." He hoped they could hear him.

He threw the pitcher of water on the flames, then shed his robe and beat the fire with it. It hissed and crackled. Water splashed from behind him, making the fire hiss again. Cory,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

holding a blanket, joined him beating at the flames.

“Humphrey is behind me,” Cory grunted.

Duncan nodded. The smoke burned his nostrils. The air he breathed in was hot, and he coughed. Another bucket of water splashed across the fire. It hissed, but continued its climb up the door frame.

“Stand back.” Duncan kicked the door. It crashed inward, cinders spraying everywhere. “Get Nanny and Anne out.” He shoved Cory across the burning doorway, then beat at the flames again.

“Here.” Eirica’s voice sounded breathless. She threw water across the door.

“Get out with your sister.” Duncan didn’t look away from the fire. He had to stop the fire before the rest of the house went.

“I shan’t leave you,” Eirica said.

“I shall no’ argue. Someone has poured kerosene and the fire does no’ abate. Take Anne and get to safety.” He continued to beat at the flames.

Someone threw another bucket of water on the door. He heard the beating of a blanket against the doorframe. Sweat poured down his face. His lungs burned and his heart raced. He hadn’t planned on going to hell just yet.

The blanket caught fire and he stomped it out. More water hit the frame as he started to beat on it again. “Eirica, you must go and take Anne to safety.”

“I sent nanny and Anne out. Men are filling buckets and sending them in.” She touched his back. “I won’t leave you or

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

my house.”

The flames seemed to be smaller, but they didn’t want to extinguish. “You’re in harm’s way.”

Cory came from inside the room and joined him. “The fire within the room is out. ’Tis only the doorway still aflame.”

Eirica threw another bucket of water on the flames. They sizzled and flickered.

Duncan beat the last of them with Cory’s help. All were safe for tonight. But what of tomorrow?

* * *

Duncan stared again at the note Mrs. MacAlister had brought him after breakfast. She said she had found it shoved under the front door. He’d asked around, but no one had seen anyone near the front of the house.

He didn’t like this rogue wandering so freely about the estate. The man had gained entrance on more than one occasion. The fire last night could have destroyed the entire house and killed all within it. Fortunately, only the door and door frame to the nursery had been damaged, and Humphrey had someone doing the repairs now.

He’d feel better if Anne were moved to the second floor for the moment. Then she wouldn’t be so far away should something else untoward happen.

He leaned against the sheep pen and opened the note again. It had been sealed with Eirica’s wax and seal, which bothered him more. Who within the house wanted to hurt them?

He read the note again, even though he had it memorized.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

As long as you abide under the same roof with Miss Eirica, her life will be in danger. Leave so she can be properly wed and you will do her a great service. Stay, and all of you will meet in hell.

He had to find whomever was behind the attacks. His presence here only caused more trouble.

He looked up at the house. He loved Eirica. He was very fond of Anne. His conscience wouldn't bear it if he brought disaster upon them. He would leave. Out of the house he could better discern who would harm them.

It had to be one of the suitors. No one else would gain from his demise. No one would gain from Eirica's demise.

If only they could find Angus' will. Cory swore the old man had a copy of it before he died, but he had no idea where it might be. The solicitor from Edinburgh had been of no help. In fact, even though Angus had been dead over a fortnight, they still hadn't heard from the man.

Duncan had no choice but to leave. He would pack his bag, then tell Eirica. She wouldn't willing let him go, but she'd known the moment would come. It had just come sooner than either of them had expected.

His heart ached. He didn't want to leave. *Not now. Not ever.*

He pushed himself away from the fence and wandered toward the house. He could be ready within the hour.

* * *

Eirica sat on the stairs, her head in her hands. A gray fog

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

had descended on her like a shroud. Her black dress did nothing to improve her humor. Two days ago, she had been happy. Happier than she had been in her entire life. Even though she missed her father, she was still happy.

She'd had Duncan. Truly as her husband.

Now he was gone. Two days gone. She sighed. She should scold herself and tell herself to stop feeling sorry for what life had given her, but she didn't want to try. She wanted to sit in the grayness. A dull ache surrounded her heart. The sun would never shine again. She didn't care.

Since Duncan had left, nothing had gone the way it should. Grant lay upstairs, barely clinging to life. He'd been leaving the village when the highwaymen had attacked him. A knife gash in his chest had nearly dispatched him.

She and Mrs. MacAlister had nursed him since the afternoon of Duncan's departure. The surgeon still would not guarantee he would live, but Grant was strong.

Even with the two thousand pound reward and a sheep farm, no progress had been made in finding the highwaymen. No one could describe or identify them. The attacks had become more frequent. Everyone feared traveling outside the village. The rogues were interfering with deliveries. Cook complained of being short of supplies, but the men didn't want to go into the village to get them.

When they did go, they went in a group. With all the strange happenings about the house, someone had to stand guard, which left practically no one to tend the sheep.

"Father, this is your fault." He and his crazy notions. Now

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

all of them were paying. If he hadn't gotten it into his mind that she had to have a husband, Grant wouldn't be upstairs fighting for his life.

If Father hadn't hired Duncan, she wouldn't be sitting here with her heart shattered into a million pieces. Duncan would not be returning. He had stated he left to keep her safe.

What of her feelings? She loved him. Without him, life held no meaning.

She couldn't lose the farm. She had to think of Anne.

She stood and brushed off her skirt. She would go and spell Mrs. MacAlister for a while with Grant. He seemed to have improved some and for that she was grateful. Gilliskel refused to leave Grant's room, afraid his son would expire if he left him for a moment. The old man seemed to be waning and she feared he would perish before his son regained his health.

Carlton paced from Grant's room to the parlor and back, imbibing each time he went into the parlor. Guilt assuaged him. He'd been in a snit and had stayed behind at the village pub for a couple more pints, instead of riding home with his brother. Finding his brother half-dead along the roadside plagued him. Eirica would feel sorry for him, except he did nothing to alleviate his father's worries. He nursed only his own.

She climbed the stairs. Her legs didn't want to lift her. The weight she carried bore down too heavily.

"Miss Eirica."

Eirica glanced up to see Nanny flying down the stairs from

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

the third floor. She was amazed the woman could move that fast.

“Miss Eirica, have you seen Anne?” Nanny stopped beside Eirica, holding her side as she gasped for breath.

“No.”

“I can’t find her anywhere.” Nanny wrung her hands as she wheezed.

“She has taken up disappearing lately. She likes to eavesdrop on the adults, though not many are around.” Eirica looked at Grant’s room. “She might have gone to help Mrs. MacAlister.”

Nanny followed her gaze. “She doesn’t like the younger Mr. Anderson.” Tears filled Nanny’s eyes. “She has been distraught since Mr. MacKinnon left. She has done nothing but cry and stomp about.”

Eirica took Nanny’s arm. “We shall get the servants to search the house. Humphrey will get the men to look about outside. A wee lass like Anne can’t have gone far.” The gray fog grew darker. The coldness encasing her heart hardened and squeezed, until she thought her heart would stop. Nothing could happen to Anne. She couldn’t lose her sister as well as her husband.

“Her favorite doll is missing.” Nanny hugged herself and rocked.

“Call the servants and have them search every bit of the house. I shall call Humphrey.” Eirica turned and ran down the stairs, holding her skirt in her hand. “Humphrey,” she called as she cleared the back door. “Humphrey!”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He appeared from nowhere in front of her. "Yes, miss?"

"Anne is missing. Have the men search for her."

He nodded and disappeared.

Eirica joined the men. An hour later, after every spot inside and out had been searched, Eirica collapsed on the back step. She stared toward the sheep pen. Where could Anne be?

Nanny appeared beside her. "She's left."

Eirica looked up. "Where would she go?"

"After Mr. MacKinnon." Nanny stared out across the farm.

"She knew not where he went." Eirica didn't know where he'd gone. If she did, she would have gone after him.

"At bedtime she was beside herself. She said he shouldn't have left. You needed him. She needed him. Father had left you, but Duncan couldn't. She would make him come back." Nanny hiccupped, a sob trying to break free. "I thought she was only talking." Nanny looked at Eirica. "She wouldn't try to find him?"

