

# Chapter 1

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*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 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.

"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 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.

"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. 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?"

fingers clutching the edge. He stared toward the ceiling, his eyes half open.

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

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.

"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.

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.

"A man?" Angus looked toward the stranger. "This can't be the governess I sent for."

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

"He is, Father."

"No. Some mistake has been made." Angus collapsed.

"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.

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."

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.

The man laughed. "I gathered that by the conversation."

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.

Eirica smiled at him. "I'm sorry. I seem to have forgotten my manners. I'm Eirica MacDougall."

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

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.

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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 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

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 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 '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." 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 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 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. "He can't take dinner with us." Nanny stepped "Nanny, we have no choice. The child must learn and forward, standing between Anne and Duncan. until I can find a proper governess, Mr. MacKinnon...well...he's here. You will, of course, stay on and supervise."

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

A smile graced Nanny's face, alleviating the look of sorrow that seemed a permanent part of her. "Of course, I will." She glared at Duncan.

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

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

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 front of her.

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