

Chapter One

She always noticed the colors first.

The cool, misty gray of the air and the sea. The muted sunlight throwing a soft glow over the line of low buildings hugging harbors and roads. The touches of bright color in the paint of a home, or a flash of a bold tartan, surprising the eye and begging to be caught in the lens.

Her profession was about color. Color and contrast and how both combined together to set a mood. Scotland always set a mood from the moment she put her feet on its shores. A comforting, timeless sort of mood.

This time, though, this time there was something off.

“Well, if it ain’t Miss Lilly Graham come home to see her da again, eh?” The old sailor smiled, showing a wide mouthful of yellowing teeth. He edged his boat by the dock, engine humming.

“Hello, Mr. Hume. How are things going?” Jumping into the compact Orkney longboat, Lilly plopped her duffle bag on the co-pilot’s chair and carefully placed her camera case on top of it. “Dad told me you’d be coming to get me. What happened to the ferry?”

“Och.” He grunted before turning to the wheel and swinging it around. “There’s no more service to Somairie.”

“No?” She settled into a padded seat running along the stern. “Why not?”

“Not enough demand.” The old man fiddled with the controls and the boat surged out of Oban's harbor, rolling past the cluster of pleasure craft, sailboats, and one large cruiser. “When the new lord decided to shut down the golf course, there weren’t enough tourists to make it worthwhile for the ferry.”

“Dad said something about that.” She tugged the sides of her windbreaker together. Even though it was the first of August, there was a bite in the air out here on the water.

“He’d be the one to know.” Mr. Hume yanked on his leather sailor hat until she could barely see his eyes. “Your da sure loves to golf.”

“True.” She’d touched base with her father right before she’d left for India a month ago, and he hadn’t sounded happy. But she’d been too excited about where she was headed to pay enough attention.

A slither of familiar guilt shifted inside her before she brushed it away.

The assignment had been long and exhausting, yet she'd got amazing photos of elephants and cobras. Of market days filled with vibrant color and movement. Of the beauty of the land with its bold rivers and the vivid greens of the surrounding landscape.

The familiar urge to start taking photos shot through her.

Lilly swung her gaze across the water and her fingers immediately twitched for her camera. The ruins of a castle clung to the point of the peninsula, and there was a flock of seagulls weaving in the wind above her. Scotland wasn't anything like India, but she still saw the possibilities, still wanted to capture everything in a photograph for other eyes to notice and appreciate.

"Your da tells me you've been in India." The sailor grimaced. "Can't say I would want to go there."

"It's beautiful." She kept herself from gushing because she'd learned most people wouldn't understand her enthusiasm for the exotic.

"Guess ye have to go where you're sent." He turned the boat to the right, past the castle and around the bend of the land into the open sea.

The India assignment had been from a small travel magazine and hadn't covered her expenses. But it had been worth it to spend her own money. The photos she'd recently emailed to the agent she'd been targeting for years held quite a bit of promise. By the time she finished her annual monthly visit with her dad, she'd hopefully have good news waiting back in New York. Mr. Hume wouldn't be interested in that, though. Like most of her dad's friends, his focus was on his home. "Dad did mention he wouldn't be playing much golf."

"The new lord." Angus Hume made a disgusted sound deep in his throat.

She hid her amusement by staring at the receding town of Oban. The fact that there was still some man being called a lord in this day and age—seriously? She stifled a wry chuckle.

"He ain't nothing like his da, I'll tell ye that."

"No?" She nudged her hips deeper into the seat, ready for a story. Mr. Hume was known on the island as the best gossip and raconteur. If she was going to get the gist of what was troubling her dad, no better person could give it to her. "What's wrong with him?"

“We had high hopes.” He shot her a look from his gimlet eyes. “When old Malcolm died, we thought his son would be the ticket to getting Somairie and the surrounding islands back on track.”

“I thought you all loved Malcolm McPherson.” She’d met the man many times. Since the age of six, she’d come with her dad to his family’s summer cottage on Somairie. The island stood in the middle of a whole swirl of other smaller islands—all owned by the McPhersons for as long as anyone could remember. The first male of the line always inherited the islands, along with the businesses tied to them: the fishing licenses for vast stretches of the sea; the tracts of land where the Highland cattle grazed; the two creameries that processed the signature McPherson cheese; the three B&Bs sprinkled on the largest of the islands that did a brisk trade in the summer.

