



## BARBARIANS, ONLY CLEAN ONES

KITTIE LUNGED FOR THE door, screamed and writhed against the hairy Highlander as he grasped her firmly by the arm, and then finally resigned herself to her fate—but only once the heather rope and knot which tethered her to the chair had been tugged tight.

“Now, make sure that ye dinna go anywhere, lass,” Hairy said with a smirk.

“No doubt you think yourself very funny, sir,” Kittie objected. “This is indecent, immoral, and I demand that you return me to my husband at once. His Grace will be most put out by your treatment of me, I assure you.”

“Thank ye for your counsel, Yer Grace.” Hairy leaned in close, hot breath foul across her cheek with the ghost of stale ale, and whispered, “Then I believe it would be best if we dinna tell him.”

Repulsed, Kittie groaned, and he laughed boisterously and then left her struggling against her bonds to join two others in the center of the small cottage.

It was now noon. Despite the brightness of the day, it was dark inside the tiny cottage, and a bleary haze of smoldering peat hung oppressive in the

air. Kittie's eyes adjusted slowly to the low light, lingering upon a single shaft which glowed through the open door, highlighting plumes of dust motes in the smoke, before falling upon the clustered Scots as they engaged in companionable conversation, talking happily amongst themselves. She was surprised by their appearance; all three were impeccably neat, and given the general gossip and opinion of Highlanders throughout her own polished circle of friends, she had expected dirty barbarians. She had found . . . *Well, barbarians*, she thought, by her own exacting sensibilities. *Only, clean ones.*

Dressed with care, each man was kilted in the same natural-hued tartan, wearing a brown or black coarse woolen coat—fastened down the front in a neat row of cow-horn buttons—and clean linen stock, wrapped and secured with a tidy knot in the center of his throat. Their belts were draped with various small leather pouches and attachments, with a dirk—sheathed in leather—hung at the point of their right hip, within easy reach, and a sporran hung heavy, front and center, like a targe to their masculinity.

By contrast, Kittie was miserable, disheveled, and cold. She had been plucked from the roses of her husband's generous estate with little more courtesy than her gardener employed when dealing with the weeds, wearing only a stylish round gown, a garment entirely unsuitable for the field. The stripes that had once glowed so luminously were now naught but dull black in the gloom. Forced onto a horse at knifepoint, she had lost her cream fichu—all the way from Paris—when it snagged a passing branch, and her favorite straw hat had blown off in the subsequent flight. Now, the tight heat-sculpted curls of her long hair tousled loose past her shoulders, ornamented with debris, and the dainty pink flowers once pinned securely to her crown dropped heavy and limp about her ears. Even her cotton petticoat had suffered, its crisp white ruffled hem first sodden with a layer of mud, now dried to crusty black.

Kittie struggled again, but the effort was mere show; her bonds were fast. "Let me go, you dogsbody!"

They ignored her.

Squinting into the gloom, she stared at the men. She did not recognize them, but it would not take a genius to make an educated guess as to who they were: disgruntled tenants from her husband's land, all around eight and twenty years old, farmers, she knew, by the heavy waft of fur, dust,

and manure offending her sensitive nostrils. And they were unhappy—this time—about God knows what.

“His Grace willna speak o’ it to anyone, I’m sure,” the hairy Highlander addressed the group, the jerky twitch of his bushy black beard the only sign his lips had moved.

“Aye, his pride will see to that. The hiddie-pyke doesna want people to ken that he canna protect his ain wife,” the shortest in the group intoned in a deep baritone. “His reputation canna handle another scandal at the moment; he is yet to cleanse the smears off his face from his handling o’ the slave revolt on his cotton plantation in the United States. Nay, he willna speak about his wife spending time wi’ a bunch o’ handsome Hielanders.” The group laughed. “Not if he can help it.”

A man with flaming-red hair and eyes which burned with similar brilliance shot Kittie a look of malice. “’Tis in his best interests to keep it quiet and submit to our demands. And sooner, rather than later—if he wants her back anytime soon, that is.”

