

THE  
MACDONALD FAMILY  
TRILOGY

# Under Scottish Stars



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## CHAPTER ONE

THREE MINUTES INTO DESSERT, Serena MacDonald Stewart was checking the time on her mobile phone, concocting a quick escape. Half past eight. She'd already devoted two hours to the date that would never end. Could she pull off an emergency text message from her babysitter without tipping her hand?

"Is there a problem at home?"

Serena jerked her head up guiltily and gave an inward sigh at the disappointed expression on her date's face. "No, no problem." She returned her phone to the seat beside her and vowed to keep her mind on the man who had taken her out to this very expensive—and very long—dinner.

"It's hard leaving them behind, isn't it?" he said. "Is this your first date since—"

“Since Edward died? No, it isn’t. But it doesn’t seem to get any easier.”

The patient understanding playing across his handsome features made her feel even worse. She’d met Daniel Cameron on a committee for the school that her daughter and his youngest son attended. He’d struck her as kind and thoughtful, and she’d not had the heart to turn him down when he’d asked her out to dinner. At least he was easy to look at: dark hair, green eyes, nice build for a man she figured was pushing fifty.

But there was absolutely no spark. Nothing. She couldn’t muster one single flicker of interest.

Daniel leaned forward, lowering his voice. “I have to tell you, I haven’t dated much since my divorce either. I know you’re probably not supposed to bring up these things, but we both understand how it is.”

Maybe not, considering she had no idea where he was going with this.

“At this point, I think we’re simply trying to find someone we like and respect. You must be looking for a father for your children, especially with Max so young. Certainly, my children could use a better role model than their mother, especially considering my work keeps me so busy.”

Oh no. *Now* she knew where he was going with this. She’d heard it too many times. *“I didn’t ask you out because I thought we had something in common and find you attractive. I’m really looking for a mother for my children before it’s too late and I mess things up on my own.”*

Serena cleared her throat and made a show of glancing at her mobile again. “I really hate to cut this short, but my babysitter has to be home by half nine. Do you think we could—?”

“Oh, of course. Yes. I didn’t realize it had gotten so late.”

He signaled the server for their bill. "I don't suppose you have plans for next weekend?"

"Actually, I thought I might take Max and Em to Edinburgh. There's a Vermeer exhibit at the National Gallery."

He cracked a smile, which faded as soon as he realized she wasn't having a laugh. "You're really taking an eight-year-old and a three-year-old to an art museum?"

"Of course. You have to start these things early. Max simply needs to learn to keep his hands to himself, but Em's got a good eye for technique already. I think it would be an enriching experience. That's part of why we appreciate the art program at Highlands Academy so much."

"Certainly." Now he looked as uncomfortable as she felt.

Serena put two and two together. "You were part of the petition to cut the arts and music program in favor of more academics." Surely he knew she'd been lobbying against that very petition with the private-school board for the past month.

"I just think we're better off emphasizing math and science, especially for girls, given the current competitive business environment." He placed his credit card in the folder and handed it back to the server, seeming glad for an excuse not to look Serena in the eye.

"And I think we're doing the world a disservice by not emphasizing the development of creative thinkers. But of course, I have a master's degree in art history and worked as a gallery curator for years, so I might be a little biased."

"Oh?" His eyebrows lifted. "I'd no idea you worked."

She couldn't tell if it was simply a way to steer the topic away from his faux pas or if he was concerned about the fact she might want a career. "I gave it up before I had Em. It was somewhat . . . incompatible . . . with raising children."

Now he looked relieved. “I think that’s admirable. Too many women put their own fulfillment ahead of their family’s needs.”

She should leave it alone. She knew she should. It wasn’t as if this date were going anywhere. Yet she’d spent far too much time swallowing her opinions on the subject. She looked him directly in the eye and said, “It’s probably not as common as men who bury themselves in the office and expect their wives to take on sole parenting responsibility.”

And that was the nail in the coffin of a date already on life support. It made for an awkward drive home, though they both attempted a polite stream of chitchat. As they parted at her front door with a cordial handshake—he was smart enough not to go in for the kiss, at least—she figured it was for the best. Daniel wasn’t a bad man, even if he did have rather conservative opinions on gender roles. He was intelligent, successful, and responsible. He simply lacked the level of imagination Serena required in a mate. She’d already had a marriage that felt like one long business transaction, and she wasn’t about to jump into another.

“Did you have fun?” Allie, the teenage girl who babysat for Serena on occasion, popped up from the sofa in the reception room, a book in hand.

“It was nice, thanks.” Serena reached into her clutch and took out several banknotes, which she handed to the girl with a smile.

Allie stuffed the money into her pocket and picked up her purse. “They were super easy tonight, by the way. Let me know when you need me again.”

“Thank you, Allie. I’ll ring you.” Serena let the girl out the front door and watched until she got into her car and

turned on the ignition. This little section of Nairn near the Moray Firth was quiet, almost rural, but her mum instincts wouldn't let her rest until she knew the girl was safely on her way. When Allie backed out of the drive, Serena stepped back into her house, locked up, and kicked her patent-leather heels onto the rug.

Nice dinner or not, that had been a waste of stilettos.

Serena quietly climbed the sweeping staircase to the upper floor and peeked into the first room she came to. Max was sleeping sprawled the wrong direction on his single bed, one pajama leg shoved up above the knee, his fine dark hair wild from his restless sleeping habits. She didn't move him—getting her three-year-old son to sleep was enough of a challenge without disturbing him—but merely covered him with his duvet, tucked his giraffe, Mr. Spots, in beside him, and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Next door, eight-year-old Em was hunkered under a purple floral covering, only the top of her head visible. Serena kissed her good night as well and tucked in the duvet more securely before continuing down the hall to her own expansive bedroom.

Serena's mobile buzzed in her handbag, and she yanked it out before it could go to a full ring and wake the kids. A quick glance at the screen showed a familiar number: the home of her younger brother, Jamie.

"Checking to make sure I got home safely from my date?" she said with a wry smile.

An American-accented female voice answered, "No, but the fact that you picked up answers my next question."

Serena laughed at her sister-in-law's wry tone. "Hi, Andrea. I just got back."

"So the hot date was not so hot?"

