

Prologue

Clarinda had had it! She was struggling to control her emotions as she feverishly shoved her belongings into a travel suitcase. Her bottom lip was being bitten to death so it wouldn't quiver and by doing so it kept the tears from brimming over. Her arms were flailing so if anyone were near enough, they would feel as if they were about to be assaulted by an octopus. Clothes were strewn around the bed and the rejects lay where they were landed; the accepted were balled up and stashed in the bag. She figured what she left would be thrown out or donated to the local homeless shelter. She didn't plan to come back.

This was it! This was going to be last time she would feel this way in her life – remorse. She had given him the best years of her life, or so she thought – and what did it get her? Misery. Deceit. Sorrow. She had stood for this mistreatment long enough and was not going to subject herself to any more emotional trauma.

Once she had selected what she felt she needed, she took the phone off the hook, collected her purse and locked the door to the spacious and bright apartment behind her. Her travel bag had wheels but even so, the stairs made the bag awkward and heavy and the struggle only fueled her anger. Muttering expletives under her breath, she reached the doors to the apartment building. She was slightly sweating from the exertion, and her hair started to fall out of its pony-

tail in wisps around her face. She took the back of her hand and swiped both aside. Straightening up and reestablishing her attire, she hailed a cab and one pulled up immediately; the cabbie helped wrangle her bag into the trunk. She let out a sigh as she fell back into the glossy seat and the cab hurtled toward Newark airport. She had loved New York, her friends and her job, and now she was leaving them all behind -- all because of him. As she watched the familiar buildings of her neighborhood whiz by, she wondered if she would ever return. Part of her hoped so, but the other part wondered why. Why would she ever return to a place so cold and heartless?

Chapter 1 News in the Highlands

Every day was the same for Alistair Campbell – , breakfast, chores, a quick shower, and off to work. He would come home and do it all again but in reverse – shower, a few more chores, and a small supper and off to bed only to repeat the routine again. At least he got to work with clients who didn't try to express their ideas over his, and also appreciated his dedication to his craft. Sometimes clients balked at his ideas, but he always won them over with his soft voice and easy gift of persuasion. He had plenty of customers, thus the reason for the seven-day workweek especially in early spring when the year and budgets were young. Luckily, there was always another hoof to shoe.

Yes, Alistair's profession is one of a farrier – and one of the best in Inverness-shire.

“Alistair, please come in and try some of my new tablets! I just took them out and they are simply delightful,” cried a shrill and cheery voice. Alistair closed his eyes, sighed and resigned himself to the fact to keep the Mrs. Fitzrandolph happy (and as a well paying client), he would have to come to her doorstep and taste some of the awful concoction she had just invented. If Dr. Frankenstein were still alive, he would have loved to have her as an assistant in his laboratory. She had an uncanny method of blending together ingredients that have no right to be near each other at all, in an effort to scare the tongue into taking up a diet and avoid any further punishment.

“Yes Ms. Fitzrandolph, I will be there in a wee bit. Shamus still needs one more shoe before you can let him trot on the main road.” This would bide him some time and maybe after a few moments she would forget and he would escape and bill her for his services later. Of course what Mrs. Fitzrandolph heard was: “I weel be there een a whee bit, Shamus steel needs woun more shu b’for yew caan lit heem trot un the mean rud.” This thrilled the old dearie to no end! Yes, she did she love to watch Alistair working on her old dappled-gray, Shamus, in the paddock – a key reason she moved to the highlands of Scotland was hear the wonderful brogue. When she heard

from the townsfolk about Alistair and saw him for the first time, she felt like she had won the Lotto – a highland accent and a wonderful specimen of man all in one prize. She would ring up Alistair the minute Shamus lost a shoe and count the days until he would arrive. Hopefully the day would be a warm or humid one, and Alistair would take off his shirt to cool himself from the hard work. He was very well toned – and somewhat tan since he was out in whatever sun there might be -- and he would gleam in the sunlight with a thin layer of sweat once he got to Shamus's third shoe. Mrs. Fitzrandolph tried very hard to fit in, but she knew her curious American ways were always obvious and strange. However, Alistair felt she was harmless – except when she had been in the kitchen. Once Alistair was finished with Shamus, he let the old horse into the paddock and reluctantly made his way to Mrs. Fitzrandolph's doorstep.

