

THE  
MACDONALD FAMILY  
TRILOGY

# Under Scottish Stars

CARLA LAUREANO  
RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

# Praise for the MacDonald Family Trilogy

## *UNDER SCOTTISH STARS*

“In *Under Scottish Stars*, independent single mother Serena Stewart returns to the beautiful land of Skye, looking for stability for her two small children—not romance with Malcolm Blake, who manages the hotel that Serena owns with her two brothers. Their ‘this can’t be happening’ relationship is engaging, and Carla Laureano reveals both Serena’s and Malcolm’s vulnerabilities as they fall in love when they least expected it. *Under Scottish Stars* is a satisfying romance that reminds readers that love doesn’t always go according to our agendas—and that can be a very good thing.”

BETH K. VOGT, author of the Thatcher Sisters series

“*Under Scottish Stars* is a fabulous read, filled with compelling characters, a delicious setting, and a romance that can only be described as . . . swoon-worthy. Carla Laureano’s third and final book in the MacDonald Family Trilogy exceeded all my expectations and truly shouldn’t be missed.”

JEN TURANO, *USA Today* bestselling author of *A Change of Fortune*

“Solid characters, brilliant dialogue, believable conflict, a setting you can taste—and, always, breath-stealing love scenes. No one writes a romantic hero like Laureano! *Under Scottish Stars* takes us back to Skye to explore poignant truths of single parenthood, family loyalty, the pursuit of dreams—and faith. A satisfying and stellar finish to the MacDonald Family Trilogy.”

CANDACE CALVERT, bestselling author of *Maybe It’s You* and *The Recipe*

## *LONDON TIDES*

“Achieving an aching depth and a resounding trueness within a heated yet baggage-ridden romance, author Carla Laureano has proven herself a storyteller who is not afraid to take her characters into the darkest regions of their own hearts. An excellent follow-up to *Five Days in Skye*, *London Tides* tugs and churns every emotion . . . right up until the lovely, hope-buoying end.”

SERENA CHASE, *USA Today’s* Happy Ever After blog

“At times lighthearted; at times heart wrenching. Laureano has penned a delightfully romantic tale about the importance of finding home. If readers weren’t already smitten with the MacDonald brothers, they will be after *London Tides*!”

KATIE GANSHERT, award-winning author of *The Art of Losing Yourself*

“Another captivating story! *London Tides* is as compelling and engaging as Laureano’s award-winning *Five Days in Skye*. It’s deliciously romantic and filled with tension, wonderful characters, and vivid scenery. A must-read this summer!”

KATHERINE REAY, author of *Lizzy and Jane*

*FIVE DAYS IN SKYE*

“Sweet and scathing, lush and intimate. . . . This story has guts and heart as well as the depth and heat necessary to satisfy any romance reader’s palate.”

USA TODAY

“From page one, *Five Days in Skye* captured my imagination and every minute of my pleasure-reading time. With enviable finesse, author Carla Laureano weaves romance, hope, healing, and faith into a spunky and sparkling tale that made me sorry to say good-bye to the characters and the alluring Isle of Skye. I look forward to reading more from this author.”

TAMARA LEIGH, author of *Splitting Harriet* and *The Unveiling*, book one in the Age of Faith series

“*Five Days in Skye* swept me away to Scotland! Against the craggy beauty of the Isle of Skye, author Carla Laureano weaves a story . . . of love between an American businesswoman and a Scottish celebrity chef. Fans of the movie *The Holiday* are sure to enjoy this contemporary romance. Laureano’s voice is deft, seamless, and wonderfully accomplished. An exciting newcomer to the world of Christian fiction!”

BECKY WADE, author of *My Stubborn Heart* and *Undeniably Yours*

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*To my single-mom friends, who do the hardest  
job in the world with grace and grit.  
You amaze me.*



# Acknowledgments

IF THERE WERE AN AWARD for the most circuitous route to publication, it would probably go to this book! As many of you know, *Under Scottish Stars* was originally scheduled to be published several years ago, but when I changed publishers, I took the MacDonald Family Trilogy with me. That began the long and complicated but gratifying process of getting these books back out in the world. It also meant a—*ahem*—rather long wait for this elusive third book, and it's hard to explain how glad I am to finally be able to share Serena and Malcolm's story.

The first acknowledgment must go to all the readers who embraced this series so warmly and hung in there for *five long years* for the final conclusion. I sincerely hope it was worth the wait! And if you've come to this series late, welcome. There's a small but dedicated community that would love to discuss the merits of the MacDonald Family Trilogy's heroes with you!

A big basket of thank-yous goes to:

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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."