“Barely lukewarm.” Serena shimmied out of her pencil skirt and peeled off the body shaper she’d worn to make the old garment fit, then kicked it halfway across the room. The date had been a waste of Lycra too. “He was nice, but—”

“No sparks.”

“Not even a flicker. I’m beginning to think I’m asking too much.” She yanked on her flannel pajama bottoms over her cotton knickers and grimaced at the marks the stiletto heels had made on her feet. “Maybe at my age, I should be looking for someone stable and boring.”

“Oh, please. You’re not even forty yet, so I don’t want to hear ‘at my age.’ Besides, you’re just going through what we all went through.”

Serena put her mobile on speaker so she could slide off her jacket and wrestle out of her silk blouse. “Which is?”

“Dating the boring, safe guys while you’re waiting for the one who curls your toes and sweeps you off your feet.”

“Please stop right there. I don’t need any more evidence of how you and my brother can’t keep your hands off each other.”

“I already apologized for that, and you really need to learn to knock.” Andrea laughed. “It’s not as if I came to Scotland intending to fall in love with a client, you know. Sometimes you have to go outside your comfort zone.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. What time are we supposed to be at your house tomorrow for supper?”

“That’s why I was calling. Can we push it to seven? Jamie got delayed in London and missed his flight home, so he won’t be back until tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’s fine. I thought I would take Em and Max to that new bakery that just opened in Old Town.”

“Thank you. I offered to do Jamie’s shopping to save him time, but for some reason he didn’t take me up on the offer.”

Now it was Serena’s turn to laugh. Her brother the chef had managed to marry a woman who couldn’t even boil water without ruining it, although Serena thought Andrea might be playing up the helpless routine to benefit from Jamie’s amazing cooking. Then again, she’d once suffered through a lunch that her sister-in-law had prepared, so maybe not.

“Seven o’clock. We’ll be there. Em is anxious to show you how much progress she’s made on ‘Für Elise.’”

“I can’t wait. Tell her to practice hard, because as soon as she finishes this one, I have something really fun for her to try.”

“I will. See you tomorrow.” Serena ended the call and set her phone on the charger on the nightstand by her bed. What Andrea lacked in cooking ability, she made up for in musical talent, considering she had once been a concert pianist and now gave lessons to Em every Sunday before supper. And that was just something she did for fun while she ran her own hospitality consulting firm. By comparison, Serena filled her days with volunteering and teaching art at Em’s school—the very program her date tonight was trying to eliminate.

How could Daniel have even asked her out, knowing that he was essentially lobbying against the one thing Serena really loved?

He didn’t know, she realized. Because to men like him, art was something you dabbled in, not something you were passionate about or made a living from. Not something that had any real, tangible value. Serena removed her makeup and tied her hair up into a ponytail before heading downstairs to the kitchen to make some tea. She paused in the reception

room to admire the collection of contemporary art on the white plaster walls. Unlike the rest of the modern interior, which had been selected by Edward's designer, these pieces held special meaning. She'd discovered and cultivated each of the artists, some of whom had gone on to be internationally recognized. The pride never failed to come with a pang of regret, a reminder that part of her life was long past. The regret deepened a degree when she moved down the hallway to a partially open door.

The space remained exactly as she'd left it: a blank canvas set up on an easel, plastic bins corralling paints and brushes on the small table next to it. She reached for the light, and her hand made a trail through the dust on the finger plate. Maybe she should turn this back into a storage room, as it had been when she and Edward moved in. She'd not used it for much else in the past several years. She clicked the light off and shut the door firmly.

Daniel and his ilk were going to win the argument, she knew, not because they were right but because she lacked the energy to convince the school otherwise. And she really couldn't blame them. How could she convince them of the value of art when she could barely convince herself?



Meals at Jamie and Andrea's house were always an event, partly because Andrea had a knack for making the simplest things elegant, but mostly because Jamie's idea of a low-key dinner was a mere four courses. It also might have had something to do with the restrained opulence of their renovated Victorian home, just a handful of miles from Serena's house. Right now, they were sampling Jamie's new spring recipes

in the expansive all-white kitchen surrounded by gleaming stainless steel and Carrara marble.

"The lamb is good, but it just doesn't feel special enough," Serena said when she set down her fork and knife at last. "Maybe it's because beans don't say haute cuisine to me."

"She's right," Andrea said, "from one lima-bean hater to another."

"That's why we call them butter beans," Jamie said, but he seemed resigned to the pronouncement. "What about the sea bass?"

"Incredible," Serena said at the same time Andrea said, "Amazing."

"Sea bass it is," Jamie said. "I prefer it myself."

Serena nodded and sipped her wine—a good dry Riesling that Jamie had brought up from the cellar. Yes, they had a wine cellar. It still amazed her that the grand house managed to feel comfortable and inviting, something she attributed to her brother and his wife's impeccable sense of style.

"Can I go play the piano again?" Em asked, folding her napkin beside her plate.

"It's okay with me if it's okay with Andrea," Serena said.

"Be my guest, Em," Andrea said. "You can work on your new section."

"Can I go too?" Max piped up.

Serena smiled at her son. "Yes, you can go too."

The children half tumbled, half scurried to the parlor, where Andrea's baby grand lived, leaving the three adults sitting at the round glass table. It wasn't exactly like old times, but it was nice to finally have family nearby, good to have a regular routine. When she and Edward had moved from Edinburgh to Inverness for his work, the tiny city had felt

impossibly lonely. The addition of her brother and his wife seemed, after eight years, to make it home.

"So, I've been meaning to talk to you about something," Jamie said.

Serena took another sip of wine with a smile. "Uh-oh. Sounds ominous."

"Not ominous. I wanted to see how you would feel about getting involved with the hotel on Skye again."

"Involved how, exactly? The renovations are complete and the new manager is in place."

"They are and he is. I'm asking if you would consider buying your way back in." Jamie reached for the wine bottle and refilled her glass. "Let's face it. Ian and Grace are hardly in country anymore with their new jobs. Andrea has a business to run, and I've still not found anyone to take over the chef de cuisine position at Notting Hill since Jeremy left. We're barely at our own homes, let alone the hotel."

"Why now? You and Ian have gotten over your differences. You don't need me to play referee anymore." Then Serena noticed Jamie's and Andrea's clasped hands beneath the table. "You're pregnant! That's why you want me to step in!"