"Oh, heavens." *Anne alone. Where?* The highwaymen had struck again yesterday after Grant had been attacked. Eirica looked away. She couldn't face the look on Nanny's face. It reflected what she felt.

She brushed her hands against her skirt, then crossed them in front of her. She couldn't draw in a breath. The tears filling her eyes made it hard to see, but she wouldn't let them fall. She stood and straightened herself. She stepped down the two steps and walked to Humphrey. She sucked in a breath and let it out, then sucked in another. Her chest hurt.

She hugged herself harder. *Anne would be fine.* They

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

would find her not far from here. She was but seven. She couldn't have gotten far. "Humphrey, divide the men into groups and search for her off the farm." She took another breath refusing to sob. "Try the loch. 'Tis a particular favorite of hers. Make sure the men are armed." She stared over Humphrey's head. "I shall go into the village and get more help."

"You can't travel alone." Humphrey took a step closer to her. "I'll send men with you."

She shook her head. "I'll take Father's pistol." She turned her back on Humphrey. She couldn't allow him to see her feelings. She had to be in charge. The men had to do what she told them. "I won't take the men from the search. Have a horse saddled for me."

Eirica walked back toward the house. "Nanny, you stay here with Mrs. MacAlister. Help with Grant. Wait for Anne to return. Keep a couple of the men with you." She took in a deep breath and held it to stop the shaking. "If Anne returns, send someone to the village to let me know."

"Miss, you can't go." Mrs. MacAlister took her arm. "You must stay here and wait. The men will find her."

"I can't sit and wait." She patted Mrs. MacAlister's hand. "I have to help." She couldn't wait. *Wait for what?* News her sister had left her also. News that she was truly alone. *No.* She had to do something. Sitting and waiting would drive her as crazy as her father.

"Father, why aren't you here when I need you?" She looked up as white clouds danced across the blue afternoon

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

sky. The sun shone, but the brightness didn't touch her. "Why, Father? You started this, but you won't be here to see the disaster you set traveling down the road."

She sighed and walked over to her mount.

The groom holding her horse looked at her for a moment and swallowed twice. "Miss. Anne's pony is gone."

"No." On horseback the child could be anywhere. "Go and tell the men she's on horseback and they must widen the search."

* * *

Eirica sat on her horse and looked around the village. She had talked to everyone. No one had seen Anne. Eachan had sent out men to search for her. Most of the men in the village had joined the search, going in threes and fours, armed with pitchforks and axes. No one would go about alone after the increase in attacks by the highwaymen.

Many whispered what Eirica refused to think again. She clutched hope tightly to her heart. Anne had to be fine. They would find her...but the sun was setting. Wild animals would be on the prowl. The highwaymen would be out looking for prey.

There had to be something she could do, besides go home and wait. Wait for the men to find her sister. Wait for someone to bring her news.

She'd never been any good at waiting. She looked at a group of men heading out of the village. "Wait up." She needed to send a message back to the house. "If you see

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

anyone from my house, tell them not to worry. I shan't be home until later."

"Miss Eirica," the villager said, "you need to return home. We shall be glad to accompany you."

"I have somewhere I wish to check first."

"'Tis not safe to be about," said the man. "Especially a woman alone."

"So far the highwaymen have only attacked men." She looked towards the road and the woods beyond it. It would be dark soon. She didn't relish being out alone in the dark, but she had to find Anne.

Duncan had been seen in the village earlier and had left. There weren't many places he could be. If she could find him, he would help her. He would be as worried about Anne as she was.

"Miss Eirica, Mr. MacFie will be extremely angry if you go off by yourself," the villager said. "I shall call him and he can go with you to protect you."

Who would protect her from him? She pressed her hand against the pistol tucked in her pocket. "I shall be fine. Don't tell Mr. MacFie I've gone. He need not be concerned with me." She smiled at the man. "I want everyone to look for my sister. She is so small. She'll be frightened and the sun is setting. I can protect myself."

The man frowned. "If you won't let Mr. MacFie go with you, then let us."

"I can travel faster by horse than you can by foot. Please, give my message to those from my house." She smiled. "I

THE KILTIED GOVERNESS

shall be fine.” She kicked her horse, urging her forward. Just up the road was a dirt path that led into the hills. Hopefully, she would find Duncan there.

CHAPTER 19

Duncan hunkered down in front of the fire and turned the rabbit he had caught. He laughed, the sound filling the small cottage. He looked around. What he had come to? A sagging bed with a lumpy mattress stood against one wall. A threadbare curtain covered the one broken window. When he looked up, he could see the stars through the thatched roof. He hoped it didn't rain.

He could have gone to the inn. He had a bit of coin in his pocket, but then he couldn't sneak about and find out who might want to harm Eirica.

He had been to the next village and back. No one there cared. So it had to be someone about here. *But who?*

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Earlier, he had come upon the latest victims of the highwaymen moments after the men had left. The man had been injured, but not severely. His wife had been uninjured, for which Duncan had given thanks. He had helped them into the village and to the inn. He'd stood about and listened a while.

Unfortunately, everyone knew him and most of the conversation stopped when they realized he stood near them. The villagers who knew Eirica felt he had taken advantage of her and some way had to be found to get her from his clutches. Some even intimated he was in league with the highwaymen.

Tomorrow evening he would go back to the estate and see if he found anyone skulking there. During the day he would head over to Eachan's estate and see what was being said around there. Most of the men who worked for Eachan didn't know Duncan by sight.

He turned the rabbit again. He wished he had a bottle of wine to go with it. He had become accustomed to wine with his supper. *Eirica did set a fine table.*

Tonight, as many nights in his life, water would have to do.

He heard a horse whinny. He listened. The sound was not far from the cottage. He was trapped. The place had no back door and, with the fire going, whoever was outside would realize he was here. He grabbed up his knife. It might prove poor protection against the highwaymen, but it was the best he had. He moved beside the door and stood ready. He hoped it wasn't the highwaymen because he'd also be out-numbered.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

The door creaked open. He held the knife, ready to stab whoever came through the door.

“Duncan?” Anne’s small voice wafted up to him.

He held the knife for a moment, then dropped it and grabbed her. “What are you doing here?”

She squeaked. “You scared me.” She flung her arms around his neck.

“My God, child, I nearly hit you.” He hugged her, then set her on her feet.

Tearstains streaked her cheeks. “’Tis very dark outside.”

“You should be home, tucked in bed.” He hunkered down to be eye level with her.

“You left us.” She looked into his eyes. “How could you leave us?”

He ruffled her hair. “Come and sit.” The cottage had two wobbly chairs and a stained wooden table. “Have you eaten?”

She shook her head as she climbed onto one of the chairs.

“Is your pony outside?” He didn’t want the animal where someone might see him. He had to protect Anne, and he had no idea where the highwaymen might be spending their nights. Not a great many places existed where they could hide.

“I tethered him to the porch post.”

“Good girl. I shall go and tend to him.” He opened the door. “Stay right here. I’ll only be gone a few moments.”

She nodded and laid her head down on her arms on the table.

He took Anne’s pony to a small clearing behind the cottage where the building and trees would hide its presence.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He had tethered his own horse there earlier.

Returning to the cabin, he found Anne asleep. He pulled the rabbit from the spit and put it on the only plate in the cottage. He pulled it apart so it would cool enough to eat. He didn't have a fork. Only the small knife he carried.

He watched the gentle breathing of the little girl. She seemed so small. He couldn't imagine what she had been thinking to follow him.

After he finished eating, he picked Anne up and moved her to the bed. He shook out the one blanket. Some of the dirt came off. He shrugged. It would have to do.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "I'm hungry."

He laughed. "You were sleeping."

She sat. "Now I'm hungry."

"I saved you some rabbit."

She crawled from the bed and back into the chair. She looked at the rabbit on the plate, then at Duncan. "What am I to eat with?"

"Your fingers."

"Nanny wouldn't approve." She picked up a piece of meat and bit into it.

Duncan smiled at her. Nanny would indeed have apoplexy seeing her charge eat with her fingers. "It canno' be helped. The accommodations did no' come with silverware."