But more than anything else, the eldest son inherited the mythical title that had been passed down for generations.

Lord of the Isles.

When she’d been a kid, she thought of the title and the castle and the stories surrounding the McPhersons as a romantic fairy tale come to life. Then, at the age of ten, she’d met Iain McPherson, the only son. Just once. Yet that one time had been enough to shatter any dreams of fairy tales and princes.

“We did love Malcolm. Still mourn his loss.” The wheel swung back and forth as the old sailor navigated the waves. “He was a good man. Over the last few years, however, he couldn’t keep up with the pace of the change that’s needed to keep the islands viable.”

“His son could, though?” She drew her attention off the surroundings to focus on the grim line of the man’s jaw. She had her own memories of Iain McPherson, yet she’d never shared them with anyone. And as the stories of his bravery grew legendary with the villagers, she’d been glad she hadn’t said a word.

Who wanted to bash their opinions against a wall of heroism?

“Apparently not.” The sailor’s gnarled hands tightened on the rim of steel wheel. “He’s been a wee bit of a disappointment.”

Wee wouldn't be the correct description, she'd guess. Not by the way Mr. Hume said the word.

Frowning, she shuffled through her memories. She'd spent a month of every summer in Scotland after her parents had divorced and her mom had moved back to New York with her in tow. Her father lived in Inverness, above his tailor shop, but as soon as she'd arrive, they'd head for the Hebrides. She hadn't been surprised about where he'd retired to three years ago. He'd promptly sold his shop and moved to the island for good.

Her memories of Somairie were ones of sunny days and rainy nights. Of friendly villagers who accepted her into the fold for the month she was there, and the happy tourists who walked down Fingal's main street, spending their money and keeping the island's economy alive.

She'd ignored the one memory that hurt every time Iain McPherson's name was brought up.

Now, she had no interest in thinking about him for any length of time, even though he was the topic of this conversation.

"We gave him some space when he came home to bury his da." The old man's voice rose when the sounds of the sea and wind escalated as they pattered out of the protection of the harbor. "But that was months ago. Months and months."

About ten months ago, if her memory served. She'd heard the news of the old lord's death on her monthly call with her father, right before she'd taken off to get shots of Oktoberfest in Munich. He'd not been a close friend, yet Malcolm McPherson had been a valued islander to Edward Graham. Her dad had always been a believer in tradition and custom. He'd sounded resigned about the passing. After all, the death from lung cancer had been expected. He'd also sounded excited about the new opportunities for the island with a new leader.

"The lad hasn't been seen for months," the old sailor mumbled, clear distress in his voice.

Her eyebrows rose. Somairie's inhabitants and the other islanders within the McPherson holdings were a tight community, even if there was always an influx of tourists, and the islands stretched for several miles. And like any small town, everyone knew everyone, and no one got away with disappearing for long. "Months?"

“Months.” The old man snorted. “I’m telling ye, it’s the oddest thing. The castle gate is locked all the time, and the only light we see at night is straight at the top of the old tower.”

“Huh?” She stopped and tried to rein in her usual overwhelming curiosity by staring at the ocean waves. The stopping didn’t work. “What does he eat?”

Another snort. “He eats. Much to Mrs. Butler’s displeasure.”

“What?” Confused, she swung back to stare at the old man. Mrs. Butler was possibly the nicest, sweetest woman she’d ever met. She ran the only grocery store on the island, and never failed to have cookies waiting for the kids. The old woman called them biscuits, but whatever they were called, they were delicious. Lilly found it nearly impossible to think of Mrs. Butler being angry at anyone.

“He orders his supplies from Glasgow and London.” His voice filled with bewildered disgruntlement. “Can ye imagine?”

Yes. She could imagine the arrogant kid she’d met long ago as someone who’d turn his nose up at Mrs. Butler’s sturdy, unassuming stock. But the disbelief in Mr. Hume’s voice told her the islanders had still not quite shaken the image of the dashing Royal Marine hero. The boy who’d gone from brave feat to valiant deed, from decorated medals to honorific titles.

