

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric landscape with mountains and a body of water. A silhouette of a person stands on a distant shore. The title 'HOLD BACK THE TIDE' is written in large, white, textured letters. A woman in a white dress is depicted falling through the letters, and red, smoke-like patterns are at the bottom.

MELINDA SALISBURY

HOLD

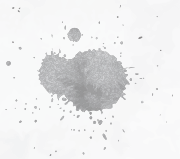
BACK

THE

TIDE

*“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 and a kitchen, and sleep a mere twelve feet and two flimsy walls away from them, this is impossible. Even the subtlest of specters 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. Serving 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 that 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 and 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 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 that 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 to clean a barrel, oil a trigger. Practice 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.

TWO

“Alva.”

It takes a lot of practice to keep your back turned when a murderer is standing behind you. But then, I’ve had a lot of practice.

“Alva.”

I know he’s angry from the way he says my name. It’s how he snaps the word: the sharpness of the *v*, the second *a* strangled to death almost before it passes his lips. The tiny hairs on my arms rise reflexively. Then there’s the dread swooping in my stomach, like an owl for a mouse. When he says my name like that, it’s a snarl in the dark, telling me to run, to hide. To be careful.

So what do I do?

I let out a long sigh. “Just a moment, Da.”

I write the last three words of the sentence I’m transcribing with a flourish and calmly put my pen down. Then, and only then, do I turn away from my desk to face him.

Because there’s a fifth rule, and this one is the most important of all:

Don’t let them know what you know.

To survive, you have to be smarter than they are. If I listened to my instincts, if I fled whenever he came into a room, startled every time he picked up a knife or a hammer or a gun, he’d know something was wrong. He’d start asking questions, start getting anxious, and then I’d really have to worry. The last thing in the world you want is to make a murderer skittish. The trick is to hold your nerve and behave as though everything is fine. So instead of cowering, I act like any other sixteen-year-old would if their father came into their room uninvited.

“What is it?” I try to sound bored, even a little annoyed. I’m pleased with myself, though the sense of achievement trickles away when I look at him. He is most definitely *not* pleased with me.

I attempt a smile. He doesn’t return it.

Oh hell.

My father fills the doorway, ducking his head so it doesn’t bump the frame, and I swallow the realization that he’s blocking the only way out. He’s a real giant of a man; when

I was wee, I'd sit on his clasped palms while he bent double and swung me back and forth between his legs, and my feet never even came close to touching the ground. I didn't inherit his height, though I did get the Douglas bird's nest of dark curls and their coal-chip eyes. Right now, my father's eyes are fathomless, cold and deep as the water outside, and I fight not to flinch as I meet them.

"Did you check the nets?" he asks.

"Yes."

"All of them?"

I nod, even as my gaze moves to the bundle of rags gripped in his right hand.

No. Not rags. Net.

Oh holy hell.

Here's the thing: I did not check all the nets. For once, I decided to leave the farthest one up by the north mountain so I could get back and finish my transcribing work. In my defense, I've checked those nets twice a week for the past three years. There's never anything in them—not even the smallest of fish for me to examine—and they've never needed more than the most basic repairs. Until today.

"Alva?"

There's no point in lying. Again. Not that that stops me from trying. "I forgot. They were fine last week," I say, standing, my pulse rising at the same time.

In reply, he unrolls the net, and I wince as I see the size of the rents that have been torn in it. After seven years, I'm good at repairing them, but there's not enough twine in Ormscaula to get this one back into working order. I could fit inside one of the rips.

My father glares at me through the net, and for a moment, it looks like he's caught in it. Then I realize that from where he stands, I would be the catch. My mouth dries.

I look away from him, forcing myself to step closer and peer at the damage. I'm surprised to see that the holes are neat, no fraying, like they've been cut, not chewed. Whatever did it must have teeth or claws like knives.

"What could have done this?" I ask, for a second forgetting to be wary of him, reaching to touch the clean edges as if they might answer me. The biggest predators in the loch are otters, but there's no way they're responsible, nor any of the fish that live there. "A wolf? A bear?"

Da shakes his head immediately. "There're no bears in these parts anymore. And we'd have heard wolves if they were around."

That's true. You always know when wolves are close. "A lugh, then? Maybe a deer was trapped inside the net, and it went after it?"

I have found deer in the nets before. Deer are pretty stupid. And lughs—mountain cats—do hunt by the loch, although usually during winter.

My father stares at the net, as if expecting it to tell him how it got in this state.

“Is it likely to be a lugh, do you think?” I ask.

“A lugh would have to be starving to come down the mountain in spring,” he says finally. “Starving or rabid. I’d better set some of the cages.” Then his tone turns pointed. “Either way, the net will need replacing today.”

My heart sinks. It’s bad enough that I skipped checking it, worse that he found it in this state. Any other day, I’d already be halfway to the sheds to fetch a new one, muttering prayers and apologies as I went. But today, I need to go down into the village to meet Murren Ross and get my *things* from him. Finding, inspecting, and hauling a replacement net almost ten miles around the north mountain shore will take the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon, and then I’ll have to rig it up, too. I’ll lose the whole day. I can’t afford to lose a whole day.

The timing couldn’t be worse.

A nasty thought occurs to me. The north nets have been fine for years, and yet today, the sole time I didn’t check, one is damaged. Not just damaged, but ravaged by cuts that look like they were made with a blade. And he just so happens to have found it . . .

The skin along my shoulders tightens and prickles. Could *he* have done this? Does he know what I’m planning? Because if he knows, then that means—

“Alva? The net. Today, if it’s convenient.”

The irritation in his voice yanks me from my thoughts.

“Sorry.” I shake my suspicions away. Now *I’m* being stupid. If he knew what I was planning, he wouldn’t bother to sabotage his own nets to keep me here. He’d probably just kill me.

I cover the transcription with a calfskin cloth to keep it clean and hastily roll up the old scroll I’ve been copying, disturbing a few tiny flakes of gold leaf that drift onto the desk. I have a jar of scraps I’ve harvested over the years, collecting the leftover fragments the monks forget, or can’t be bothered, to remove properly. The bottle they’re in is probably worth more than the contents, but I like the thought of my little pot of gold.

“I’ll go now, then,” I say, still hoping for a reprieve.

A normal father would hesitate to send his only child ten miles around the loch shore to fix up a new net with a potentially rabid lugh lurking nearby. He’d take pity on his daughter and allow her to go down into the village to collect the paper she told him she needs to finish her work. But not mine.

“Take a gun, and mind yourself,” he says, turning away. “And be back before nightfall.”

Aye, Da. I love you, too.