Anne smiled. "You're a very good cook."

"You're just very hungry."

She nodded and took another bite.

He watched her. Eirica had to be beside herself not

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

knowing where Anne was. The nanny would be hysterical. He couldn't blame either of them.

He waited for her to finish eating, then he said, "Why did you leave home?"

She laid her head back down on her arms. "To find you."

"Eirica and Nanny have to be very worried." Duncan raised her head and looked her in the eyes. "Remember how upset you were when you did no' know where Eirica and I were."

"Yes, but I couldn't write a note. I don't know enough words."

"That is no excuse. You should no' have left." He was glad she had found him without harm coming to her. "Evil men travel these roads. Grown men have been hurt. Something could ha' happened to you."

"I had to find you. You left us." She raised her head and crossed her. "Why?"

"Sometimes adults have to do things that children do no' understand." He didn't want to frighten her with what had been happening.

She gave him a glare. "Always I hear I am too young to understand. I know what is right and 'twasn't right for you to leave. You broke my sister's heart. I see it in her eyes." She sighed. "I missed you. You're my brother, and you have to stay and take care of us."

"You do no' understand many things, little one. Tomorrow I shall take you back to the estate." If not for the highwaymen, he would take her now. Eirica would worry the night through,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

but he feared traveling after dark with the child. Many of the attacks had happened at night.

“You’ll stay.” She nodded.

“I canno’. Not for the moment.”

“Then I won’t go.”

“Anne, you have no choice.” She had the same stubborn streak her sister did. It would hold her in good stead as life went on, but now it would give him worry. He was bigger than she was and he would take her home to her sister. “You canno’ let Nanny and Eirica worry.”

“Then we’ll send a message.”

Duncan laughed. “We have no one to take the message but ourselves.” He stood. “Now ’tis time for bed.”

“I am tired.” She jumped down from the chair. “It was very dark. I didn’t much care for riding after dark.”

He picked her up and hugged her before tucking her into the bed. He would spend the night on the floor near the fire, watching the stars through the roof.

* * *

The darkness bore down on Eirica. The cottage she sought was farther than she remembered. It was the only place in the area where Duncan might stay since he hadn’t moved into the inn, nor had he left the area. He had said, when he left, ’twas to find out who was behind the incidents and make things safe for her and Anne.

She had to ride slowly up the path because of the darkness. She wished the moon would rise so she could make better

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

time.

An owl hooted and she clasped her hand to her mouth, not wanting to scream. She swallowed, forcing her heart back to its place. Now was not the time to become a woman scared of her own shadow. Darkness had never frightened her before.

She urged the horse ahead faster. The cottage couldn't be much farther. A wolf howled somewhere in the night. She should never have set off alone. She should have had the men come with her or Humphrey. If anyone knew what she was up to, they would truly think her as addle-pated as her father had been. They would agree she needed a husband to keep her from harming herself.

She had to find Duncan. To help her find Anne. He would know where to look.

She heard hoof beats coming from another path that joined this one a short way ahead of her. Men's voices drifted on the wind.

She urged her horse ahead. *It could be a search party.*

She gulped.

It could be the highwaymen.

Eirica urged her horse past where the two roads crossed and cut into the brush. She didn't care to meet whoever was out at this time of night. Dismounting, she tethered her horse in a thicket and hid in some bushes near the road. She pulled up the hood on the dark green cape she'd borrowed from one of the women in the village. At this moment, she was glad to be wearing mourning. The men wouldn't be able to discern her among the bushes.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She crouched down as the men turned and headed the way she had come.

"He'll be most pleased if we find the girl," said the man in the lead.

"'Twould give him what he wants," the second man answered.

The third man nudged his horse faster to catch up with the lead man. "We could hit one of the parties out looking for her."

"That would be dangerous. There are too many in the group and they're armed. Some of them might recognize us and we don't want to be discovered," the lead man said.

Eirica inched back into the bushes, a shudder running through her. Coldness settled into her and she wished she'd taken the offer of having someone ride with her.

"We pass up an opportunity. The whole village is out looking for the girl. They might have monies," the third man said.

"Even if not, 'twould be a pleasant way to spend the evenin'. Those sapskulls are easy targets," the second man said.

"We were told to look for the girl." The leader turned his horse down the path near Eirica. "We need to find her. That'll make himself happy."

"Earn us a bit of coin," said the second horseman.

Eirica huddled in the cape and held her breath. She laid her face on her knees so none of the light from the rising moon would reveal her hiding place. Her body quivered and she

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

feared she would make the bushes rustle. The men continued down the road.

When she could no longer hear them, she crept out and untethered her horse. She had to find Anne before those men did. They wouldn't be bringing her home.

Pulling herself into the saddle, she urged the horse up the path toward the cottage she sought. She listened for any sound that didn't belong in the woods. An owl hooted, but the noise soothed her nerves. An owl belonged here.

As she neared the deserted cottage, she saw a light and smelled smoke. Someone was inside. She hoped 'twas Duncan, but, in case it wasn't, she dismounted and tied her mare away from the cottage. She crept down the overgrown path. It had been years since anyone had lived here. She hadn't been much older than Anne when the old woman who lived there had died. People had thought her a witch and feared her spirit still lived there. Everyone feared entering the cottage, so it had fallen into disrepair. No one went near it.

She couldn't think of any other place Duncan would be able to stay, though she had no idea if he even knew about the cottage. When she stepped onto the porch, the boards creaked. She clasped her hand over her mouth to smother the cry lodged in her throat. She had wanted to peek in the window and see who was inside before she let them know she was here.

The door flew open and a large form filled the space, a small amount of light illuminating him from the back. She squealed, pressing her hand against her heart that threatened to

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

jump out of her chest. "Duncan!"

"Eirica, what are you doing here?" He pulled her into his arms.

"Looking for you." She snuggled against his chest. For the first time in days she felt as if the world weren't quite so heavy.

"I told you I'd be back when I knew you were safe." He kissed the top of her head.

"Anne's missing." She shuddered.

He hugged her. "Anne is here."

"You didn't bring her home?" Eirica pulled away.

He pulled her close again. "She arrived after dark. I feared trying to get her home safely at night with the highwaymen about."

"I saw them."

Duncan pushed her away from him. "What? Where?"

"Not far from here. They were headed back toward the main road."

Duncan looked over her head. "Come inside. We do no' want others to realize we are here." He shut the door.

She looked around. "Will the walls stand?"

Duncan chuckled. "If the roof does. No' many abodes can you watch the stars from inside."

She leaned against him. "At least Anne is safe. I wish I could send a message to Nanny."

"We shall take her home in the morning. 'Tis no' safe to be about now."

Nanny had to be sick with worry. Her baby was missing,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

but Eirica could do nothing about it. She didn't wish to run abreast of those three men. That would not bode well. "'Tis not." She sighed. "We shall leave at first light."

"By then, the highwaymen should be abed."

Eirica giggled. "We wait for them to sleep. How do we know they will go to bed at first light?"

He shrugged. "If they're up all night, they must sleep sometime."

"They're looking for Anne. Someone wants her and not to return her to me."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "They talked of taking her to whomever they work for." She shivered again. "They made me feel they weren't concerned with her well being."

"Then we shall take extra care in getting her home on the morrow." He led her over to the table. "Have you eaten?"

"In the village before I set out to hunt for you." Her stomach was so knotted she couldn't eat anyway.

"Probably just as well. There is little left, and Anne will be wanting it in the morning." He pulled out a chair for her to sit.

The chair wobbled as she sat. She steadied herself against the table and glanced over at Anne's sleeping form. "She looks so peaceful. Did she tell you why she ran away?"

"To bring me home because you needed me."

"What did you tell her?"

"I could not stay if it brought danger." He stared her straight in the eye.

She sighed and leaned against the table. "Danger comes

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

anyway.” She wanted him to come home. He was her husband and she wanted him to remain such.

He took her chin in his hand. “What is it?”

“I want you to stay.” She looked at him.

“We ha’ discussed this before. I ha’ nothing to offer. I only wed you to protect you from the others, and because your father made me promise to care for you.”