Kittie stilled at the hostility, overcome by fear. She needed to escape—and now! With a long, deep breath to steady her nerves, she continued her stealthy plucking upon the heather rope bound tight about her wrists, employing renewed desperate vigor.

“Regardless, we need to move her oot o’ my house, now, before Sutherland comes in here, poking around. Sae, which o’ ye lot is going to take her to the summer shieling?” Hairy asked. “Because it willna be me.”

Flaming Red shot his hands up in refusal. “Nor me.”

“Dinna look at me,” came the deep voice of Shorty. “I still ha’ the potato seed to plant.”

“Weel, then, that settles it . . . does it no? There is only one man who is currently no here,” Flaming Red posed. “And he doesna ha’ a family. I say we make the wee bastard do it.”

Each man eyed the other with resonant mirth, and then all three burst out laughing.

A man in his early twenties entered, clean-shaven, with long dark brown hair pulled tight to the nape of the neck. He was dressed similarly to the other three, but with the addition of a corrugated black goat horn strapped to his belt, the natural twist and curve of the beast caressing his hip as he strode forth in high spirits. “What did I miss?” he asked the assemblage, bright-eyed.

“’Tis decided,” Hairy announced.

“A terrible shame ye missed the vote, laddie,” Shorty added with a deep boom.

“We are all in agreement,” Hairy continued. “And, since ye’re late, then ye can be the one to take the wee lassie to the summer shieling, and then stay wi’ her until we ha’ come to a suitable arrangement wi’ the Duke o’ Dudley.”

“What! Me? Now just wait one—”

“Ye want to challenge my decision?” Hairy bristled and his whole body stiffened. Their feet hadn’t moved, but the pair seemed suddenly much closer—eye to eye. “After what happened wi’ my sister?” He stared the youngster down.

“I told ye before—nothing happened—’tis no but a wee misunderstanding. But, aye, I suppose ye’re right in any case.” Hairy’s tension eased immediately with the admission. “I’ll take her, I suppose I owe ye that. But then, we’re square.”

“Aye, aye,” Hairy said, slapping the youngster on the shoulder, the heat of his temper chilled by the young buck’s acquiescence like a forged blade dipped in oil. “But first, ye must swear before these men, on yer iron, that ye will no lay a hand on her. We all ken yer ways, and I canna be sending Her Grace home to His Grace in *dis*-grace. Especially no after I promise the Doiter tomorrow that his wee wifey is being well taken care o’ whilst we all come to terms.”

The newcomer eyed Hairy and, with stealth and familiar ease, his hand gripped the handle of his dirk. He drew the blade and held it before him, reverent, as he swore his oath upon the holy iron. “I swear, here and now, that I’ll nay lay a hand”—he paused with cheek and then added—“nor any other part o’ my body”—Shorty snorted—“on His Grace’s wife, whilst she is under my protection.” He eyed each man in turn and the group nodded in solemn agreement. A sudden smile split his face. “No unless she begs me to,” he added belatedly, and then kissed the steel of his dirk like a familiar old friend and firmly thrust it back into its sheath without the need to look.

Shorty’s deep voice boomed, followed closely by Flaming Red. The newcomer waited, eyeing Hairy with interest as the man pondered the statement. Finally, unable to resist, Hairy slapped him on the back and joined in.

Strapped to the chair and discarded in the corner, Kittie was not laughing. “How dare you say such a thing in my presence? You may be certain that *I* would never stoop to, to, begging—for anything.” She was irate. Enraged, she fell into silent wrath, but for an indignant puffing as she heaved anew against her tight bonds.

The newcomer was drawn by the struggle like a wolf to wounded game, and he crossed the room to her side, trailed closely by the pack. They formed a semicircle of tartan cloth around Kittie, all staring down at her like they had found a lost lamb in the heather and didn’t quite know what to do with the thing: send it home to its mother, or eat it.

“Weel, who do we ha’ here?”

She glared at him, petite nose high in the air. “You may address me as Your Grace.”