Andrea's smile faltered, and she looked to Jamie. Serena's heart sank. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"No, it's okay." Andrea took a deep breath. "We've only been trying about seven months, but the doctors all agree it's a long shot. There's just too much wrong for me to carry a baby."

Serena's stomach twisted with guilt. She'd just assumed they'd eventually start a family, but neither Jamie nor Andrea had mentioned that there might be barriers to that goal. She fumbled for a way out of her faux pas, but before she could

speak, Jamie stepped in. "Which is why we're starting the process to adopt."

Serena blinked for a moment, and then a smile broke over her face. "I'm so happy for you! You'll make fantastic parents. I had no idea you were considering adoption."

"Blame Ian," Andrea said, her smile returning. "He and Grace are always talking about the children in India who need homes, and we realized that there are plenty of children in Scotland who need families as well. But we know it won't be easy, and we want to have as much time to devote to him or her as we can."

"Right. How are you going to work that?" Serena asked, looking to Jamie.

"Andrea's hired two new account managers so she can stop traveling and run her business from here. I'm going back to London next week to start interviews, but it could be a long process. I have my eye on someone, but I'm not sure I can entice him away from his current position."

"You mean you're trying to poach from the top," Serena guessed with a laugh. There were only a few restaurateurs in London with higher profiles than Jamie.

He flashed a quick grin that said she was right. "The point is, we don't feel that we can commit to being as involved in the hotel as we should be. Malcolm is doing a great job managing the hotel, but he's not an owner. We need to keep our offerings fresh, continue to bring in guests. After what you did with the gallery, this should be a simple thing."

"That was ten years ago, Jamie—"

"Skills don't expire."

"—and I have two children, one of whom is in school. I can't just pick up at a moment's notice like you can."

The tinkle of piano music from the other room stopped, followed by a crash and a wail. Serena put aside her napkin, but Andrea shook her head and rose instead. "Let me. It couldn't have been anything important. There's nothing truly breakable in the parlor."

She strode out of the room, leaving Serena sitting with her brother. "You two seem happy."

"We are." He smiled at her. "Don't change the subject."

"I don't know, Jamie. I need to think about it."

"If it's the money, we can—"

"It's not the money. I invested the proceeds of the sale. I can liquidate them if I have to. It's more the commitment."

"I never thought you'd be reluctant to visit Skye."

"It has nothing to do with that." Serena folded her hands on the table and lowered her voice. "I've tried to keep Em and Max's lives as stable as possible since Edward died. And now everything seems to be going smoothly. I'm not so sure I want to disrupt this."

"What's there to disrupt? You can work on the marketing ideas at home. Then you go out there one weekend a month, talk to Malcolm, check on Aunt Muriel. It's a mini holiday every few weeks."

What Jamie said sounded logical, but he'd never had to make the three-hour drive with two children. It might sound simple now, but after a few months, she could guarantee it would begin to wear on all of them. "I don't know. I'll have to think on it."

"Good. Think on it." Jamie's face brightened, and without even turning, Serena knew that Andrea had returned with the kids. He seemed to light up whenever his wife was in the room. Truly, they were so in love, it would have been

nauseating if she didn't wish them so well. Max ran straight to Serena and climbed into her lap with his three-year-old enthusiasm. Em, on the other hand, quietly slipped into the chair beside her.

"Your 'Für Elise' is coming along nicely, Em," Jamie said. "When is your mean piano teacher going to let you move on to something else?"

"Stop." Andrea stuck out her tongue at her husband and gave him a nudge with her shoulder. "She'll move on when she's mastered it. And she's very close from what I just heard."

Serena looked between them and felt an answering pang in her own chest. The way they were working together so intently to give their future child what he or she needed only highlighted how suited for each other they were. She couldn't help feeling a twinge of resentment over her own situation—not that Edward had died and left her, but that she'd never had the opportunity to experience that kind of companionship in her ten-year marriage. But she'd gotten Em and Max out of it, and that far overshadowed anything she'd lacked personally.

"Dessert?" Jamie shoved away from the table. "I want your honest opinion of these."

Half an hour later, her honest opinion was that Jamie needed to hire the baker as his pastry chef. There was dense, moist almond cake; a chocolate-chili soufflé; and deep-fried zeppole filled with a light pastry cream. All were fantastic. Even Em, who hadn't been born with a sweet tooth, devoured everything set in front of her.

When they finally slipped on their coats to leave, Serena thought she might need to be rolled out the front entrance.

"Think about it," Jamie murmured when he hugged her. "Let me know."

"I will." Serena turned to Andrea and squeezed her tight. "Keep me posted on the adoption news. I'm so excited for you."

Serena stepped out onto the front stoop, holding tight to Max's hand as they descended the stairs to where she had parked on the drive. Her breath puffed out in front of her, hanging in the cold March air. The calendar might be clawing its way toward spring, but winter clung tenaciously to the Scottish Highlands. Even now, snow from a recent storm dotted the shady places beneath the hedges that marked off the formal gardens. Serena bundled her children into her dusty red Vauxhall and buckled Max into his car seat.

"What was that about, Mum?" Em asked as they pulled back onto the street and headed for their own home a few miles away.

"Nothing. Just some business matters."

"Are we going to Skye?"

Serena caught her daughter's eye in the rearview mirror. Exactly how much had Em heard? "For a visit maybe. But you have school and music lessons, and I have my art classes. We can't go for too long."

Em slumped back in her seat, disappointment evident in her young face.

Serena turned down the long drive to their home, the bright glow through its picture windows the only spot of light in the dark surroundings. Without the summer foliage in the front garden, the newer home's angled rooflines, white plaster, and Tudor detailing looked even starker than usual. She parked in the drive and twisted around to give instructions to her kids. But Max was already asleep, clutching his battered orange giraffe in one chubby hand.

"Get your rucksack and then go straight up to the bath," she whispered to Em. "I'll get your brother."

Em obeyed, grabbing the sparkly pink bag off the rear seat. Serena got Max out of the car seat and juggled her handbag as she fished her keys from her pocket. As soon as she pushed open the solid-oak entry door, she carried her son to his room, pulling off his tiny trainers as she went. She put him in bed fully clothed and pulled the duvet up over him. With any luck, he'd be so tired from the late supper and playing at Jamie's house that he would sleep all the way through the night.