The wind rose in intensity as they chugged past the first of the McPherson islands. She let the conversation go. She’d heard enough to understand the lay of the situation and she’d hear the rest from her dad.

A sudden burst of sweet desire to see her dear dad’s face welled inside. She sucked in a deep breath of salty air. This wasn’t home. But it was as close to one as she’d ever had.

“There’s Fingal.” The old sailor had to roar the words, because coming around the east side of Somairie, the boat was hit with the full force of the ocean wind.

Fingal, the island’s biggest village, clung to the edge of the island like a needy lover. The two- and three-story houses and stores were painted with bright reds and yellows, deep blacks and greens. A line of fishing boats bobbed in the round harbor. The old, white lighthouse rose on the point, no longer needed, yet still enjoyed by the village children and the tourists who swarmed the island in the summer.

She stood, clinging to the side of the boat. The odd mood she'd picked up in Oban stirred.
"Mr. Hume."

"Eh?" He kept his gaze on the approaching dock.

"Where are the crowds?"

There were always crowds in August. Edinburgh was holding their annual festival and the peak of the summer tourist season guaranteed large groups of tourists all across Scotland and the many islands of the Hebrides.

"No crowds this year." He swung to glare at her like it was her fault. "I told ye. Things have changed, and someone needs to do something about it."

The odd feeling grew. Did he mean she needed to do something about it? What could she do? "The fishing boats are all docked."

The old man humphed as if she'd disappointed him. "Why do ye think I had time to come and get ye, lass?"

She glanced at the town and the harbor. "No fishing?"

"The new lord," his words went hard again, "ain't renewing the licenses."

Without fishing or golfing, this island community would eventually die. Unease slipped into the oddness, making her stomach a bit nauseous. It didn't really affect her, but her dad loved this place and had buddies here. What would he do if Fingal died and Somairie was deserted?

The boat bobbed in the water as it eased next to the longest pier in the harbor. Mr. Hume threw a couple of ropes across to a glum, petulant dock boy. "Your dad will be glad to see ye," the old sailor said as the boat was tied to two stout pilings. "He'll tell ye the rest of the island news."

She'd heard quite enough of the island news. Her dad would have more to say about this situation, though, whether she liked it or not. Hefting her bag onto her shoulder, she clutched her camera case and jumped onto the dock. "Thanks for the ride."

"Ain't got much else to do," he grumbled as he swung his attention back to the wheel and instrument panel.

Not knowing what else to say, she paced strode toward the main street, noting how little action was going on. On her other trips here, this harbor would have been bustling with activity. Now, it was strangely empty. A sad, forlorn mood cast a gloom over her own.

She was suddenly tired, the impact of her long flight from India hitting her all at once.

A good meal and some sleep and she'd be fine. This whole situation couldn't be as bad as Angus Hume had indicated. The old man tended toward the dramatic, she remembered. Every good story needed drama and he was a good enough storyteller to know that.

Walking down the main street, she noted the boarded-up tea shop she'd loved last year. And the empty shops boasting the McPherson tartans and crests. Even Mrs. Butler's neat, tidy store looked a bit rundown. The windowsills and door needed a fresh coat of red paint, and the windows themselves could use a cleaning.

This was bad.

She felt it in the mood.

A bunch of teenage boys lingered on the last corner of Fingal, sullenly smoking cigarettes and eyeing her. Two of them wore hoodies tightly drawn around their faces and another one sneered at her as she drew close.

Lilly had learned to trust her instincts. Her specialty was in culture and travel and people, still, her career had taken her into a few perilous situations. Her instincts went on high alert in a split second. She'd never thought she'd feel afraid on Somairie, yet she was now.

"Ye all go on." Mrs. Butler stepped onto her stoop, her white hair flying, the brisk wind whipping it into a fluffy cloud on top of her head. "Don't be making me get my broom to chase ye away."

The boys threw her a glare but shuffled off past the bend of the store.

"Lilly Graham." The woman gave her a big smile. "Your da is going to be so happy."

