MELINDA SALISBURY

HOLD BACK THE TIDE

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For my second-favourite Scotsman.
I doubt David Tennant reads my books, so,
Neil Bird, this one's for you. Slàinte mhath!

"Hell is empty and all the devils are here"

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

"Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings. . ."

Henry of Huntingdon, *on King Canute*, *Historia Anglorum*

"The form of the monster on whom I had bestowed existence was forever before my eyes. . ."

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*; *or, The Modern Prometheus*

ONE

Here are the rules of living with a murderer.

One: Do not draw attention to yourself.

It's pretty self-explanatory – if they don't notice you, they won't get any ideas about killing you. Be a ghost in your own home, if that's what it takes. After all, you can't kill a ghost.

Of course, when you live with a murderer, sit opposite them at every meal, share a washroom, a kitchen, and sleep a mere twelve feet and two flimsy walls away from them, this is impossible. Even the subtlest of spectres is bound to be noticed. Which leads to the next rule.

Two: If you can't be invisible, be useful.

Cook huge, hearty meals that make them too full and sleepy to feel like slaughtering you. I'm talking meaty stews, thick casseroles. Heaps of potatoes; no one ever ate three pounds of mash and then went on a killing spree. A bit of bread and hard cheese is not going to keep you alive.

You should also keep your home spotlessly clean: get those floors swept, pillows fluffed; shine that cutlery so bright you can see your face in it. Never let them run out of fresh laundry, always sew on loose buttons before they're lost, and darn socks the moment they show any signs of wear. Be sure to collect the eggs and milk the goat each morning before sunrise, no matter the weather – better to be cold and damp than dead, my girl. In short, make it so your death would be very inconvenient. Murderers hate to be inconvenienced.

It's still not enough, though. Not nearly enough.

On to rule three: If you can't beat them, join them.

Not in murder, obviously; the last thing you want is to get into some kind of rivalry. Find some *other* way to become an apprentice and turn yourself into the thing they didn't know they needed. Become their right hand, so cutting you would only make them bleed.

Build the stamina it takes to walk around the loch day after day, rain, snow or shine; do it with ease and speed. Learn to set and cast the nets around the loch edges to catch the fish that live there. Where to slit those fish to harvest what's in their bellies, and how to sift through your findings, panning for information like the luckless pan for gold. Then train yourself not to be sick at the sight of fish guts strewn across a table you'd spent half an hour polishing to gleaming just the day before.

Clean the table again.

Study hard. Learn how to test the loch to make sure it's clean. How to draw the tables that predict what the

water level should be, so you know at a glance how much can be used and how much should be spared. Master these calculations, be sure you can do them in your head, and keep those numbers on your tongue, ready if they're ever needed. Record the signs that mean rain is coming, or drought is likely. Prepare.

More than that. Familiarize yourself with spears, knives and guns, learn how to sharpen a blade on a whetstone so it sings when you slash it through the air, how clean a barrel, oil a trigger. Practise until you can assemble a long gun in under thirty seconds. Know where the bullets and gunpowder are kept and make sure there's always plenty.

Four: Don't make them angry.

In my experience, a murderer is much more likely to kill you if you make them angry.

Right now, my father is furious with me.