*Fat chance*, Serena thought. He'd barely slept through an entire night since he was born, which meant that Serena had gotten good at pretending she wasn't sleep deprived and passing off her forgetfulness as busyness.

"Mum?" Em called. "Are you going to tuck me in?"

Serena slipped from Max's room and shut the door, then padded into the room next door, where Em was pulling on her pink pajamas. "That was the fastest bath in the history of baths."

"You didn't say to take a bath," Em said with a shrug, climbing beneath the covers. "You just said to go to the bath."

Serena chuckled and perched on the edge of the bed. "You know how much I love you, don't you?"

"More than chocolate?"

Serena pretended to think for a moment. "That's a hard one, but yes, more than chocolate. Now why don't you say your bedtime prayers?"

Listening to Em thank God for her blessings as she did every night—her family, her toys, their pretty house—Serena couldn't help the pang of disquiet that crept into her. She

pushed it deep down while she pressed a kiss to her daughter's forehead, then turned on Em's desk lamp in the corner before turning off the overhead light. Still, the restlessness dogged her all the way down the hall to her stark, massive bedroom.

She sat on the edge of the bed, staring at her plush surroundings as though they were foreign. In some ways, they were. Edward had chosen this sprawling home, with its extensive grounds and water view, just as he'd hired the decorator to redo the interior in his particular contemporary taste. Had she been given a choice, she never would have chosen the sharp lines and bright-white walls that dominated the home, especially when her style leaned toward cozy wood and fluffy duvets that invited you to curl up in bed with a cup of tea. After her husband's death, Serena had considered moving into Inverness's charming city center, which was more in line with her own tastes, but by then they were firmly established in their suburban routine. There was no reason to inject any more uncertainty into their lives.

Even so, she couldn't deny that what Jamie had suggested intrigued her. She'd grown up on Skye, unlike her brothers, who had gone to boarding school, and she'd spent nearly as much time at the hotel as she had at her own house. If she were honest, she also missed working. She'd loved her job managing a gallery in Edinburgh before she met Edward. Loved finding talented artists. Loved marketing and promoting their work. Maybe the hotel wasn't the same thing, but it would be a challenge to both her mind and her creativity, something that had been sorely lacking in the past decade.

But what Jamie suggested required more than occasional visits, whatever he might say now. She would need to be there

weekly, if not full-time. What would all that back-and-forth do to the kids? They'd already been through so much change in the past three years. Didn't she owe it to them to keep their lives as stable as possible?

No. No matter how much Daniel's assumptions had rankled last night, her most important job was to be a mother to her two children. They needed her even more now that she had to be both mum and dad. Just because the career change hadn't been entirely of her own choosing didn't mean she wasn't going to devote herself completely to the domestic life.

She managed to bury all thoughts of the hotel and art for the rest of the evening, but not long after she got home from dropping Em off at school the next morning, her mobile rang, flashing the school's phone number on the screen. Her heart seized for what felt like a full minute. She answered cautiously.

"Mrs. Stewart, this is Ada Douglass in the Highlands Academy office. Dr. Clark has asked if you would be able to come speak with him this morning."

"Is something wrong? Is Em all right?"

"Emmy is fine, Mrs. Stewart. May I tell Dr. Clark you're coming?"

"I'll be right there." Serena clicked off, her heart jump-starting to a hammer this time. It was the call she'd been dreading—the one that signaled the end of the art program and her employment at Highlands Academy—but that didn't make it any less painful. "Come, Maxie love. We need to go back to school. You can eat your biscuit in the car."

Max didn't protest when she hoisted him on her hip and carried him to the car, too focused on the biscuit's chocolate coating melting over his fist. The entire drive to school, she

rehearsed her speech about why the school was making a colossal mistake by cutting their art and music programs, and how the arts were as crucial to the development of young minds as math and science. But deep down she knew it wouldn't do any good. This summons meant it was already too late.

Serena parked in front of the converted Victorian mansion that housed Highlands Academy and stared at the brownstone edifice for a long moment. Between teaching art, volunteering, and serving on several committees, she spent a good chunk of her life here. It was hard to accept that it was coming to an end.

"Mummy, my hands are sticky."

She twisted in her seat to see Max holding out his chocolate-covered palms, just before he gave one of them a lick. "Hold up, monkey." She rummaged in her handbag for some hand wipes and reached back to clean away the last traces of his snack. "Are you ready to go now? Can you be a good lad while Mummy has her meeting?"

Max grinned, an expression that meant either agreement or that he was hatching a plan decidedly incompatible with being a good lad. She chuckled. Her son possessed equal measures of mischief and charm, which made it difficult to discipline him as she ought.

Serena marched Max up the front steps, holding one of his hands while clutching the strap of her shoulder bag with the other. She proceeded straight to the wood-paneled office on the right, what would have been the house's parlor.

Ada Douglass, the school secretary, sat at a massive wood desk, the phone pressed to her ear. She held up a finger, but Serena thought she saw something akin to sympathy light in

her eyes. When she put down the phone, she said, "Thank you for coming so promptly. You can go on through. Dr. Clark is waiting for you in his office."

"No need. I'm here." Dr. Eliot Clark smiled at Serena as he crossed the room, his hand outstretched. "I hope you haven't been waiting long. Please, let's speak in my office."

Sixtysomething with a full head of neatly combed white hair, the school's headmaster possessed a stern air that always made Serena nervous, even when he was being welcoming. She led Max into the small room with its glass-paned door and took a seat in the wingback chair before another massive mahogany desk. Her son immediately climbed onto her lap and began playing with his stuffed giraffe.

"Mrs. Stewart, I know you're familiar with the problems that Emmy has been having at school."

Serena blinked. They were here to talk about Em's behavior, not about Serena's teaching position? "I know there was an altercation with another girl earlier this year, but I was led to believe that it was resolved."

"So was I." Dr. Clark sighed and folded his hands. "We've been patient with Emmy because of all she's been through. It's not easy losing a parent, but I'm afraid we can't overlook physical violence."

"Violence? Em? I don't believe it."

"There were several witnesses, Mrs. Stewart, including her teacher. Emmy clearly struck another student and yanked her hair."

Serena just stared. That didn't sound like Em, the least violent child she'd ever met. Bookish, quiet, endured her younger brother's annoyances with admirable patience. "Who started it?"

Dr. Clark shifted uncomfortably.

"Right," Serena said. "Em claims that the other girl did, but you don't believe it."