Her heart ached. She could see the pain in Duncan’s face, but it didn’t help. She wanted him to stay, but unlike Anne, she wouldn’t beg. He had to stay because he wanted to be with her. Not because he felt guilty. She blinked back tears. She wouldn’t let him see her cry. *Never*. “You have much to offer. You just won’t see it.”

“Eirica...”

She held up her hand. “I shan’t discuss it now. We have other things to worry about.” A huge sigh escaped her.

Sadness shone in his eyes. He let his hand drop to the table. “You are tired. Crawl up beside Anne. I shall keep watch, in case those men decide to come here as you two have.”

“I think not. Most are scared of this place because it belonged to a witch.” She had loved the tales of the old woman when she was a child, but had put no credence in them. Obviously, Anne had heard them also, but the child seemed to fear little.

“Then we shall hope the witch will keep them away tonight.” He rubbed his head. “Now you need sleep.”

“I don’t think I can sleep on such a lumpy bed.” She

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

wanted to sit with him. She might not have another time with him. Tomorrow he would return them to the house and be gone again. Nothing she could do would stop him.

“You must try.” He stood. “I shall be here to keep away those who would wish to harm you.”

“Thank you.” She didn’t know what else to say. She lay down next to Anne and put her arm around her. Even if she didn’t sleep, she would hold her sister. God had returned her safely and Eirica was grateful. Part of the weight that plagued her had lifted when she realized her sister was safe. If only the rest of her problems could be resolved as easily.

* * *

Anne rode ahead on the path with Duncan and Eirica following. He touched the pistol tucked in his coat pocket that Eirica had given him. It only contained one shot and the highwaymen’s band consisted of three men. Hopefully, they wouldn’t run into them, but if they did, the pistol might scare them away. He couldn’t allow those men to take Eirica or Anne.

“Look, Eirica.” Anne pointed in front of her. “There are villagers out looking for us.” Anne urged her mount ahead and raised her hand to wave.

Eirica looked where Anne pointed. Her face blanched. “Anne, stop. Come back.” She kicked her mare in the sides.

Duncan leaned forward, overtaking Eirica. “What’s wrong?”

“Those are the men I saw last night. The highwaymen.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Stay here.” Duncan overtook Anne and grabbed her reins. She blinked at him. “I only wanted to say hello. Be neighborly.”

“No’ to those men.” He pulled her horse toward the bushes. If they hid until the men went on their way, they might still get back to the estate without trouble. He motioned to Eirica to follow them.

One of the highwaymen shouted, “There they are!”

Duncan glanced around him. A path cutting back toward the main road went off to the right. “Eirica, take Anne and head that way. I shall stand them off as long as possible.”

“Come with us, Duncan.” Anne grabbed his hand. Her eyes were wide and the color had drained from her face.

“Go. Now.” He handed Anne’s reins to Eirica. “As fast as you can.”

Eirica grabbed the reins and pulled on them. “The pony isn’t that quick.” Her hands shook. “Be careful. I don’t want harm coming to you.” She clamped her mouth together in a thin line.

He nodded. He watched as Eirica led Anne down the path.

“They’re gettin’ away,” the lead man hollered.

Duncan stopped his horse, blocking the path Eirica had taken. He pulled the pistol from his pocket. One man tried to cut around him, but the thick brush blocked his way.

Duncan aimed the pistol at the man in front. He held his hand steady. Never in his life had he aimed a weapon at another man. He’d been in many a fist fight. Mostly with his brothers.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

But a weapon. No.

He hoped they would hesitate long enough for Eirica to escape. He had promised Angus he would protect her, and protect her he would. With his life if need be.

The man in the lead stared at him, but didn't move his horse any closer. "You can't take all of us." A grin crossed his face.

"Choose which of you wishes to die today." Duncan didn't lower the pistol. "I need only one to prove who has been reigning terror on our neighborhood." He pointed the weapon directly at the lead man.

The heavier man to the side pulled a pistol from his waistband. "You'll die also. Then who shall protect Miss Eirica?"

"If I allow you to go after her, 'twill be no better than dying." Dying would solve his dilemma of being married to a woman he couldn't support, but he'd rather solve that problem in a different manner. He shifted in his saddle. He couldn't see a pistol on the other man, but that didn't mean he didn't carry one.

Duncan aimed the pistol at the second man. "We shall all travel back to the village now."

"I don't think so." The heavy-set man pulled back on the trigger of his pistol.

Duncan fired. He didn't wait for the man to drop, but flung the pistol aside and launched himself at the lead man. They landed with a thud, the man beneath him. A knife handle pushed into Duncan's side. The smell of whiskey and

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

unwashed skin assaulted his nose.

He sat up and drove his fist into the man's face. Behind him, he could hear horse hooves. The heavy-set man groaned beside him.

The lead man threw him to the side and Duncan rolled over the man he'd shot. The lead man drew a pistol and fired at Duncan. He rolled, but fire tore through his shoulder. He scrambled to his feet and charged the lead man again. They tumbled into the bushes. He had to get to his horse and go after the man chasing Eirica and Anne.

He raised his fist and smashed it into the lead man's nose as the man rose. A crunching sound greeted Duncan's ears as the man flopped back into the brush.

He staggered up and pulled himself into the saddle. He glanced at the men. The heavy-set one writhed on the ground, clutching his belly. A shiver ran through Duncan. He had never killed a man before, but this man would surely die from his wound. The other lay still in the bushes.

Duncan yanked on the reins and turned his horse down the path after Eirica. He had to get to her before the other man harmed her. He urged his horse into a full gallop, hoping the animal wouldn't trip in a hole or over the tangles of brush that had crept into the little-used path. The smell of crushed heather and lilac drifted up to him, making him think of his beautiful Eirica and how sweet she smelled.

The smell belonged to another time. Another place. The smell of his own sweat crept into the air, blocking out the smell of the flowers.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Help.” Anne’s scream drifted towards him on the wind. It came from far ahead of him.

Too far.

CHAPTER 20

Duncan leaned over the neck of his horse, urging him forward at full speed. His heart beat in his throat. His breath came in ragged gulps. He rounded a bend and pulled his mount to a stop. Eirica sat her horse. In front of her, the third man held Anne pressed against him, his hand over her mouth.

Duncan slid from his saddle.

“Back away, governess.” The man glanced from Duncan to the path behind him.

“They are no’ coming.” Duncan took a step toward them.

He took a quick look at Eirica. She concentrated on her sister. Her face was pale and her blond braid had come loose, her hair floating around her face. “You couldn’t have gotten

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

both of them.” The man shifted Anne against his body.

“One is dying. The other in no shape to help you.” Duncan studied the man. There had to be a way to get Anne from his clutches before he injured her.

“I don’t believe you.” He snarled and pressed his hand harder against Anne’s mouth. A muffled cry escaped her.

“You need no’ hurt the child. She can do nothing to you.” Duncan eased forward another step.

“Stay where you are.” He flung Anne across the saddle and drew his pistol. “I shall kill you where you stand.”

“’Twill do you no good. You ha’ but one shot. You canno’ kill all of us.” Duncan gauged the distance to the man. He couldn’t rush him. Somehow, he needed to distract him if he were to rescue Anne.

“You’ll be dead. Then I can deal with the woman and the child.” The man nodded, resting his hand on Anne’s back.

She kicked her feet and squirmed. Her white petticoats showed as her feet pumped.

“Or better yet, I’ll kill the woman. She means nothing to me.”

“If you shoot her, you’ll never leave here.” Duncan balled his fists at his sides, ignoring the pain shooting through his shoulder. He balanced his weight, ready to feint to one side or the other. Years of battling his older brothers had taught him to read a man’s movements. “’Twill only get you the hangman’s noose.” Eirica let her horse ease forward a step.

The man shifted his gaze from Duncan to Eirica. “Then your safe return will bring my boss what he wants—you and

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

your farm.”

“I am wed to another. ’Twill do him no good.” Eirica shifted her leg in her saddle, tucking her skirts above her ankles.