Tall and broad, young, perhaps twenty-two, the newcomer crossed his arms upon his chest, swelling with the act, and eyed her with casual interest. The tail ends of his plaid were tied over his heart with a thin strip of leather and ornamented by a crispy green sprig of something bell-leaved and curled at the tips. Kittie thought the Highlander had a spirited robustness about him which extended beyond his years, but he still held the mischievous air of youth in his wide brown eyes.

“And ye may address me simply as *mo ghaol*,” he said, and a murmured laugh vibrated through the circle. He pronounced the Gaelic word with a “mo,” followed by a slight catch of the “gh” at the back of his throat, and finally “hill,” and then inclined his solid frame with a subtle, polite bow. “’Tis verra nice to meet ye. It appears that ye and I are to spend some time together,” he added, with a belated “Yer Grace.”

“I can’t say that I am happy to meet you . . .” Kittie replied with scorn. She tried the Scotsman’s name but missed the Scottish “gh” and ended with a rather English-sounding “Moe-hill,” though she praised herself that, to her own ears at least, it was not too dissimilar from the original Gaelic pronunciation.

Moehill unleashed a sudden rush of Gaelic to his clansmen, who all roared in hilarity, and Kittie imagined a torrent of insults. She flamed in anger, red-faced, and raised her voice against her station and the thorough training of her youth. “I demand that you let me go this instant. What are you saying in that barbarous tongue? You, sir, have no more decency than

the cows with which you cavort.” Haughtily, she sniffed the air twice. “And you smell no better.”

“’Tis the Gàidhlig, lass. A ‘barbarous tongue’—ye say? ’Tis a noble language, lass, and much older than the one ye speak.” His eyes roamed her body with apparent pleasure, lingering for a brief moment on the plump swell of her breasts, unnerving her. He saw it, and unfolded his arms. “Dinna fash yersel’, lass. I swore to these men that I would no lay a hand on ye whilst ye’re under my protection.”

“Well, then. That is good to know—I suppose.”

The air around him suddenly shifted in some indefinable way, and brightness sparked into his eyes. “I only said to them now that I didna expect I would live to regret it sae soon.”

The Scots all roared once more, and Kittie’s jaw dropped.



Kittie and Moehill stood on the sandy bank of a wide river. To the north, it opened into a wide, stretching loch flanked by swollen grassy hills, the western bank blessed by an ancient forest and a vast covering of bluebells—evidence spring was well and truly alive in the Highlands.

A small single-masted cutter lay at anchor in its mouth, surrounded by an airy flotilla of pale-grey-and-white gulls, the nimble thieves following the fishing boat in noisy hope of offal for their lunch. An old, hairy captain stood sturdy on deck, his clothes as worn and weathered as his character. He acknowledged them with a gnarly hand before nimbly climbing the rail and descending into a tiny dinghy, sending forth a flurry of high-pitched karrs and kek-keks into the air around him.

He rowed ashore with slow, solid heaves on the oars. “I am Captain Cook,” he announced, with no hint of humor.

Kittie saw that his skin was bronzed and tanned to a thick rich leather by years and years of copious application of both sun and salt. “Captain Cook?” she repeated, with abject contempt. “I believe that you are dead, sir. And have been for some fifteen years past.”

With vibrancy, and a number of rough slaps, the man patted down the length of his torso in mock assessment. “It is a miracle!” he declared with

vigor and then exploded in boisterous laughter, revealing the black holes of several missing teeth. “Welcome aboard my *Whaler*.”

“Whaler?” Kittie eyed the vessel and then the man before her in turn, certain she was being practiced upon once more. But a quick shot at the anchored vessel revealed a weathered nameplate bearing that title. She didn’t laugh, certain that “*Whaler*” was only one harpoon away from a watery grave.