"I'm afraid neither of them has been forthcoming about the situation. But regardless, this is an offense that would normally lead to expulsion."

*Expulsion.* Her eight-year-old daughter kicked out of school for fighting. Serena felt as if the chair had collapsed beneath her. She held more tightly to Max, who was squirming on her lap, and focused on the single word she had initially overlooked. "Normally?"

Another sigh, this one with a resigned smile. "Typically we would take disciplinary action. But we are not without sympathy for your situation. Out of respect for you and your late husband, we think it would be better that you have the opportunity to withdraw your daughter from Highlands Academy."

"And do what? Put her in another school for the last four months of the year?"

"Frankly, Mrs. Stewart, that's your concern now. But she will not be admitted back for the new term."

Serena swallowed hard. When they said out of respect for her husband, they meant out of respect for the massive donations that Edward and his company had made to the school. Sunspring Energy was the reason Highlands Academy even existed: it had been formed expressly for the families of executives who didn't want to send their children to Edinburgh or Glasgow for a proper prep-school education. She supposed she should be grateful for the consideration, but right now she merely felt numb.

"I'm very sorry there isn't more I can do. Emmy is a

delightful child, but we simply can't be seen to allow this kind of behavior. I'm sure you understand."

"What I understand is that neither girl is owning up to what happened, and yet you've singled my daughter out for punishment." Serena rose, hoisting Max with her. "Send Em down and we'll be going."

"There's some paperwork that needs to be—"

"I'll post it back to you."

Dr. Clark cleared his throat. "Then there's the issue of your classes."

Serena fixed him with a hard look, and whatever he saw there made him drop the subject. Whether he was going to fire her or say he expected her to stay on, she wouldn't be setting foot in this school again. She hiked her handbag over her shoulder and gave him a sharp nod. "Good-bye, Dr. Clark."

She carried Max from the office into the high-ceilinged foyer, assuming that the staff was hurrying Em down. When her daughter finally did arrive, dressed in her tartan pinafore and navy-blue cardigan, she wore a hangdog look that said she was expecting a tirade. "Mum, I'm sorry. I didn't—"

Serena put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. "We'll talk about it later."

Em let out a long breath. "What happens now?"

They broke out the front doors, where the sun was struggling to cut through the gray clouds. Serena inhaled the frigid air, and all her excuses to Jamie, all the reasons she'd given for staying in Nairn, fell away.

"I think," Serena said slowly, "we're going to Skye."



## CHAPTER TWO

A MONTH LATER SERENA STOOD on the shore of the Sound of Sleat beneath a steel-gray sky, the wind pulling tendrils from her plait and working its way beneath the hem of her field jacket. Somehow when she'd made the dramatic pronouncement on the steps of Highlands Academy, she'd thought their departure would happen more quickly. But the massive sheaf of paperwork involved in liquidating her investments and repurchasing her share of the hotel paled in comparison to the effort of extracting Em from school and enrolling her on Skye for the summer term, not to mention pausing activities and gym memberships and all the trappings of a life that she'd taken for granted in Nairn.

Now she watched the gentle lap of waves on the shore and breathed in the cold salt air, feeling the first measure of peace in weeks settle over her. The children were still up the road at Aunt Muriel's, sleeping off their late arrival and giving Serena a few unaccustomed moments alone. She'd been back to Skye frequently in the past few years, but this felt different—like a homecoming. Even with the changes to the hotel, the landscape was as familiar as her own features: the swaying grasses and scrubby brush from which the whitewashed buildings of Isleornsay's village sprang; the slim white lighthouse in the sound; the mysterious cover of fog that hovered over the water and reflected abstract patterns onto its dark, glassy surface. She inhaled the smell of the sea and damp foliage for a moment longer, then turned away from the water.

She cut through a field that was just beginning to show the first bits of green, its usual wildflowers delayed by the unseasonably cold weather; then she circled around the front entrance of the MacDonald Guest House. Even with the addition that had expanded and modernized the function of the hotel, it retained the old-fashioned charm inherent in the original whitewashed stone and mullioned windows. Andrea and Jamie had done a wonderful job transforming it from a modest regional guesthouse into an international holiday destination.

Serena stepped inside the hotel, where already the smell of food and the clatter from the kitchen spoke of breakfast being prepared, and the low hum of voices from the dining room to her left told her at least a few guests had found their way downstairs this early. The reception desk sat empty. From the looks of the car park, the hotel was full, and guests

often checked out early in order to make afternoon flights from Inverness. Didn't they have a receptionist? Where was the hotel manager Jamie had hired?

While she was standing baffled in the foyer, a young couple appeared, dressed too warmly for a day of sightseeing, even considering the chilly temperatures outside. They brightened when they saw Serena.

"Do you work here?" the woman asked. "We've just arrived, and we don't want to miss anything."

Her pronounced Spanish accent explained the puffy down coats. Guests from southern Europe always regarded Scotland as one step below the Arctic Circle.

"I'd be happy to make some suggestions," Serena rounded the desk and found a paper tourist map of the island in one of the drawers. She highlighted a driving route in bright-yellow marker. "Since you're already equipped for the cold, you must do a little stargazing. We have more Dark Sky sites than anywhere else in Europe."

The couple exchanged looks, clearly intrigued by the idea.

"Why don't I print out another map and some star charts for you and leave them here at the desk? You can pick them up when you get back."

"*Gracias*," the man said. "Thank you for your help."

"Of course. I hope you enjoy your holiday on Skye." As soon as the couple left, Serena did as she'd promised, looking up several star charts and printing them out. Then she took out a fresh copy of the map and highlighted the locations of the nearest Dark Sky Discovery Sites. This hadn't exactly been her intention in coming to the hotel, but at least she could do something useful while she was here.

The dull thump of feet on the stairs made her turn to the

wooden staircase, where a couple, dressed for a day of hiking, carried down their trolley cases.

“Checking out?” Serena asked politely.

The young woman flipped her ginger ponytail. “We are. We’re hiking the Quiraing today before we head back to Manchester.”

“Ah, you picked a good day for it. We’ve a lot of fog today, but there’s rain forecast the rest of the week.”