“If you’re a widow, then he can gain your hand.” The man grabbed Anne’s hair and yanked her neck backwards. A squeak escaped her. “The child can be disposed of with ease. ’Twill also make him happy not to have her intruding on your time.”

“I would never wed a man who would harm Anne. Or who would steal from my neighbors and harm them.”

The man laughed. “Since you’ll never know who is behind these doings, he’ll woo you and have his way.”

Duncan eased forward, hoping the man’s attention was fixed on Eirica and he wouldn’t notice him moving closer. If she could distract him for a few moments more, he could unseat him and have Anne safe.

“I shall never wed another. If I become a widow, I shall remain one for the rest of my days.” Eirica twisted the reins in her hands, but stared the man in the face. “He will get nothing, whomever he is. All this will be for naught.”

The man glared at her. “I don’t care what becomes of him. We’ve made enough. I’ll take the child and leave the area.”

Duncan continued to ease forward. He wanted to challenge the man, but he didn’t want to bring the man’s attention back to him.

“You’ll be hunted to the doorway of hell if you harm her.” Eirica wrapped the reins around her hand.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Duncan jumped, smacking Eirica's horse on the rump. The animal leapt ahead. Eirica screamed, grabbing the saddle pommel. The man fired. Eirica tried to rein in her horse as she raced past the man. Duncan grabbed him, and threw him to the ground.

A horse raced up the path toward them. Keegan weaved in the saddle, brandishing a gun. "Eirica, out of the way." He flew by her, jerking his horse to a stop by Duncan and the other man.

The man rose. Duncan smashed his fist into the man's face. Keegan fired. The man sagged backwards.

"I've saved you and caught the highwaymen." Keegan stood over the fallen man, a broad smile on his face. He turned to Eirica. "You should never have come by yourself. 'Tis a good thing I came this way and found you before your were injured."

Eirica stared at him from her horse. "Duncan had everything well in hand."

"Nonsense." Keegan shoved his pistol into his waistband and leaned over the man. "He won't be hurting anyone else. Nor shall his partner who I dispatched as he was coming after you."

Duncan balled his hand into a fist and wanted to smash it into Keegan's face. "You've killed him for naught. I had him." He winced as pain shot through his shoulder. "Now we shall never know for whom he worked."

Keegan waved a hand in the air. "That doesn't matter, as long as he can't hurt Eirica." He walked over to her. "Are you

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

fine? Let me help you from your horse.”

She pushed away his hand.

Duncan turned. He would do something regrettable if he continued to watch Keegan. Anne sat in a heap on the ground, her eyes wide. He scooped her from the ground. “Are you injured?”

She shook her head against his neck as she clung to him.

Eirica pushed Keegan away with her foot and rode back to Duncan and Anne. Slipping from the saddle, she ran to them and wrapped her arms around them.

“We need to return to the estate. We shall send someone to retrieve the bodies.” He wanted her where she’d be safe. *Safe from Keegan and anyone else who might be lurking about.* Safe before he passed out from the pain in his shoulder.

Eirica leaned into him. “You’re bleeding.”

He set Anne on the ground. The ache in his arm had intensified with the fracas and holding the child. “’Tis nothing.” Darkness hovered at the edges of his sight and the world tilted. He feared moving, not wishing to meet the path with his face.

“It is. Blood is soaking your shirt.” She ripped a piece from the hem of her petticoat and pressed it against the wound in his shoulder. “Anne, tear your petticoats so I can tie this in place.” She took a strip of cloth from the child. As she finished bandaging him, she said, “We shall send straightway for the surgeon. Then we shall tend to these ruffians.”

Duncan smiled at her and brushed her hair behind her ear. “I’ll be fine. You need not fuss so.” He placed his hand on her

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

shoulder to keep his balance.

She looked at him, tears rimming her eyes. Then she smiled. "I shall fuss if I wish."

"Yes, she will." Anne leaned against his leg. "We shall both fuss. You're injured." She shivered against him. "They could've killed you."

"There was no chance of that." Keegan moved to stand near Eirica. A frown creased his face. "I was here to rescue you both."

Anne glared at him. "A fine lot of good you did." She put her hands to her waist. "You ride in and shoot a man that Duncan had."

"I saved all of you." Keegan puffed out his chest and glared back at Anne.

"'Tis not important who did what." Eirica put her hand on Anne's shoulder. "We are safe now and that's what matters."

Anne stomped her foot. "Of course it matters." She wrapped an arm around Duncan and leaned against him. "If Duncan hadn't been here, those terrible men would've hurt us."

"They did no', lass." He ruffled her hair. His family. A family he would be leaving soon for now they were safe. He would no longer have a reason to stay.

"Let us be away." Keegan reached for Eirica's horse. "I shall help you mount. I wish to go to the village so I can collect the reward for the capture of the highwaymen."

* * *

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

Duncan sat in a wing chair by the fireplace of Eirica's parlor and watched through half-closed eyes as everyone gathered to settle the question of the reward. The surgeon had removed the ball from Duncan's his shoulder and said he would survive, as long as infection didn't set in. He had wanted to put a poultice on it, but Duncan had declined.

Eirica sat across from the pastor on the settee. Anne snuggled next to her, sipping at her tea and nibbling at a scone with blackberry jam. Gilliskel had left Grant's room and lay on Angus' lounge. He looked less worried than he had in days and some color had returned to his face. Carlton perched beside his father, holding his head in his hands. He looked defeated, as though he had nothing left for which to fight.

"Now that the scourge of the area has been stopped, we can all rest easier." Pastor MacLean shoved his tea cup aside. "All that needs doing is paying the reward."

Keegan stood behind Eirica. "I'm ready to receive my reward."

Eirica grimaced. "You played but a minor part in stopping the highwaymen." She looked over at Duncan and he held her gaze for a moment. She'd tried to get him to stay in bed, but he'd insisted on joining them.

Eachan burst into the room. "What has been discussed before my arrival?" He glared at all of them.

"Only that Mr. MacCallum wishes to receive his reward." Pastor MacLean sipped at his tea. "We've made no decisions, as we were waiting for your arrival."

"Fine." Eachan stomped across the room and took the

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

empty chair near Duncan. He spared him a cursory glance. "Then this must be settled. I have business to attend."

"You never seemed in much of a hurry before to attend to your business." Eirica reached for a scone.

Duncan smiled.

Eachan grunted. "As the head of the village council, I've been directed to pay the reward." He glared at Eirica.

"As the one who put up the most money, I shall have a say in who receives it." Eirica nibbled at the scone and glared at Eachan over it.

"You have naught to say about this." Eachan crossed his arms over his chest.

"Eachan MacFie, I am still the largest landowner about, and I have a great deal to say about this." Eirica leaned forward and slapped the scone onto the table.

Duncan could feel her anger and knew that her worry for him fueled it. She'd paced beside his bed as the surgeon had removed the ball and she'd fussed over him, becoming alarmed when he insisted on going downstairs. She had assured him she could handle the men and would make sure the reward went to the proper person. He also knew she would insist that he take the reward.

He didn't care about the money or the farm. His only care had been that she was safe and Anne. He didn't need a reward to protect those he loved.

Eachan fidgeted. "Then 'tis your husband who shall have a say in this and not you."

"'Tis just a matter of formality." Keegan rested his hands

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

on Eirica's shoulders. "I stopped the highwaymen."

Eirica pinched Keegan's wrists. "You did no such thing."

"Ouch." Keegan drew back his hands. "Of course I did. I dispatched the man just before he injured you."

Eirica stood and put her hands at her waist. "Keegan, shut up. I'm tired of listening to you brag about how you saved us. Duncan dispatched two of the men and would've captured the third if you hadn't interfered. He was shot saving us." She let out a long breath. "All you did was stop us from finding out who was behind all of this."

"I did no such thing. I saved you." Keegan frowned. "I didn't think you'd be so ungrateful."

Duncan closed his eyes. The problem was they didn't know who was behind this, and that could mean more danger for all of them. The men who'd been killed were hired and more could be hired by the same man. He opened his eyes and looked around.