Once on board, the captain ran the sail up the solitary mast as Moehill heaved the anchor from its watery depths, and the trio set a steady pace up the sparkling blue waters of the long loch, embraced by the large swell of rolling hills and nodding carpet of blue wildflowers on the western bank. The *Whaler’s* cargo consisted entirely of four bulging barrels—known as casks—three people, two pottery vessels, and one large bucket of slimy fish livers—repugnant to all but the karring contingent of trailing gulls. Kittie cut a look of malice at her captors. *And these two miscreants, certainly.*

She had settled herself onto the seat at the front of the boat, hand gripping the rail tightly as her eyes ran up the tall mast, with its delicate swell of crisp linen eight months gone under a steady breeze. She took a deep breath, craving fresh air and the steady influence of this bright spring day to calm her frazzled state. Instead, her nostrils flared with the putrid scent of warm fish livers, which churned her stomach into a whirlpool, and the cutter’s timber sides, all imbued with the foul reek of a thousand fish—if not more. Its “Captain Cook” was seasoned likewise.

Had Kittie not been prisoner, she would have been happy. It was warm for the end of April, the sun high and unshadowed—for now at least; it was Scotland after all!—and distant wisps of steely clouds moved across the sky, pursued by darker ones the color of cold slate, billowing on the horizon. It wasn’t raining. Well, not yet.

But Kittie was a prisoner, and she was miserable. She was also used to having her own way. “Take me back, now!” she commanded for the tenth time in the last hour, employing both spirit and voice of one used to charging servants with orders and then having them fluster off to cater to her every whim. “You have no right to hold me against my will.”

“And yer husband has nay right to run off families born to this land, for centuries past. And yet he does,” Moehill said dispassionately.

With a shrewd eye, he assessed the lagging swell of sail and made a subtle correction on the tiller, drawing the long timber handle towards his chest.

Captain Cook deftly adjusted the length of hemp rope at his hip, pulling it taut, and then tied off the remaining length to a cleat on the rail with a flourish.

Kittie thrust her chin defiantly in the air. “His Grace has every right. That is your problem—isn’t it? *He* owns the land now, not you. It was given to him by His Majesty King George III, no less,” she added haughtily.

“Look, lass, the Doiter o’ Dudley—” the captain began.

“The Duke of Dudley,” she corrected.

“Aye, I ken weel enough what ye mean, but I meant Doiter—it means blundering fool, lass.”

Kittie huffed in indignation.

Moehill broke in. “Ye may purr”—he rolled his *Rs* intentionally—“about it all ye want to, my wee Kittie, but it willna change the fact that ye are my prisoner now. And yer circumstances will remain sae until yer husband grows some sense.” Moehill turned to the captain. “I ken the man . . . it may be some time.” The pair laughed.

Kittie folded her arms with a scowl. “His Grace has perfect sense, I assure you. And, what is more, it is becoming clearer to me by the second that moving sheep onto the land and you off it is a perfectly sensible substitution. Sheep, Moehill, are simply less trouble than Scotsmen.”

The two men caught each other’s eye and burst out laughing, their disconcerting mirth loud enough for Kittie to hear mocking echoes of their contempt off distant cliffs. She squirmed uncomfortably and then rolled her eyes. “Argh. Really?”

“Aye, ye’re right about one thing, lass.” Captain Cook pointed a gnarly arthritic finger at her, and she now saw that the remaining curled fingers were tattooed with the letters H-O-L-D on one hand, and F-A-S-T on the other. “Sheep are definitely less trouble than braw Scotsmen.”

“Aye, and ye had better hope—for yer ain sake—that the Doiter o’ Dudley kens the truth o’ it weel enough. Or ye and I may find ourselves out here together—in the middle o’ nowhere—for some time.”

Kittie turned her back upon them, sitting statuesque with her arms tightly folded beneath the swell of her breasts. A shining vision in striped silk, she rocked back and forth as Whaler rode the gentle waves, mumbling oaths under her breath about annoying Scotsmen, the immorality of men in kilts—bare-kneed, no less!—and foul reeks.



Moehill snorted in response to her defiance—much to her displeasure—a sound irritatingly joyful in its timbre. “If ye’ve got something to say to me, lass, then I suggest that ye just come right out and say it.”

Enraged, she bounced to her feet and rounded on him. “I said,” she bellowed, “the sheep also smell much better than you stinking Scotsmen!”

The men locked eyes around the swell of sheet and then boomed with laughter, rolling on their seats. Their insolence turned Kittie’s pale face the glowing hue of day-old sunburn, and she clenched her fists at her sides in fury.