The man fished his room key from his pocket and handed it to Serena. She hesitated, momentarily at a loss. Clearly she couldn’t just take the key and send them on their way, but she had no idea whether or not they’d been given a bill when they checked in or if it had been slipped under the door. She sat down at the padded chair in front of the computer and quickly keyed in Muriel’s password, blessing her aunt for suggesting she take it with her. The number on the door key helped her pull up the reservation, and she quickly printed the receipt for the account, which appeared to be paid in full. She handed the paper across the desk to them with a smile. “Thank you for staying with us. We hope to see you again.”

“Cheers,” the girl said brightly, and then they were out the front door into the gravel lot.

Serena turned back to the booking system and frowned. She could have sworn she had just checked them out of the room, but it still showed it occupied. Had she missed a step? She pressed a key, and the computer beeped obnoxiously at her. She tried again and earned another beep for her efforts.

“What are you doing?”

Serena swiveled in the chair, awash in guilt before she could remind herself that she had nothing to feel guilty about.

“I was just . . .”

The rest of her sentence faded as she took in the man standing behind her, his arms crossed over his chest. He was taller than she—though who wasn't?—with the broad, muscular build of a rugby player and the scowl to match. Sandy blond hair, dark eyes, a couple of days' growth on his face that suggested he couldn't be bothered to shave, rather than a legitimate attempt at a beard. A tickle of memory at the back of her suddenly sluggish mind told her this must be the new manager, even if his jeans and battered leather jacket read more nightclub bouncer than sophisticated hotel supervisor.

Serena swallowed hard and dragged her eyes from the way his T-shirt stretched over his chest, cursing the flutter of attraction that started low in her stomach. Instead, she rose and stuck out her hand. "Malcolm Blake, I presume. I'm Serena Stewart."

He made no move to shake her hand. "I know who you are. We met last summer. What are you doing here?"

"At the moment, manning the front desk, which was conspicuously empty when our guests wanted to check out."

"*Our* guests?"

"Yes, *our* guests."

He stared at her, unblinking, and a little chill ran down her spine, not altogether unpleasant. "And why is that?"

"As of this week, I am once more part owner of the MacDonald Guest House."

"I don't understand."

"Jamie sold me back my share."

"Why?"

His hard tone finally loosened the logjam in her brain, and she drew herself up straighter. "I'm not sure that's any of your business."

He wiped a hand over his face. "What I mean is, James and Ian have been perfectly content to check in with me via phone and e-mail, and up until this point, they seemed satisfied with the way I run the hotel. Why, now, are you here, Mrs. Stewart?"

Somehow, on his lips, the title seemed dismissive, as if the fact she was a married—or formerly married—woman with children meant she had no business overseeing the health of her investment. "I imagine you know, Mr. Blake. I would appreciate if you could find some time in your busy schedule to take me through the inner workings of the hotel." She held up a hand. "Just so I understand everything that's being done here."

He gave her a bare, closemouthed smile. "Of course. I'd be delighted. Perhaps the first lesson should be on the proper way of using the booking system?" He nodded toward the computer. "Since you seem to be about to change one of my custom scripts?"

She turned her head back to the error message, behind which was a window filled with unreadable code. A slow flush heated her cheeks. She could hardly be angry with his tone when she had indeed been about to do that. Somehow. "Yes. I think perhaps that would be a good idea."

He gave her a suspicious look, obviously not buying her cooperative attitude, then leaned past her to the computer. The scent of a clean, outdoorsy cologne wafted around her, mixing with the scent of leather. Another unaccustomed pulse of heat slugged her in the stomach, choking the breath in her lungs. She leaned away from him while he closed the windows with a few keystrokes.

"May I?" he asked.

She practically leaped out of the chair. "Of course."

He barely looked at her as he plopped into the seat, his fingers flying over the keyboard with surprising accuracy. "Let's start with your own user account. Is 'sstewart' okay with you?"

"Fine," she murmured.

A few more clicks and keystrokes, and he stood again, gesturing back to the chair. "There you go. You're logged in."

"My password?"

"*Safezone*, lowercase, all one word."

"Oh?"

A slight smile tipped up the corner of his mouth. No, not a smile. A smirk. "I gave you the safest level of user privileges. There's no way you can delete anything important. As the new owner, I'm sure you realize how disruptive it would be if I had to take time out from my other duties to fix the booking module again."

He was laughing at her, and it made her want to smack that look off his handsome face. No matter what she might think of his manners, he was good-looking. "Yes, quite disruptive. And since you're so busy, I'm sure you won't mind an extra pair of hands around the hotel. You can show me every last detail of what it is you do here all day."

His smile faded. "Whatever you want, Mrs. Stewart, I'm happy to comply."

"Yes," she said, enjoying for a single moment the shift of power in her favor. "I'm sure you are."



Malcolm Blake knew when he was stuck, and by the satisfied little smile on Serena Stewart's face, he figured he'd have a

better chance of prying a bear trap from his leg than shaking his new boss off his tail. Rotten timing too. The guesthouse was packed, and he hadn't even begun to address the two dozen issues that had met him the minute he walked in the door. No, the quickest way to get rid of her was to indulge her sudden urge to play innkeeper until she got bored and moved on to something else. With any luck, he could impress her with his work ethic and send her on her way by lunch. No matter what she might think of him, he took pride in his work. He wasn't going to let some snap judgment from the new owner negate everything he'd accomplished since he'd been hired.

"You might want to change first," he said finally.

"What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?"

*Absolutely nothing*, he wanted to say, but he wouldn't be able to keep the note of appreciation from his voice. Not to mention the fact it summoned his attention back to the very things he'd been trying to ignore. A man would have to be blind—or dead—not to notice how the fuzzy lavender sweater accentuated her lush curves or how the tight dark jeans hugged slim legs down to where they disappeared into the tops of her brown riding boots. He jerked his eyes back to her face, but that didn't help much, considering his enduring weakness for the contrast of pale skin and dark hair. Especially when it was paired with blue eyes the exact color of the sound outside.

He blew out his breath and hoped it could be passed off as irritation. Serena Stewart didn't seem the type to endure being ogled by the help, even if he could have sworn she'd been staring at his pecs. "Suit yourself. I've got to bring in a few cases of liquor to the bar later, and I'd hate for your nice clothes to get damaged." Especially considering those riding boots probably cost more than his car.

She frowned at him. "I'm fine. I'm not wearing an evening gown. But why exactly aren't the deliverymen doing this for you?"