It had to be one of the suitors. Someone who wanted Eirica's hand and her farm, but which one? The Anderson brothers? One of them had nearly been killed, but it could've been a falling out. Keegan, the scarecrow? He seemed barely able to take care of himself. He was mostly hot air and bluff. Eachan? Whose wife had mysteriously died. He would gain in status in the village if he won Eirica's hand. What of the missing sheep? They still hadn't been found. "It may be too soon to pay out the reward."

"What?" Keegan's voice rose shrilly. "I want my due."

Eirica looked at Duncan. "Why do you think so?"

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"You have no say in this, governess." Eachan glared at him.

"I'm the husband of the largest landowner in the area." Duncan stretched out his legs. Everything hurt and he wanted to be in his bed.

"That is of no import." Eachan stood and paced to the window.

"You just said he had a say in this matter." Eirica walked over and laid her hand on Duncan's shoulder.

Eachan turned. "I changed my mind."

"I'd like to hear his reason for waiting on paying the reward." Pastor MacLean leaned forward.

"So would I." Gilliskel sat up. "Duncan played the biggest part in stopping the men, and it seems to me the reward should go to him."

"Duncan?" Keegan screeched. "He did nothing. I'm the one. Those men were ruthless and if I hadn't dispatched that one, Eirica would've been kidnapped and Anne killed."

"He stopped two of the men." Eachan walked back to his chair. "The biggest part of the reward will go to Duncan."

"He did nothing. He would have been killed if I hadn't ridden up when I did." Keegan leaned against the back of the settee.

Duncan eased himself forward. If he leaned back any longer, he would fall asleep. The medicine the doctor had given him was working too well. The pain was subsiding, but so was he. "We do no' know if there are others working with those men. They mentioned a leader who would have Eirica

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

and her farm.” He rubbed his head. “We still haven’t found the missing sheep.”

“I’m sure the sheep were taken from the area and sold.” Keegan walked around the settee and sat next to Anne.

She scooted away from him. “Duncan, you saved us. You should have the reward.”

“No, little one. There are things to be sorted out first.” He smiled at her. For all the terror she’d seen in the past few hours, she seemed quite calm.

“Keegan is probably correct.” Eachan leaned back in his chair. “I’m sure the sheep are gone. Whoever has been behind this wouldn’t have the courage to start again.”

Pastor MacLean looked at Duncan, then Eachan. “The man has a point. We don’t know who was behind this.” He folded his hands in his lap. “I’m sure he has fled the area.”

“They had to have been staying somewhere.” Duncan looked at Eirica. Maybe a cup of tea would make him feel better.

As though reading his mind, she fetched him one. “There aren’t many places they could hide.”

“I’m sure they were hiding in the forest.” Keegan reached for a scone. “After all, it wouldn’t be safe to hide anywhere else. Any abandoned farms would be searched.”

Duncan looked at Keegan. Why hadn’t he thought of it before? The only abandoned farm in the area. The one put up as reward for the capture of the highwaymen and the sheep thieves. “Call Humphrey. I have something for him to do.”

Eirica touched his shoulder. “What?”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

“Just get him and I shall meet him in your office.” Duncan rose. “The morrow is soon enough to settle on who gets the reward.” He stumbled as he walked toward the hall. He hoped they’d all get the message and go about their business.

* * *

Duncan leaned against the pillows and smiled at Eirica. She looked so beautiful. He wanted to take her in his arms, but he didn’t have the strength.

She kissed him. “I married a very smart man, but whatever made you think of looking for the stolen sheep at the abandoned farm?”

“Where else could stolen sheep be kept?” He smiled.

“I’d have thought Keegan correct when he said they’d been taken from the area.” She smoothed the coverlet over him.

“Yes, but there was more going on than just the stealing of sheep. Someone wanted to terrorize the suitors as well. They were mostly the target of the highwaymen.” Someone had wanted to be rid of him, too, so Eirica would be free to marry someone else.

“Ranald, Grant and Carlton were all attacked by the highwaymen.”

“Which leave Eachan and Keegan.”

“Eachan has a terrible temper, especially when he doesn’t get his way. Why would he steal from his neighbors?”

“Who knows why a man does terrible things.”

“I can’t imagine Keegan being involved with those men.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He might be pompous, but maybe...”

“But what?” He didn’t like the look on her face. He squeezed her hand. “Tell me.”

She told him about the incident in the garden.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I’d have thrown him out.” If he could climb from his bed, he would go and throw the man out now. “I shall have Humphrey do it for me.”

“On the morrow, when all has been settled.” She kissed his hand. “Now you must rest. I have back my missing sheep, as do my neighbors and we’re all pleased.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Tomorrow you will have the reward and the others will be gone.”

“I do no’ want the reward.” He looked into her eyes. “I did no’ do it for the reward. I did it to make sure you were safe.”

She nodded. “The reward is there and it rightfully belongs to you. Even Eachan will have to agree since you found the stolen sheep.”

“Or believe I stole them, just so I could find them and be the hero.”

Eirica chuckled. “That would be something he might do, but not you.” She stood and picked up the tray from the table beside his bed. “Now you must get some rest.”

The lamp flickered beside him. He wished she’d stay, but he was having trouble keeping his eyes open. Tomorrow so much had to be decided. He could take the reward. Then he would own property and have money. He could support a wife.

Eirica still owned the largest farm in the area. He had

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

nothing to give her that she couldn't give herself.

Except love.

Was that enough?

He didn't know and couldn't sort it out now. He closed his eyes and let sleep claim him.

A wavering figure came toward him, but fog obscured his view. "You think you've won, but you haven't. I'll still have Eirica and both farms."

He wanted to see who was speaking to him. The voice wavered as though the fog distorted it. Who would think they could still have Eirica? Even if he left, she had made it clear she had no intention of marrying any of the suitors.

"Once she's a widow, she will come to me for comfort. Then I shall have all that should be mine."

"She'll ne'er go to another." Duncan wanted to go to the figure and discover his identity, but he couldn't move.

"Of course she will. She'll be glad to have a man for her husband, instead of a governess." The figure laughed, and the eerie sound sent shivers down Duncan's spine.

"She'll never marry a thief and a murderer." Duncan reached out his hand, but couldn't reach the figure.

"She'll never know." The figure laughed louder.

Duncan sat up with a start. He grabbed his shoulder as pain shot through him. He peered around the room. The light from the lamp flickered against the walls, the shadows dancing. He searched the corners of the room and realized no one was there. It had been a dream.

He lay back and stared at the ceiling. Something prickled

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

at the back of his mind. The man was still out there and Eirica was still in danger. So was he.

The man would see him dead so he could take his place. Duncan couldn't leave Eirica in danger.

He threw back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, holding his arm against his chest to stop the shooting pains. *Which one was it?* Which suitor would see him dead so he could claim Eirica's hand and her farm.

He thought of each of them. *Damn.* Why hadn't he seen it sooner? He knew who had tried to kill him. He knew who had hired the highwaymen.

CHAPTER 21

Eirica sat by her bedroom window and looked out at the stars. The moon hadn't risen yet and the blackness of the night hung over her like a shroud.

She sighed. The highwaymen had been dispatched. The suitors would soon be gone. Grant would be well enough to travel in another few days. Gilliskel insisted upon giving she and Duncan a wedding party. Her father would have wanted it, and as he wasn't among them to do it, Gilliskel would perform the honor. His sons weren't pleased because he planned on paying for the celebration.

The whole idea was silly. Even with the pastor's blessing, her marriage was nothing more than a charade and she saw no

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

sense in adding to it. Duncan still planned on leaving.

He would have the reward for capturing the highwaymen and finding the sheep. She would make sure of that. She would make sure he received all of the reward. Keegan deserved none of it.

She would be glad to see him gone. Duncan would make sure that on the morrow Keegan would move into the village.

Eirica leaned her head on her arm resting on the window sill. Even when she had seen no future but managing her farm and caring for her father and sister the world had not seemed so bleak.

She had to find a way to convince Duncan he should stay. He would have enough money and a farm of his own. She had offered to go elsewhere with him if he no longer wished to remain in this area, but he insisted she must protect her inheritance. Her place was here. His was elsewhere.

