

Chapter One
January, 1855

Sevastopol, Russia

93rd Highlander Encampment

Conall whistled and called out before he entered Mrs. Scott's hut. He'd come here first, as soon as he'd reported in from Scutari and dumped his sack in the tent he shared with his brother Brodie. Perhaps she'd changed. He knew he had. Perhaps she'd left, although he'd asked around and been told she was here. He hoped she was. His heart was beating a rapid tattoo, anticipation firing his blood and flushing his cheeks. His hands were sweating in his gloves.

"Come on," she called out.

"Who is it?" a man asked. Conall felt a burst of unreasonable anger. Mrs. Scott did laundry and cooked for a number of the men in the 93rd, and even other Highland regiments. But this voice sounded far too proprietary for Conall's liking. Had she taken up with someone while he'd been gone, cooling his heels in the hospital at Scutari? So close and yet so far from Mrs. Scott. Had he lost his chance to be with her? For the hundredth time he cursed the Russian bullet that had laid him low at Balaclava.

He ducked into the hut, his hand on his sporran, but came up short when he saw the occupants. They were as arrested at the sight of him. It was Captain Munro with her. He had saved Conall's life at Balaclava. Mrs. Scott spoke first, her voice breaking slightly, not the practical tones he remembered so well.

"Lieutenant Fletcher," she said. "You're back." She smiled, and it was a tremulous, beautiful thing. Her thick blonde hair was escaping its black bonnet and her blue eyes looked a little bruised and weary. She was a bonnie lass to him, and always had been, but he wasn't blind. Hard work and a hard life had made her rough around the edges, perhaps a little older than she ought to be. Conall grinned back.

"Aye, I am." He shook his arm, the one that had been shot. "Hale and hearty."

"And a stone lighter," she chastised, brushing her hands off on the apron she wore over a heavy gray coat. "Didn't they feed you?"

"Fletcher," Munro said in greeting. "I didn't know you were coming today."

"I didn't either," Conall admitted. "I caught a wagon coming this way from Scutari last week. I figured I'd arrive before a letter. Hamish came with me." He looked over at Munro as he spoke. In addition to saving Conall's life at Balaclava, he'd interceded on his behalf a dozen times in the past few months, showed him through words and deeds what was expected of him here, and how to stay alive. And yet Conall felt as though the older, taller dark-haired Scot was a stranger. He'd never let Conall in, never shared his past or his laughter. He was a gruff, kind mystery who had always watched Conall with an uncomfortably intense gaze.

Munro nodded, unsmiling. He reached down and picked up his forage cap. "It's good to see you," he said, his tone flat and emotionless. "I'll take my leave, then. Good afternoon, Mrs. Scott." His behavior now made Conall think he'd imagined other things at Balaclava, like the captain's anguish at Conall's injury, and the heat between them. He was glad. The idea of what it meant had worried him while he was away.

She nodded without looking at Munro. "Good afternoon, Captain."

Conall caught Munro's arm as he passed. "Thank you again for saving my life."

Munro shrugged. "It was a happy coincidence."

"No, it wasn't," Conall said, shaking his head. "If you hadn't shoved me out of the way, that bullet would have gone through my heart and not my arm, and we both know it."

"Yes, but I wasn't shoving you out of the way of the bullet," Munro said patiently. "I was just shoving you." He tipped his hat. "Good afternoon." He stepped out of the hut and quietly closed the door.

When they were alone Mrs. Scott turned her back to Conall, bustling about. "Are you hungry, then? Fare is scarce these days. This winter is killing us faster than the Russians."

"I missed you," Conall blurted. "Thought about you. Are you getting on all right? Has someone been taking care of you?" Worry for her had kept him up at night, chafing at the bit to return to camp, to make sure she was all right. Ever since September when her husband had died at the Alma she'd struggled along, taking in wash and cooking for the pittance the soldiers could pay her. He'd been sharing his own provisions with her before he fell at Balaclava.

She froze for a moment and then spun to face him. "And is that what's been worrying you? That someone else has been taking care of me?" She seemed angry, though Conall couldn't imagine why.

"I hoped someone was," he said. It wasn't a complete lie. He wanted her warm and fed, but he didn't think he'd take the news of a lover well. "Is it Munro?"

"Is it Munro," she repeated his words with an inflection he couldn't decipher. "Well, now, I won't lie, I was hoping it would be."

Conall felt the color drain from his face. He'd wanted to be the one. Surely she knew that? "If that's what you want, then I'm sure he'll do the right thing," he forced out of a tight throat.

"No, the captain is too honorable for that," she said mockingly. "He'll plant himself in front of my hut like a thorn bush, driving every other prospect away, but he won't take advantage of a poor widow. His words, of course. I'd never call myself that." She made a face. "As though I was a charity case." She crossed her arms militantly. "And what of you?" she demanded. "Are you come on the same errand? Or are you going to finally make me your woman? You went and got yourself shot and I thought you were going to die, you bastard. And then you come back and want to know if I'm all right." She sniffed and turned away. "I'm getting on. There? Feel better?"

"Mrs. Scott," he began placatingly, not sure what to say. Did she want him or Munro? Or anyone? For the first time he wondered if she'd take him for protection even if her heart wasn't engaged. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that wasn't what he wanted.

"Avril," she said softly. "I'd like to hear someone say my name. It's been so long." She still wasn't looking at him.