Secretly he had been wishing for a bit of something to tide him over until supper, but he had forgotten to bring any energy bars with him this day. He could imagine what her tablets would taste like, and he braced himself for the worst, but back in the small corner of his mind, he hoped these would not be representative of her earlier experiments. He knocked on the screen door, “Mrs. Fitzrandolph, Shamus is finished. I need tae be aff. Did you want to speak with me?”

Maybe she wouldn't hear him and he could slink into his wee panel lorry and be gone.

“Oh, just a sec Al, I will be right there!” Oh Lord, he hated being called ‘Al’; this was clearly an American tendency to give everyone the endearment of a nickname. “Oh, please do come in. Here are some fresh tablets I have just made. I substituted the heavy cream for half and half and instead of sugar I have used NutraSweet and added some lime to the lemon juice. I think you will find them quite tasty and only one-third the calories – not that you need to worry about that, but I do. A girl has got to watch her figure!”

Yeah, watch it grow is what Alistair thought as he took a wee bite. Horrid as expected. These tablets were dreadful and would surely kill small animals. “Lovely”, he muffled as he tried to swallow without using his tongue. Praise the good Lord, she sensed he needed some liquid to wash the concrete down, and thankfully give him a nicely chilled glass of water.

“Well have you heard about the new American in town?” Mrs. Fitzrandolph inquired. “I understand she is quite a modern thing so I don't think she will need any horse maintenance of any sort. I know the kind -- coming here to try ‘to find themselves’. What she is probably doing is to find herself a new husband! Although I don't

know why she would come to the Shire – this is a remote area so the pickings are slim, if you know what I mean.”

He was using all the best manners his mother taught him to continue to choke down her tablets and quite honestly wasn't really paying attention to her diatribe. I was certain his mouth would soon be glued shut, and prevent him from attempting a reply.

“Yep” Mrs. Fitzrandolph continued, “I understand she was jilted from her husband and she decided to come to Scotland to try on a new lifestyle. She sure has chosen a tough way to try to start a new life. She went and purchased that big, old Cameron house off Telford Lane. That house needs so much work! And she thinks she will open it up for guests – clearly the girl does not understand highland life and what is involved to run a place like that. She is such a wisp of a thing and doesn't look strong enough to even pump the well. At any rate we will see.”

“These are great, but I really must be going. Thank you Mrs. Fitzrandolph,” Alistair raised himself out the chair to make his way to the door. She continued with her report of her new neighbor while washing dishes and gazing out of the window and really wasn't paying attention to the fact Alistair was making his leave. “Oh yes, bye now. Do you want some tablets to take with you?” Alistair of course shook

is head no. “Are you sure? OK, well then drive safe and I will see you in about three weeks?”

“Yes Mrs. Fitzrandolph -- the paddock is no as clarty now, sae Shamus might nae need shoes for about four to five weeks, but I will ring ya’ to see if he is getting’ along alright.”

“Yes—good!” she replied, “and I will do the same. Good to see you again. Let me know if you ever need any thing – like a casserole or something. Bye-bye.” She was now standing on her stoop waving vigorous and the bottom of her arm acting as the counter balance. Alistair could only imagine if her casseroles would still contain live animals even after baking, but he felt they were best to be avoided. He waved out the window of his lorry as he turned to go down her lane and to the next clients he has scheduled for the remainder of the afternoon.

The day was wonderful – some people would not think of ‘Scotland’ and ‘good weather’ in the same sentence, but this month had been wonderful. Yes, the summer had been rainy and the midges awful, but September was dry with puffy white clouds framed against a deep blue sky. He couldn’t really believe what wonderful weather this season had provided. The air was clear; a touch of chill in the air, and no midges with the heather loamin’ in the hills. Glorious!

He turned down the next road to make his way up to the Sheffield’s to repair the shoe of their bay gelding. As he did, he passed the old Cameron house. There seemed to be new life there, but the house was still in such a state of disrepair. Generally it needed new paint, the garden was overrun with weeds, the adjoining out buildings were missing windows and overall the place had the appearance of sadness and uselessness. Alistair noticed some movement in the garden. He spied a tall women tugging at the weeds and it appeared the weeds were winning. *This must be the new American* he thought. *Well, good luck with that*, and he continued to drive to the Sheffield’s farm.