With a glint in his eye, Moehill gave a sudden hard jerk upon the tiller, and with the instinct of a seasoned sailor and the twitching reflexes of a cat, Captain Cook grasped the edge of the cutter as the sail sagged. The boat lurched to a sudden stop with a startling heave which flung Kittie into the front well with the anchor rope, a mass of screeching silk stripes, white-ruffled petticoats, and red silk stockings clad in kicking black shoes.

“What are ye doing down there, Yer Grace?” Moehill asked, coming to his feet. “I canna ha’ ye flapping about in the bottom o’ the boat like a wee landed trout. Come along, get ye up.”

“Och, ye must take care on the seas, lass.” The captain reached forward to help his confederate, and together they dragged the squealing form out of the hole, depositing her, puffing and indignant, back onto her seat. “Ye’d best be careful, or ye’ll pitch fair ower the side and drown.” He turned to Moehill, his brown leather face pleated in wrinkles of delight. “Then what will we do?”

“We’d ha’ to put ye in a dress and call ye Duchess Doiter, and then send ye home to His Grace as a replacement,” Moehill put in helpfully.

“D’ye think he would ken the difference?” The pair laughed.

Kittie folded her arms. Overtly aware that her face was glowing red hot with a potent mix of embarrassment and fury, she huffed in frustration, and then rolled her eyes over the side of the cutter, searching for peace beneath the depths of crystal-blue water. A seagull landed lightly on the rail at her side and screamed a high-pitched karr of contempt in her face. She violently slapped the thing away and watched with envy its effortless glide on the brisk breeze across the loch, towards its home.

She could not get to her own soon enough.



“Can ye swim?” Moehill asked Kittie.

She had been standing on the pebbled shoreline for the last two hours, seething with hostility as her captors unloaded the four fifty-two-gallon oak casks and rolled them up the slope, disappearing over the top. He knew that she was planning her escape. “If ye can swim, then the easiest route is across the loch and down the western bank, to the south. The east bank is, weel . . .” He turned and gestured at the steep, rugged terrain in conclusive illustration of his point. “How are yer shanks?” he asked, dropping his eyes.

She glowered at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Shanks—yer legs, lass. How are they?”

“My legs? How dare you speak to me of such things as—my legs are no concern of yours, Moehill.”

At the word “Moehill,” the captain’s head swung away from her and he buckled onto the large cask he was pushing, but not before she caught the massive smile which split his face and the barely suppressed heave of his chest. Moehill closed his eyelids tight with thumb and forefinger, and then gave a soft squeeze to the bridge of his nose. Kittie watched his cheeks swell beneath his palm as he smiled. It appeared, to her abject irritation, that he checked his mirth with obvious struggle.

“I only ask because, if ye ha’ the stamina, ye may follow the ridgeline north, and then turn east. It is the shortest . . .” He splashed into the water ankle-deep, the lower half of his knee-high boots lapped to a wet, shiny black, and reached down to the floor of the dinghy. Heaving a leather sack from its depths and slinging it over one shoulder, he emerged from the water with a smile. “But it is also the hardest. O’ course, each o’ yer escape routes will take at least a week before ye find company, sae ye’ll likely freeze before ye make it to the first village.” His eyes tracked the striking plum-and-grey-blue stripes of her gown with a long, slow sweep. “How are ye at hunting for food?” he asked with contempt.

Perplexed, Kittie looked down past the plump swell of her breasts to the even larger cathedral bell of her silk skirt. It was glowing now with a pleasant golden shimmer as it caught the light. Realization struck like a knife in her heart. Moehill was right. She was trapped. With no means nor

method of escape, she resigned herself to her fate with reluctance, and a sickening well of unshed tears brimming in her eyes, but she obstinately refused to cry in front of them.

The captain climbed into the dinghy and settled himself upon the seat, gripping the oars hard—no doubt in thanks to the reminder of his tattoos. “Ye ha’ what ye need at the bothy, but I promise to bring ye something special in a month when I return.”