Fear faded, to be replaced with the ever-present guilt. Last year, she'd planned on staying the entire month, but an excellent assignment had pulled her away after a mere two weeks. And the year before, her two half-sisters, Taylor and Ashley, had demanded she spend at least a week with them in the Hamptons. Her dad hadn't complained either time. She'd seen the

disappointment on his face, though. This year, she was determined to stay the entire month. “It’ll be nice to see him.”

“He’s been talking about nothing else for weeks.” Mrs. Butler waved her hand at the lane behind the one-street town. “Ye go on then, and say hello for me.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Butler.”

“I’ll be seeing ye soon, I’m sure.” A speculative look crossed the old woman’s face. “Lots to discuss.”

Lilly had no idea what she could possibly need to discuss with Mrs. Butler and whatever it was, she didn’t need to deal with it right now. She was dead on her feet, and just wanted to hug her dad.

The lane led over a short ridge and then dipped into a valley. Her father always offered to drive to Fingal to pick her up. But she liked to stretch her legs after long travel. Plus, she enjoyed taking in Somairie, sinking into the peace she found here every single time she visited.

Peace would not be the word she’d choose now.

Even the sky, the Scotland sky that changed from a mellow blue to the brewing dark of a storm in minutes, even the sky didn’t give her a sense of place and peace. It looked dull, a blank color that didn’t make her fingers twitch to pick up her camera at all. The sea’s waves rose in a sluggish beat on the sandy beach and the gulls’ calls seemed muted.

A shiver of unease ran through her.

Spotting her dad’s cottage, her pace quickened. Her dad would hug her, she’d take a nap, and this odd feeling would disappear.

“Lilly.” Edward Graham appeared in the open door of his house, his face wreathed in a smile, his brown eyes twinkling. He hadn’t aged since the last time she’d seen him a year ago, and that fact made something inside her settle. “You’re finally here.”

“Dad.” Dropping her duffle, she stepped into his warm embrace and laid her head on his sturdy shoulder. “It’s good to be here.”

“It’s good to have ye home.” His arms tightened.

He always said she was home when she was here, but she'd never felt the attachment. Her life was about dancing with the new, not settling for the familiar. Right now, though, she didn't want to argue or explain. "I'm tired."

"Why wouldn't ye be, coming all the way from India?" He drew away, patting her shoulder before retreating into the interior. "Come on, then. I've got a nice little spread, courtesy of Mrs. Butler."

Grabbing her bag, she ducked her head before it hit the mantle of the door and stepped into the welcoming den her father spent most of his time in. The leather chair sat right by the peat fire, and the side table held his familiar pile of books and wire-rimmed glasses. "I saw Mrs. Butler on my way through Fingal."

"Did ye?" He bustled into the small kitchen lying past the den.

"Yes." She pulled the strap of her camera case off her shoulder. "She and Mr. Hume were acting a bit odd. Things have changed."

He popped his head out from the kitchen door. At the look on her face, he frowned. "Now what did they dump on ye?"

"Neither dumped on me." She tried to reassure him by fixing a smile on her face. "Mr. Hume just told me some of his stories. And Mrs. Butler was her usual pleasant self."

Her father sighed. "Both of them are scheming, and I don't think their plans are good ones."

"Plans?"

"Why don't ye take your bags to your room?" His voice grew muffled when he withdrew back into the kitchen. "Then ye can come down and we'll have a bite before ye get too tired to eat."

She obediently climbed the simple wooden steps that lead into the narrow hallway sporting four doors. One led into her father's bedroom and another into the spare he used for storage. Her bedroom lay under the eaves, right by the dinky bathroom. The cream-and-pink quilt on the bed was as familiar as her own face. It had been passed down for generations, and supposedly had been hand-crafted by her great-great-grandmother. The rest of the room appeared exactly the same too, nothing having changed since she'd been here the last time.

Lovingly cared for and waiting for her return.

The peace she craved whenever she came here finally settled over her, driving away the odd twinges. Sighing with relief, she shoved her duffle into the closet. Unpacking could wait. Her camera case slid easily into the notch in the wall where, as a kid, she'd stored seashells and pretty rocks. Tomorrow, she'd wake early and take some shots of the bay that lay past the edge of her father's land.

"Got yourself settled?" He beamed at her as she walked down into the cozy den.

"Pretty much." Looking at the spread, she smiled. "Scones and raspberry jam. My favorite."