That did her no good. Long, lonely nights still extended ahead. She would make sure her sister grew to be a fine woman. She would make sure the farm made a profit to pay for all they would need, but her gladness in the effort had departed as the light of day had. Only it would not return on the morrow. Never would her heart be light again.

The door behind her opened. Her heart skipped several beats and she turned.

She stopped. Keegan stood in front of the door, a pistol pointed at her. She gasped, words failing her.

“You must listen to me.” He waved the pistol in the air.

She folded her hands in her lap over her white linen night

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

dress. Keegan's gaze was wild, his eyes wide.

"What do you wish to tell me?"

"You should never have married the governess. 'Tisn't fitting. He is a no one. Not worthy of you." He took a step closer.

She wanted to cry out for Duncan, but he wouldn't arrive before Keegan had time to fire. It would take but one shot and then Anne would have no one. She couldn't anger Keegan. She shrugged. "'Tis too late. The deed has been done."

"He doesn't share your bed." A smile glinted across Keegan's face. "The marriage can be set aside."

"He's injured." Eirica looked down at her hands. In a low voice, she said, "But he has."

Keegan took another step closer. "I don't believe you." He brandished the pistol. "You belong to me. I have worked too hard for this."

She looked at him. His eyes were overly bright. "You've never wanted me, Keegan. You wanted my father's farm, but 'tis not yours for the taking."

"You can't give it to that...that...man."

She shook her head. "It belongs to me."

"It belongs to your husband. If I can't be the one, than neither will he." Keegan stepped back towards the door. "I shall dispatch him. This time he won't survive."

Eirica's mouth fell open. "You shoved Duncan down the stairs and had him attacked in the garden."

"I couldn't allow him to be your husband. As a widow, you'd have no choice but to wed me."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"I would never wed you." She worried her hands together. She had to get help, but she couldn't put Duncan in danger. Keegan wouldn't kill her. Not yet anyway. "Why did you try to burn down my house?"

"With no where to live, you'd have to come to me." A smile flickered across his face as he neared the door. "Duncan is only next door. I'll go to him. Then none will stand in my way."

She stood. She couldn't allow him to go after Duncan. He wouldn't be able to defend himself. He would be asleep and he was injured. Keegan would surprise him.

She wouldn't lose Duncan. Not in that manner. She would rather lose her own life than Duncan's. He would stay to care for Anne. He'd never leave her alone. "I will do you no good. If you kill Duncan, you'll face the hangman's noose."

"I shall have you and the farm." He nodded. "All this will be mine." He waved his hand in an arc.

"Keegan, even if you dispatch me, you won't gain." He had lost all reason. To kill her would gain him nothing. To kill Duncan would gain him nothing. He didn't seem to grasp that, though.

He let the pistol drop to his side. "I would never hurt you."

"It would gain you nothing to do so." She took a step toward him, holding herself erect. Her insides trembled and her heart threatened to jump through her chest. "It would be best if you left. I shan't tell anyone what you've done."

"Why would I care what you say?" He leered at her.

"You stole. You organized men to terrorize those

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

hereabouts.” If she could get the pistol away from him, they’d all be safe.

“I did nothing.” He raised the pistol and pointed it at her again.

“Your men attacked people.” She breathed in slowly, not moving.

He waved the gun about. “That is not so. I wouldn’t conscience such acts.” He aimed the pistol at her chest. “There’s no one to say I did.”

She was about to join her parents. Duncan would stay and take care of Anne. He would never desert her when she truly had no one else. She wished she would be there, but without Duncan in her life, she didn’t care whether she went on or not. “Then why are you in my room at night with a pistol pointed at me. Who else could it be?”

“I only wanted you to marry me.” His hand trembled. “I never would’ve stolen from you.”

“Then why are you here?” Maybe if she could keep him talking, she could manage to survive.

“Because I want you for my wife.” He smiled. “I have plans for this farm. If I’d been given the reward, no one would have found those sheep. I’d have been rich.” He stared at her. “I won’t let you take it all away from me. Your father promised it to me.”

“He didn’t know who you were.”

“He made a promise.”

“He made many promises. He didn’t remember most of them.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

"That doesn't matter. I shall hold him to his promise."

"You can't. He is gone, and with him his promises." The house seemed so quiet...as if everyone had deserted her. She was alone with a mad man.

"No. I shall have you." He glanced toward the door. "I shall do away with Duncan, then you'll come to me."

"I'd never come to you if you harmed Duncan."

"You'll see the reason of it. He is nothing."

"You did such terrible things. How could you believe I'd come to you?" She clutched her hands in front of her. "Your men threatened Anne."

"I only wished to trade her for your hand."

"My hand has been taken."

He waved the pistol in the air. "You'd have been so grateful at her return; you'd have rushed to me."

"I'm already wed to another." She wondered if any reasonable part of his mind remained.

"No one else will have you." The pistol wavered, then he righted it. "You are mine."

Eirica shivered. Her nightdress clung to her and exposed more of her to him than she found comfortable.

The door behind Keegan eased opened. Duncan, dressed in his nightshirt and holding Father's pistol, edged around the opening.

Keegan smiled. "As Angus grew weaker, I knew the time had come when you would take me. You couldn't manage alone."

She looked directly at Keegan, staring into his eyes. She

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

could see Duncan's movement, but refused to look at him. She had to keep Keegan distracted. "I managed since my mother's death alone. Father managed nothing."

Keegan shook his head. "That isn't possible. You were but a girl and now a mere woman. Angus managed his own estate."

Duncan crept closer to Keegan, his bare feet silent against the floor.

"Father couldn't manage himself. He needed constant attention." She shook her head. "How do you think I came to have so many suitors if Father weren't confused? He couldn't remember meeting them or promising my hand to any of them. Yet, they kept appearing."

"He promised your hand to me." Keegan took a step toward her. "You must honor what your father wanted."

"I can't honor what he promised." She shook her head.

"He..."

The floor board squeaked as Duncan stepped. Keegan whirled. A great explosion filled the room. Eirica screamed and clasped her hand to her throat. Blood dripped from Duncan's shoulder. Keegan swayed, then toppled forward.

Duncan wrapped his arm around Eirica. "'Tis done."

* * *

She and Anne were finally safe. He had no further obligation here. Keegan's body had been transported to the village. The pastor had sent back the monies for the capture of the highwaymen.

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

She leaned her head against him. "You can't still mean to leave."

He stared into green eyes. Green as the hillsides he'd traveled through. "I wed you only to give you peace from the others. You knew that."

"I love you, Duncan MacKinnon." She brushed the side of his face. "Now, there is no reason to leave. Stay and help me with the farm."

"You do no' need my help." He wanted to take her into his arms and hold her forever. His heart belonged to her. "I cannot take the reward money."

"Why not? You earned it."

He brushed her hair back from her face. "You helped in capturing those men."

"I did naught. If you hadn't been there, Anne and I would've been their prisoners, and I don't wish to think what might've happened." She shuddered against him.

How could he leave her? She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He loved her.

If he took the reward, he'd be able to make a living, but it would still be nothing compared to what Eirica made with the farm.

"Besides, I need someone to help me with the books here and dealing with those who wish to buy my wool and sheep." She wrapped her arms around his chest.

"Eirica, you've managed fine without any help. You do no' now need mine." He wished she did. She traced a design down his chest. "You must stay. You promised Father you

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

would.”

“I promised to make sure you were safe.” He pushed her away and looked into her eyes again. What he saw there went straight to his heart. Suddenly, his pride didn’t matter. All that mattered was the love filling his heart. He couldn’t leave her. He would stay. At least to see how things went. “I shall take the reward.”

“Of course you will.” She smiled at him.

He swept her into his arms, ignoring the pain in his shoulder, and carried her up the stairs. He kicked open the door to her bedroom, strode to the bed and laid her on the mattress. After latching the door, he threw his coat across a chair.

She smiled at him and held out her arms. “I love you, Duncan.”

“I love you.” He sat on the bed next to her and unbuttoned her dress. He removed her clothing, until she lay naked in front of him. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

A blush crept up her cheeks. “’Tis not fair that you should wear so many clothes when I have none.” She unbuttoned his shirt.