“Och. D’ye still ha’ more o’ the moonlight whisky left, then?” Moehill rubbed his hands together. “’Twas a nice batch.”

“Aye,” Captain Cook agreed.

Moehill shouldered the rowboat off the bank with the gravelly grind of timber across rock as the captain fixed his oars in place and gave them a solid heave, gliding away from the shore with the grace of a swan. “I ha’ a feeling that ye are going to need it by then,” he called back with an accusatory glance at Kittie.

She was not sorry to see him leave.



Kittie climbed to the top of the long, gentle rise, breaching the lip puffing and uncomfortably moist. “Sweating like a peasant in the field,” she said, aghast, running a silky forearm across her brow, all the while wishing she had retained possession of the wide-brimmed straw hat she wore whilst in her garden to protect her skin.

The unappealing “bothy” mentioned by the captain was, in fact, a quaint cottage, set upon a wide tabletop in a beautiful sea of green-and-brown heathland. It was constructed from grey rocks, dry-stacked in twin layers and filled with a core of sand—protection against the harsh Highland elements—and had two square windows on either side of a centralized timber door. Twin chimneys breach the ridge at either end, one currently billowing black plumes across a pitched expanse of thatched roof.

The flat landscape was populated with patches of longer grasses, gorse, and low brush, segmented by scattered groups of exposed rock, and veined by worn game trails. It ran to higher mountains in the distance, with a clear, low peak close by. A small ancient burn carved a long, curving course

through the land, catching the light in brilliant flashes as water hurled around its rocky bed and over a series of small waterfalls. It passed by the cottage in a rippling stream to its left and then babbled away down the hill to join the loch far below.

“So this is home . . . for now at least.” It was a far cry from Kittie’s twenty-six-room Scottish estate, or her London terrace, but the rustic “bothy” was situated pleasantly enough, she acknowledged reluctantly, though wisely chose to reserve her overall opinion until she saw inside.

Moehill emerged out the door with a timber firkin in one hand and a large timber plate in the other. “Welcome, Yer Grace,” he said, with a polite sweep of the arm in invitation. “Make yersel’ at home, whilst I collect water from the burn.”

Kittie stepped onto the flagstones, looking into the dark abyss. She palmed the rocky doorway with trepidation, surprised to find the outer rocks pleasantly warm to the touch from a bright day of sunshine, and then decidedly passed through thick walls, plunging into cold darkness. On her right, a steady stream of light fought its way through the crazed windowpane, lighting the room, barely enough, to reveal that she stood in a combined kitchen and living area. Her eyes adjusted and she saw to the far end of the cottage, where centuries of the theater of fire had scorched the insides of a wide stone hearth to sooty black, the stage ringed by an audience of two timber chairs, a sturdy stool with four legs, and another smaller table, which, upon closer inspection, appeared to be yet another stool. A large cast-iron cauldron sat empty on a thick step of flat stone, center stage.

To the left of the hearth, nestled in the far corner, were a series of timber shelves, these piled with various timber bowls, cups, plates, and a few large pottery vessels, whilst along the wall opposite the door was a solid table constructed of three planks of dark timber, with a long bench for seating cozy on either side and a sturdy timber chair at either end.

To her immediate left, beyond a dividing wall of rock and its woven wicker door, light glowed in through the second window, trapping radiant drafts of dust motes inside its soft beam, lighting the only bedroom in the cottage.

It had been a long walk up the slope from the loch and Kittie was tired. Her legs ached, and she plonked down heavy onto the solid bench, breathing a long sigh of relief. A critical sweep of the cottage, as seen

through the polished lens of her high-society discernment, depressed her further, and she eyed the rough-hewn timber rafters above her head, and dirty flagstones beneath her feet, with abject disdain. “It appears that quaint on the outside does not equal quaint on the inside,” she said with disturbing realization—her polished English accent, and French silk round gown, quite at odds with her Scottish accommodation.

Kittie’s body was still infused with residual heat from the hill climb, an uncomfortable state which was now built upon by her growing anger to produce a thoroughly combustible fuel for her furnace. Outraged by the conditions, she stormed from the cottage, swung right, and found her captor doubled over on the far bank of the eight-foot-wide burn, dirk in his hand with the timber bucket at his now-bare foot.