Avril. He hadn't known her Christian name. It fit her. Some might say such a lyrical name was misplaced on the practical, handsome Mrs. Scott, but not Conall. There was beauty in her strength, a song of Scotland in her voice. "Avril," he said quietly.

She spun around to face him. "Conall." She said his name for the first time and it tripped off her tongue with the kind of longing he'd often dreamed of. She came to him then, first untying her bonnet and letting it fall to the small cot against the back wall of the hut.

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Avril watched Conall warring with something inside him. She didn't want to give him time to think that hard. She needed a man. Not just to protect her, but in her bed. She missed it. Missed the closeness of it, the kisses, the joy, the pleasure of it. She was a woman who enjoyed the sexual act, something her late husband had appreciated. But she knew there were men who didn't, who thought it wasn't a woman's place. Avril wanted none of that. Best to know where he stood now.

She walked briskly over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. He looked shocked, but then she sealed her lips over his and couldn't see his expression anymore. He felt as good as she'd thought he would all these long months. He'd been coming around since almost right after Tom's death, sniffing around her skirts. He was younger than she, and she felt a fool for even trying to seduce him. He was bonnie and braw with his red hair and broad shoulders, brave and kind, and the few lasses here gazed after him with the same sort of longing she felt, but she'd tried hard not to show it. She wouldn't be one of those silly girls. That wasn't what he wanted from her.

She had to go up on to her toes to kiss him properly. His beard was a soft, curly bush against her chin, warm and soothing. She'd been cold for so long, it seemed. Everything about him made her feel warm from the inside out. His arms went tight around her waist and he pressed his mouth against hers. She waited for him to deepen the kiss, but he just held her tighter. It took her a moment to realize he wasn't sure what to do with her. She almost wept with frustration. God love them both, he was the innocent here. She'd never felt her years more.

She licked his lips, sliding her tongue between them, praying he'd understand. She was a practical woman, but she wasn't sure she was up to explaining the facts of life to Conall Fletcher. To her utter relief he opened his mouth and she licked into the heat of him. He was breathing heavy, and even though she couldn't feel him through their layers of clothes she could tell he wanted her. She nearly shouted for joy. He took control of the kiss almost immediately, a fast learner it would seem. He tasted her like she was the finest wine and for once Avril felt like it, like she was worth savoring. It had been so long since she'd felt this way, like a woman and not a drudge.

It was over too soon. Conall stiffened in her arms and pushed her away. "I can't," he said, panting. He shook his head. "It isn't right."

Avril had still been pliant in his hands, but at his words she became as stiff as he. "Let go," she demanded harshly. He yanked his hands off her arms and took a step back. "How no?" she asked, dreading his answer. Had she been too forward? She didn't like the weight that settled in her stomach at the thought of showing the young lieutenant the door. She'd liked him, she had.

"Because it's as Munro said," he answered, surprising her. "I feel like I'm taking advantage of you, Avril. A woman alone, a widow, no way to protect yourself. You needn't do this to have my protection. You know that, don't you?"

She growled in frustration and scooped her bonnet up off her measly, cold cot. "Oh, yes, I know. And no good woman would want to bed you, is that it?" She growled again and shook her fist at

him. "You and the captain. Well, I've had enough of casting my pearl before swine. The two of you just go ahead and 'protect' me," she said with a sneer. "And while you're doing that, don't be minding me out there looking for a man to warm my bed."

"Avril," he said sharply, and she spun around to face him, stopping his words.

"Don't be calling me that," she snapped. "You don't get that right now. You just threw it away. It'll be Mrs. Scott to you unless you come to your senses. And if you do, you better hope it's not too late." She held open the door. "Out with you. I'll bring you something to eat and you can freeze your arse off eating it out there."

"Did you make the same offer to Munro?" Conall asked angrily, ignoring her dismissal.

She sniffed regally. "And if I did?"

Conall stalked over and took her by the arm, and even angry as he seemed, he didn't hurt her.

"Don't throw words at me," he growled, his delicious burr raising goose bumps on her skin.

"Tell me true. Did you?"

"Yes, she did." The captain ducked into her hut again. "Close the door," he ordered her. Without a thought to disobeying that tone, Avril did as she was told. Munro looked between her and Conall, a scowl on his usually unreadable face. "You're making a spectacle of yourselves," he growled. "I'm not the only one who heard what was going on in here."

Avril had a bit of trouble breathing, surrounded by the two big Highlanders. One ruddy and dark and tall, the other bright and big, and both angry. She'd never seen two men who wore the kilt and scarlet jacket so well. Conall still had a hand on her arm, and the captain grabbed the other.

"Let her go," he ordered Conall. But Conall wasn't as quick to obey as she'd been.

"No," he said clearly. "It's you who needs to be taking your hands off."

The captain couldn't have looked more shocked if the queen had walked into the hut. "What did you say, boy?"

"I'm not a boy," Conall growled. "Did you dishonor her?"

"What?" Avril ground out. "I'm just after telling you he didn't." She drove her shoulder into his chest and shoved him away, forcing him to let go of her. Then she did the same to the captain.

"Neither of you is wanting to 'dishonor' me," she said sarcastically. "I'm wishing someone would ask my opinion of it, then, aren't I?" She pushed them both toward the entrance. "Both of you, outwith. Now." When they were both out in the cold she stood there, arms akimbo, and glared at them. "And don't be coming back unless you're ready to give me what I need." With that, she stomped back into the hut and yanked the flimsy door closed behind her. "And you'll be going hungry too," she called behind her, not caring who heard.