"This is Skye, love. I am the deliveryman. I swung by the distillery this morning to pick up our order."

"Then I'm glad to help." She put on a sweet smile, beneath which he figured she was cursing his parentage and his very existence on the planet.

"I need to do a couple of things first. Think you can keep yourself occupied in the meantime?"

"I'll just shadow you. You can show me the ropes."

Make sure he met her standards, more like. But he only nodded and kept his sharp comments to himself. Irritating or not, this woman held his livelihood in her hands. And as much as he hated to admit it, this was the only decent-paying job he'd found since moving back to Skye. He couldn't afford to lose it. Pride, as important as it was to him, wasn't enough to pay the bills.

In the next hour he checked out four guests—without managing to erase anything vitally important—then started the task of cleaning the two rooms that would be occupied later that night. They did have housekeepers, one who worked weekdays and the other who worked weekends, but the weekday maid had called in sick just before he came to reception that morning. He grinned as he thrust a pile of dirty linens into Serena's arms, expecting her to suddenly remember an urgent appointment elsewhere. Instead, she helped gamely, not a single complaint escaping her lips, even when he directed her to scrub the sink and toilet. She might be a princess, but she was a stubborn princess.

Once the rooms were turned over, he led her out to the

car park, where his black Ford hatchback waited, the paint splashed with mud from the recent rains. He usually only stocked the bar on Sundays when it was closed, but last night's unexpected turnout to their live-music event had left them low on local spirits. No point in waiting on the delivery-men he'd pretended they didn't have when the distillery was just a few minutes' drive up the island.

"Grab a box," he said, "if it's not too heavy for you."

Serena shot him a challenging look and hefted a case of a dozen bottles from the boot, if not easily, then with far less effort than he would have expected from her. He picked up one as well and preceded her inside, nodding toward the polished bar. She was so short that she couldn't lift the box high enough to get it over the edge. She set it on one of the barstools. He fought a smile.

"Why are you laughing? You're not the only one who works out."

His grin broke free. She'd been checking him out all right. His snobbish princess of a new boss had been noticing him as much as he'd noticed her. Even if she didn't remember him.

*That's the real issue, isn't it? She made an impression on you when you last met, but you're too far beneath her for her to remember your face.* If he were smart, he'd abandon all the ridiculous thoughts that had plagued him since she walked through the door. But he wasn't that smart or that disciplined, which meant his best bet was to stick to the original plan and send her on her way as quickly as possible, out of the realm of temptation.

As soon as they had carried all the boxes in from his car, she leaned against the mahogany bar top. "Would you show me the storeroom and your inventory methods now?"

He nodded, even though he had to clamp his teeth down on a smart response before he did. By the time he was finished, he'd also shown Serena the point-of-sale system and cash drawer, the menu, and pretty much every minute detail she could think to ask about.

With each new question, his ability to keep his cool faltered. She might be fit, but she was most definitely a micromanager.

"You know, James and Ian seemed perfectly content to let me run the place," he said finally. "Why don't you just come out and say what concerns you?"

"Nothing concerns me. But if you've not noticed, James and Ian are rarely here, which is exactly why I bought back my share. It's a pretty poor business strategy to back away and let someone else make all the decisions."

"The help, you mean."

"Someone without a vested interest in the success of the venture." She drew herself up as if she could add inches to her tiny frame out of sheer will.

"You don't think I have a vested interest? If I don't do well, I don't get paid. I imagine that makes me more invested than you."

"Considering this property has been in my family for generations, I very much doubt that."

He flinched. Of course she was going to pull rank. She was an owner; he was just the hired help. And if he were smart, he would surgically remove his foot from his mouth and apologize. But the *I'm sorry* froze on his lips. He wasn't sorry at all. Instead, he cleared his throat. "What's the verdict then?"

She lifted her chin, and for the first time she looked uncomfortable. "I think you're doing a fine job."

“What?”

“You have everything under control. Your inventory methods are probably more stringent than necessary considering the size of the bar, but I appreciate the precautions you’ve made in locking down the stock. You clearly have a better grasp of the computer system than I do—” a faint self-deprecating smile surfaced on her lips—“and judging from the reviews of the hotel online, guests are perfectly satisfied with the service.”

“Then why all the questions, if not because you thought I wasn’t doing my job?”

“Because you’re only one man, and from what I can tell, the hotel is understaffed. If I’m to properly assess personnel needs, I need to know every detail of the hotel operations. Unless, of course, you enjoy changing bed linens and scrubbing bathrooms?”

The hint of humor in her tone and the subtle lift of her eyebrows began to thaw his attitude toward her until he realized she’d played on his fear of being sacked to put him through the wringer today. He kept his own expression impassive. “I will defer to your judgment on that matter.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I’ll get out of your way and let you finish your work then. I wouldn’t want to be the one interfering with your ability to do your job.”

“It was a pleasure, Mrs. Stewart.”

“I highly doubt that, Mr. Blake.”

Malcolm bit back his automatic response and gave her the most courteous nod he could summon. She flipped her ponytail over her shoulder and strode from the bar without a backward glance. He rubbed both hands through his hair with a groan.

He'd made a complete mess of that. He might be good with guests, but he was rubbish with authority. And like it or not, the new owner, Serena Stewart, had made it abundantly clear that she was in charge.



### CHAPTER THREE

SERENA DROVE BACK to her aunt's house, a cold kernel of disquiet forming in the pit of her stomach. That hadn't gone at all as she'd hoped. She'd thought coming back to Skye to oversee the continued growth of the MacDonald Guest House would be a way to utilize her long-buried business skills, as well as a pleasant diversion from days that would otherwise be spent with household chores.

And yet she'd barely set foot in the hotel before Malcolm Blake had taken a dislike to her, greeting her with distrust if not outright hostility. What had she done to earn such a harsh reception?

The familiar sick feeling of worry washed over her as she began to catalog their interactions before she cut it off. No, this was not her fault. She had made a mistake with the

booking system, but she'd done nothing to incite the level of ire he'd shown. The problem wasn't her; it was him.

And that problem was a big one. His surliness immediately put her back into a frame of mind she'd worked hard to break out of. Not to mention the little fact of her physical reaction to him. Even remembering how he'd inadvertently pressed up against her sent another shiver of anticipation through her.