“This is completely unacceptable,” she protested. “I have no lady’s maid. No comb, nor clothes. What am I to do?”

The hunched figure unfurled, face contorted with a quizzical expression. He took a large step into the fast-flowing water and, whilst still standing in the ditch, managed to look her in the eye.

She realized with a start that he was both taller and broader than she had originally thought. But undeterred, she flapped her skirts wildly at him. “This petticoat is a disgrace. My hair is a mess. And if anyone should see me, well, then, I should be ruined. I demand that you take me home this instant.”

He watched her fussing in amused silence.

“That means right now!” she bellowed with a stamp of the foot, fists clenched at her side.

“I can see that ye ha’ worked yersel’ into quite a swivet over yer present predicament, my wee Kittie,” he said, calm and bright-eyed. “May I suggest that ye lodge yer complaint with the manager at the front desk.”

She ignored him. “I don’t have my . . . tortoiseshell hairbrush, my favorite brooch with the emeralds, my straw hat, the one with the pleasant open weave and delicate embellishments . . . we must send for stockings, redingote and ribbons . . .”

Moehill waited patiently whilst she ran through her long list of absolute necessities, and then his critical eyes traveled the length of her body, assessing her current state of dishevelment. He snorted at her in amusement. “If I were ye, lass, I would be more concerned wi’ the fact that ye dinna ha’ a cloak.”

His prompt held subduing gravity.

“Look, lass.” The tip of his dirk pointed to the edge of the stream, where a plate balanced precariously on a large boulder, mounded with the unmistakable pinky flesh of filleted fish. “For now, I can promise ye food—and that is it. Dinner. Compliments o’ Captain Cook.”

Kittie licked her lips. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast and the promise of hot food to an empty stomach was enough to turn the tide on her raging mien. “Well, it is not chicken fricassee,” she conceded, with hunger-inspired affability, “but, I suppose with a little butter sauce it will—perhaps—do.”

“We dinna ha’ butter.”

“But . . . this is the Highlands.” She threw her arms wide to encompass the obvious long roll of mountain ranges and heather.

“Ye noticed, did ye?” he said dryly. “Sae?”

“Where are those hairy black beasts that you are all so fond of?” she asked sarcastically.

“Ye mean kine?”

“Yes. Cows,” she moaned, long and indignant, the word uncomfortably similar to the sound of the animal. “Where are they all?”

“I imagine they ha’ been eaten by the starving.” He bristled suddenly, and then, with unobvious breaks to emphasize his point, added, “Or were stolen—to sell—to buy food—to eat, by the starving.”

Frustrated, she groaned at him.

He ignored her and returned to his work, cleansing rogue scales from the blade of his dirk with long dunks in the crisp water. He eyed the steel critically and then dipped it again, this time with a brisk rub. Once he was satisfied, two long strokes across his plaid dried the blade to a radiant shimmer, and he sheathed it in its leather scabbard with a solid snap. One large stride and he leapt from the flowing creek to land before her with a thud. “O’ course there is a third option,” he said after a minute, looking down at her, smug.

She was afraid to ask. Bit her lip to resist. But he simply stood in front of her, waiting patiently with a cheeky smirk and the certain knowledge that she would be obliged to ask clear on his face. In the end, Kittie was compelled by an inherent character flaw, one she had possessed since birth, which could only be categorized as self-serving curiosity. “Yes? What is the third option?”

“That men like yer husband ha’ got rid o’ them because they take food out o’ the mouths o’ his sheep. In turn, taking milk, cream, cheese, and fuarag out o’ the mouths o’ Hieland families, a goal which means that those folk ha’ to move away—if they dinna want to starve to death.”

“Nonsense!” She flapped a dismissive hand in his general vicinity. His eyebrows went up at the gesture, incredulous. “Don’t be so dramatic,” she added, and then wondered briefly what “got rid o’” referred to, and if it was sensible to ask what “fuarag” was. This time, she curbed her curiosity.