He stood and shed his clothes onto the floor, then lay next to her, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her and ran his hand down her back. She shivered against him.

He brushed her hair back. “I want you. Always.”

She pressed her lips against his neck. He leaned his head back. She kissed him across his throat and down his chest,

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

sucking at his nipples. He drew in his breath and held it.

He captured one of her breasts in his hand and rubbed her other until it stood taut. She gasped and laid her head against him. He wanted her. All those nights when he had refused to bed her made the longing more.

He rolled her onto her back and spread her legs, kneeling above her. He pushed himself into her. She wrapped her arms and legs about him, holding him.

“I need you, Duncan. I need you with me always.”

He captured her lips and pushed himself deeper into her. She raised her hips to meet him. He pulled back and thrust forward again. She met him. Her grip tightened and her nails dug into his shoulders. He rocked faster, until she tightened around him. With one final thrust, he called out her name and hugged her.

She nibbled at his neck as she held onto him. He rolled to the side and pulled her with him. Her hair caressed his chest. He held the most important part of his life in his arms. He didn't know if he should believe she truly was his forever.

Almost as though she could read his mind, she said, “Stop fretting. I wed you because I loved you. I shan't be supporting you. You'll be lord of the manor. My lord.”

He stroked her arm.

She kissed him. “I'll convince you of such, even if it takes the rest of my life.”

He kissed her neck and down her throat. “I want to stay with you.”

“Then we are in agreement.”

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He pulled her on top of him and stroked her breasts. She squirmed against him. He lifted her and pushed himself into her again. As she rocked back and forth, he let his uncertainties disappear and thought of nothing but the feeling of being with her.

* * *

Eirica stood in her breeches by the sheep pens. With the shearing done, the area was quiet. "Not much to tend to at the moment."

Duncan wrapped his arm around her. "'Tis a good time to do what you wish, instead of what you have to."

She leaned against him and nodded, but she wasn't sure what that was. Before she had spent the late days of summer with her father. She would like to spend them with Duncan, but he'd been busy repairing the buildings on his farm.

He kissed the side of her neck. She shivered against him. "Happy?" he asked.

She looked out over the fields that extended beyond the sheep pens. This was theirs. Duncan had never had anything that was all his before. His brothers had driven him out of his home. He had floated from place to place until he had come here to settle. Now he had something.

She knew he would stay.

Because he loved her.

Because he was happy here.

She faced him. He smiled like a little boy with a new toy. She could not begrudge him his work. "Very happy."

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

He leaned his head against hers. "With both farms, we shall do very well. Anne and our children will never do without." He kissed the top of her head. "I'll be able to provide for my family."

She hugged him. Being able to care for them was important to him. And she wouldn't mind having someone else worry about all the concerns of running the farm. She would gladly share that part with him. She liked having his arm around her. With him beside her, the world was a bright place.

"I thought we might redecorate my house and move into it." He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes.

"You don't care for my house?"

"'Tis a fine house, but we shall keep it for Anne." He hugged her close. "I wish to have a house that is ours."

She nodded. "I'd be honored to live with my husband in his house."

"Eirica, Duncan." Anne's voice floated to her.

She turned and watched the child skip across the dirt. Nanny nearly ran to keep up with her.

Anne grabbed Eirica's hand and leaned against her. "What're you doing?"

"Watching the lambs play." Eirica squeezed Anne's hand. Even dressed in black, the child seemed happy and alive.

"They're so cute." Anne climbed the fence and leaned against the top rung.

"'Tis time to set them out with the others," said Duncan.

Eirica hated to let the lambs loose because she enjoyed

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

watching them, but they had grown enough to join the flock. "Tomorrow I shall have Humphrey take them out."

"They are cute." Anne turned. "Can we go for a ride?" She looked from Duncan to Eirica. "Neither of you seem very busy."

"I could get out the carriage." Duncan pulled Eirica close to her.

"Horses." Anne smiled. "Nanny can stay and take a nap. The two of you can watch me. I promise not to go out to far in the loch again."

Nanny's face turned pale. "You don't need to go swimming."

Duncan smiled. "That sounds like a wonderful idea." He winked at Nanny. "We need to take the proper clothes, and I'll take proper care of Anne."

Eirica nodded. "If we go swimming, then we must plan. We can take tea with us."

Anne jumped down from the fence and did a dance. "'Twill be so much fun. Just the three of us. Like a family." Her eyes twinkled.

Eirica put her hands to her hips. "Have you done your lesson?"

Anne looked at her. She twirled in a circle. "'Tis too nice a day for lessons."

"Lessons come first."

"Let's take her swimming. She can do school work tomorrow." Duncan nuzzled her ear.

Eirica moved her head away. "Anne is watching," she

THE KILTED GOVERNESS

hissed.

Duncan laughed. "'Tis too nice a day for lessons."

Eirica moved from the circle of his arms. She had trouble concentrating when he held her so close. "A fine schoolmaster you make. Encouraging your students to play hooky. Lessons must come first. When she's done, if time is left, then we shall take her swimming and have tea at the loch."

"'Tis summer." Duncan smiled at Anne.

"It doesn't matter." Anne smiled back. "I have no lessons to do."

"Why not?" asked Eirica.

"Because no one has given me any."

Duncan opened his mouth and covered it with his hand. "I've been so busy, I must've forgotten."

Anne laughed and wrapped her arms around his waist. He swung her up into his arms.

Eirica looped her arm through his. *My family. All laughing and happy.* "A fine job you're doing."

Duncan shrugged.

"He isn't at fault." Anne clapped her hands. "After all, he's no longer the governess."

JANET QUINN

Janet Quinn has always been a storyteller. She has put her love of stories into her writing. While honing her craft, she earned a B.A. and an M.A. in journalism. Then she took up teaching high school English and writing. She has also taught novel writing classes at the Learning Tree University in California.

Her first novel, *Yesteryear's Love*, was published by Berkley/Jove under their Time Passages imprint. It placed in the finals of the Romance Writers of America/Orange County Chapter's Orange Award Contest for published writers for best historical.

Wild Honey, published in June 2004, placed in the finals of the Romance Writers of America/Orange County Chapter Orange Rose Contest for unpublished authors.

A Moment In Time, published in November 2004, is her second time-travel and takes the reader back to 1692 and a pirate boat. Published in September of 2005 is *The Lucky Lady*, a western with a gambler and a seamstress with a secret.

Also, her manuscript, *The River's Treasure*, published by Amber Quill Press in May of 2005, placed in the finals for best historical in the PASIC Book of Your Heart Contest.

Arrow of the Heart is her third time-travel and Amber Quill Press published it in September of 2005.

When she isn't writing historical or time travel novels, Janet works as the Director of Education for a California Sylvan where she helps to teach the next generation to read. She lives in Southern California with two of her three sons, who encourage her writing, and her three cats.

* * *

***Don't miss The River's Treasure, by Janet Quinn,
available from Amber Quill Press, LLC!***

Genevieve Rawlings awakens on the banks of the Mississippi River, cold, half drowned and with no recollection of how she came to be there. Cooper Monroe rescues her, and Genevieve finds love and happiness with his family, something she doesn't believe she's ever had.

Then someone tries to steal her diamond and ruby necklace—and her life.

As Cooper protects Genevieve, he finds he is falling in love with her. He lost his first wife to a fever and has vowed to never again love a woman, but no matter how hard he tries, he cannot stop himself from loving her. Cooper insists, however,

Genevieve return to her father in New Orleans where she will be safe and live properly. She wants nothing more than to remain with Cooper. Can she convince him that she'll be happy as a farm wife instead of a socialite?

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

THE GOLD STANDARD IN PUBLISHING

QUALITY BOOKS
IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SUSPENSE/THRILLER

SCIENCE FICTION

PARANORMAL

ROMANCE

MYSTERY

EROTICA

HORROR

WESTERN

FANTASY

MAINSTREAM

HISTORICAL

YOUNG ADULT

NON-FICTION

BUY DIRECT AND SAVE
<http://www.amberquill.com>