Malcolm Blake might despise her, but she'd noticed him looking her over with far more interest than was proper to show toward one's boss. And she'd brought it on herself, simply because of her involuntary response to the scent of masculine cologne mixed with leather.

*Nice one, Serena. The fact that he's good-looking and smells amazing doesn't mitigate the fact that he's a miserable git.*

She pulled up in front of her aunt's house, a simple clapboard structure painted in soothing tones of white and gray, and slammed the gear lever into first before she turned off the car. The front door opened, and Max raced out at full tilt. She jumped from the car and caught him just as he sprang at her, then hoisted him onto her hip. He wrapped his arms and legs around her and smacked a wet kiss on her cheek. "Hi, Mummy."

"Hi, monkey! Did you have a good day with Auntie?"

"Mmm-hmm. We had shape sandwiches."

She shifted her son as she retrieved her handbag from the car, then nudged the door shut with her leg. Max was only three, but he was getting heavy. Adjusting her grip again, she trudged up the macadam walkway to the front door. "Shape sandwiches, huh? With cookie cutters?"

"Yes. I had a dinosaur. Em did hearts."

"Very nice. Auntie is a fun babysitter, isn't she?"

"Mmm-hmm. She gave us caramels too."

Serena chuckled and planted a kiss on top of his messy hair before she let him down on the front stoop. When she pushed the door open, the delicious smell of roasting meat drifted from the kitchen. She inhaled deeply. No matter how infrequently they came back to Serena's childhood residence, it always felt like home: the floral upholstery, the antique lace curtains, the scent of cooking food. It was as though time never passed in Muriel's presence.

"Mum, you're back!" Em looked from her spot on the sofa, where she was curled up with a thick book. "How's the hotel?"

"Fine." Serena perched on the edge of the sofa and gave her daughter a sideways hug. "Did you have a good day?"

"Yeah, Auntie let us collect sea glass and shells down by the water until it got too cold. And then Max and I helped with dinner."

"It smells delicious. I can't wait. Where is she?"

"I'm in here, dear," Muriel called from the kitchen. She appeared at the doorway, wearing trousers and a silky blouse, her silvery hair as perfectly coiffed as ever. She wiped her hands on a tea towel and accepted Serena's kiss on the cheek.

"Were the children good for you?" Serena asked, casting a mock-warning look at her kids, who donned *Who, me?* expressions in response.

"They were perfect angels." Muriel winked in their direction, and they grinned as if they were getting away with something. Serena's heart swelled. She'd hoped that the warm,

homey atmosphere on Skye would be good for them, but she'd forgotten how much she herself had missed Muriel. Impulsively she reached out and hugged her.

"What was that for, dear?"

"I missed you, and I'm really happy to be back."

Muriel suppressed a smile. "Well. It's nice to have you back too. I could use some help in the kitchen. Come, child."

Serena's brow furrowed, but she followed obediently. Muriel never needed help in the kitchen. In fact, she was the one who had taught Jamie to cook as a boy, and she was almost as good as he was, which was why she normally waved everyone out of her way into other parts of the house. Clearly there was something on her mind.

"I had a little talk with Em today." Muriel retrieved two mugs from the cupboard and poured already-brewed tea into both of them. "Why didn't you tell me she was expelled?"

Serena deflated. She should have told Muriel the real reason they'd decided to come to Skye for summer term, but she'd not known how to broach the subject. It felt like something that was best addressed in person. "She wasn't expelled. I withdrew her because it was a hostile environment in which to learn."

Muriel's expression said she didn't make the distinction. "She told me she pulled a girl's hair because, in her words, 'Sophie is a stropky cow.'"

Serena smothered a laugh. Em had told her the same thing, even though she had refused to elaborate further. "In my opinion, she's absolutely right. I have no doubt that Sophie began whatever caused Em to act out, but Sophie's father happens to be the one who took Edward's position after he died."

"You think that might have had something to do with it?"

"I don't know. But since Sunspring Energy is the reason the school even exists, you know they don't want to do anything to offend their biggest patrons."

"Same old story." Muriel looked at her sympathetically. "So she's going to be attending Sleat Primary."

"She starts next week. I decided to enroll her in the Gaelic Medium course."

"Even though she doesn't speak Gaelic?"

Muriel didn't mean the words as criticism, but they pierced all the same. Serena took a long swallow of her tea before she answered. "She speaks some. We've been working on it at home, and the head teacher assured me Em can be brought up to proficiency. She's so ahead of her class in academics, it won't have any long-term effects on her education. Besides, it's only one term, and then she'll be back to school in Nairn in the autumn."

"You know, Serena, you have nothing to feel guilty about. Skye is part of your heritage. It was unfair for Edward to make you give it up. Even though you abided by his wishes while he was alive, you have the right to make different choices now that he's gone."

"Who says I feel guilty?" Serena said sharply. Muriel just smiled in that kind, knowing way that made Serena feel bad for her response, and she moved on uncomfortably. "In any case, they've allowed me to enroll Max in the Gaelic nursery class, even though he's starting late. Then I won't need to rely on you to babysit him while I'm at the hotel."

"And how did that go?"

"Fine." Even to her own ears, her tone wasn't entirely convincing. "Mr. Blake seems to have things well in hand, even if he is somewhat . . . surly."

"Had a bit of a run-in, did you?"

"I wouldn't say that. I merely asked him to show me around the hotel, and he acted like it was a huge inconvenience. He assumes just because I want to know how the whole thing works that I'm questioning his judgment."

"Well, dear, you do like to be in charge."

"Aunt Muriel! Are you calling me bossy?"

Muriel shrugged, but there was a glint of mischief in her pale eyes. "I'm just saying that when you have two people who like to do things their own way, sometimes sparks are going to fly."

An involuntary flush crept up Serena's neck into her cheeks. "I would say mild irritation, not sparks. *Sparks* implies something else entirely. Besides, as far as the hotel's concerned, I *am* in charge."

"Of course. My mistake." Muriel sipped her own tea. "I certainly hope you two can come to an understanding, considering you're likely to be in close proximity to each other."

"Trust me, I plan to have as little contact with him as possible. He can stick to his regular management duties, and I'll work on marketing and guest satisfaction. There's no reason for us to have much contact at all."

"Whatever you say, dear." Muriel's tone was perfectly innocent, but something in her expression told Serena that the subject was far from dropped.