"Cold ham and macaroni pie also." He placed two steaming cups on the small round table. "Come on. Dig in, and then ye can take a nap."

The food was good and tasty. A comfortable lull fell between them—a silence she'd loved as a kid, because it was so different from the life she'd lived with her mother and stepfather.

"So." Her dad coughed before taking a sip of tea. "I suppose old Angus Hume told ye a few things about the island."

The peaceful feeling she'd been enjoying wafted away. "Sure."

"I'm sure he painted a black picture, as he's used to doing."

"I wouldn't necessarily say black." She stared at the last scone and decided against stuffing herself. "Maybe a bit dark."

"I'm telling ye not to take any note while you're here, Lil."

"What do you mean?" She frowned at him.

Edward Graham rarely looked serious. He tended toward jovial, kind, and patient. Yet the look on his face could only be called grim.

Grim?

Her father didn't do grim.

"I'm not saying I wouldn't want ye around all the time, but it won't do."

Confusion filled her foggy, travel-tired brain. "What won't do?"

"I'm just telling ye not to pay attention to any of the villagers and their ramblings."

She liked the villagers and their ramblings. They were her father's companions and she'd known many of them for years. She couldn't claim to be close to any of them, really, yet she enjoyed seeing them when she was here. Most were more her dad's age than hers, as the young people tended to leave for the lure of the big cities, at least for a time. They were harmless, hearty folks, though, who'd welcomed her every year. She couldn't understand why he needed to issue this warning, when he'd never done it before. "Um. Okay?"

"It's no business of yours if Iain McPherson is driving his islands into disrepair and ruin." He glared at his teacup.

Her father grim? Glaring? And it *was* her business, if her dad's favorite place on earth was being hurt. "Ah, Dad—"

"It's no business of yours if the boy is doing harm to everyone, including himself."

The new Lord of the Isles was harming himself? What did that mean? "I think you need to explain—"

"Iain McPherson might be destroying his heritage and himself, but it has nothing to do with ye."

"Dad." Lilly straightened in her chair, her peace and comfort long gone. In its place the odd, unsettled feeling she'd tried to push away as her father got more and more upset had turned into a cold, hard knot. "What do you mean, he's destroying or harming himself?"

"We've all heard the rumors." He slapped the side of the table, making her jump. "We've all seen what's being delivered."

"What he's ordering from Glasgow and London?" She attempted to grasp the strings of the disjointed story.

"Whiskey." He grimaced. "Some say drugs."

"I don't think any reliable service would be delivering drugs."

"Those are the rumors." Sighing, his hand dropped from the table in a dispirited slide. "It's nothing ye need to worry about, though. It is what it is."

But she did worry, against her will. She didn't like the arrogant kid she'd met that one time, but clearly, there was something wrong. And she'd learned to pay careful attention now,

after losing a friend who'd retreated into alcohol as the first step toward suicide. "Did any of you think to go to the castle and talk with him? Find out if everything's okay?"

"Of course we did. Many times." Her dad gave her an offended look. "He wouldn't answer. We couldn't even get into the inner court."

She scrunched her face in confusion. "The outer gate is always left open."

"Not anymore." He gave in to another gusty sigh. "The boy locked it tight as soon as he buried his da next to his mum."

"Ten months ago."

"When he came back from the wars." Her father's brown eyes went dim. "The rumor is something dreadful happened before he quit."

The tense knot of worry turned into a crater. "He quit the service to come here and take over for his father. That's what you told me."

"Maybe." He stood abruptly and began to stack the dishes. "It's nothing to ye. Do ye understand?"

"Um." It certainly did have something to do with her if her dad's beloved island was being ruined. Still, she had time to figure this out and right now, she needed to sleep. Rising, she grabbed the platter of ham.

"Naw, naw." Her father waved his hands. "I'll take care of this. Ye go up and have a sleep. Tomorrow morning you'll be bright and cheery and ye can make your old da his porridge."

"Okay." Lilly gave him a peck on the cheek. "It's nice to be back."

"Nice to have ye back." Snaking his hand around her neck, he returned her kiss. "Just for this month. I know that well."

The usual guilt murmured, but she banished it with a smile. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, lass. There's always tomorrow."